

Ethnic Conflict in a Post-Accord Situation: the Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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The south-eastern part of Bangladesh, commonly known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) occupies a physical area of 5093 square miles, or 13,295 square kilometres constituting ten per cent of Bangladesh's total land area. It shares borders with India and Myanmar and is inhabited by about 13 (according to some estimates 10) ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas, Marmas and Tripuras constitute the majority. Non-indigenous hill people, i.e. Bengalis who are predominantly Muslims also live in the CHT.

According to the 1991 Census, the total population is 974,465 out of which 501,145 (51 per cent) belong to groups of different ethnic origins. About 49 per cent are Bengalis. Out of the total land of the CHT, only about 3.1 per cent is suitable for agricultural cultivation, 18.7 per cent for horticulture and the remaining 72 per cent for forestry.

Over the last quarter century, the indigenous people of the Hill Tracts have been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state. The main roots of the crisis on the CHT centred on the land issue, the transfer of population from plain districts and the control of administration by non-inhabitants. Besides, discrimination, deprivation and exploitation in social, cultural, economic and political fields and the programme of assimilation of the indigenous hill people into the majority Bengali population were other bones of contention.

It was in 1997 that the Parbotto Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS or JSS), the armed wing of the struggle for Jummaland reached a peace accord with the Government of Bangladesh. The accord came in for considerable criticism by people of different political persuasions. The mainstream political party, the BNP (then in the opposition), thought it was a sell out on the part of the government to the rebels. The 'civilian wing' of the struggle, the Proshit group, through it was a sell out on the part of the Shantibahini (as the armed wing was popularly called). The split within the struggle resulted in the formation of two parties of which one, the JSS, because it had signed the accord, now became the official party to form the Regional Council, and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) became the opposition. The result was the polarization of the politics of the Hill Tracts and the division of the people into two – and as a consequence their bargaining power has been reduced. More than five years have passed since the Accord and signs of implementation have been slow, and the JSS is now threatening civil disobedience if the government does not act.

State reprisals have followed any activism by the people of the CHT and much of this has targeted women. As recently as August 2003, five villages were attacked, about 231 houses were burnt down, and about 400 families were affected. It is the purpose of my paper to examine this situation in the context of the complex interplay of political, economic and social factors, which have been brought into play in the post-accord era.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997 and its Current Status

In 1997, the official wing of the Parbotto Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) and the Government of Bangladesh concluded the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord ('the CHT Accord'). This consists of four sections (Roy, 2003):

- The first section recognized the CHT as a 'tribal inhabited area' deals with commitments to pass legislation and set out details of the composition of the committee to oversee the implementation of the Accord (but did not set out any time frame for implementation).
- The second section entitled "Hill District Local Government Councils/Hill Districts Councils" detailed proposed amendments to the laws concerning the District Council to strengthen the District Councils' existing powers and to extend their jurisdiction to include new subjects.
- The third section, entitled "Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council" lays down the composition of a new unit of regional authority to be constituted, styled as a "Regional" Council incorporating the three hill provinces or "districts". In the case of both the Regional and the District councils, the chairpersonship and two-thirds of the seats were to be reserved for indigenous or "tribal" people.
- The fourth section, entitled Rehabilitation, General Amnesty and other matters deals with a wide range of issues including the rehabilitation of international refugees, the internally displaced persons and the indigenous fighters, and the grant of amnesty to the guerillas and other people involved in the armed struggle.

Whatever the disputes regarding the contents of the accord, one of its prime limitations was the lack of a time frame for its implementation. According to the PCJSS, which has been protesting against the non-implementation of the CHT Accord, the following major unimplemented provisions were considered to be crucial:

- a. the non-withdrawal of (all except a few) non-permanent military camps;
- b. the non-transfer of land and law and order matters to the District Councils;
- c. the passage of the CHT Land Commission Act of 2001, in violation of provisions of the Accord (reducing the geographical jurisdiction of the commission and providing too much power to its non-indigenous chairperson);
- d. the non-commencement of the work of the Land Commission;
- e. the appointment of non-indigenous persons to the post of (cabinet rank) Minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Chairperson of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board.

The PCJSS have also criticized other aspects of the situation following the Accord, including:

- f. the inclusion of non-permanent residents of the region as voters in the recent parliamentary elections (which were participated in by the UPDF and boycotted by the JSS); and
- g. the inclusion of non-indigenous people within the list of the "internally displaced.

It may be mentioned that the UPDF were the dissenters who thought that the Accord was a 'sell out' on the part of PCJSS as it compromised the prime objective of the struggle i.e. regional autonomy. The Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) who was in the opposition at the time of

signing the Accord also critiques it but as a “sell out” on the part of the Awami League, since it compromised the Constitution and national integrity of the country. Even since it came to power in the 2001 elections, it has been trying to undermine the demands of the PCJSS and threatening to scrap the agreement altogether. It is in this context that the incident described below took place.

The Mahalchhari Incident of August 2003

After the Accord was reached incidents of violence against the Hill people by Bengali settler communities allegedly triggered off by the armed forces has not been uncommon. The Mahalchhari incident was one such event. The joint forces of Bengali settlers and the armed forces staged a recent attack of villages in the Mahalchhari Upazila. Riots between Bengali settlers from the plain-land (especially those settled by the Armed forces as part of a counter-insurgency plan) are not uncommon. But this incident was the first one of its kind to occur after the Accord, which was of a major proportion.

On 24 August 2003, Rupom Mohajon, 30, son of Bijoy Mohajon, and a settled Bengali resident of Babupara, was abducted and a demand for ransom made to his family.¹ This incident resulted in growing tensions between the local Bengali and Pahari communities. That evening, and again the next day, 25 August 2003, local Bengali businessmen held a meeting in the Babupara Bazaar area demanding Rupom’s immediate release. At that meeting, which was held under the leadership of the local BNP leader, Dewan Abul Kalam Azad, and the banner of the ‘Bangali Shomonoy Parishad’ (Bengali Coordination Council), they announced a *hartal* (strike) and road blockade the next day. Later that afternoon, some of them apprehended the Chairman of Shindukchori Union Parishad, when he came to the Bazaar, and beat him and held him overnight against his will in a local shop.

Tuesday 26 August

By 9am on 26 August, a group of Bengalis assembled in the Bazaar area, and began to harass the Paharis (hill people) who had come there to sell their wares, chasing them out of the area and towards the sluice gate, in front of the entrance to Babupara village.² By this time, a number of soldiers had also joined them from the Army camp near the Bazaar.

Several of the Bengalis attacked Binod Bihari Khisha 50, son of the late Sunendra Khisha, and a former Union Parishad Chairman, hitting him with *lathis* (cane) as he sat in his shop by the sluice gate. He was later taken to the Army Camp near the Bazaar, where he died.

¹ There are differing, and conflicting, accounts of the reasons for the abduction and who was responsible. Regarding the causes of his abduction, the PCJSS and a number of local residents pointed to extortion as being the primary motive; a few others noted that Mohajon was suspected of acting as an informer for the army, and others said that Mohajon’s nephew, Titu Sen, son of Ronojit Sen, had either abducted or run away with a Pahari woman, the daughter of Binod Bihari Khisha, and that his abduction was a retaliation for this act.

² The PCJSS and the Bangali Shamannay Parishad claim that the Bangali processionists were fired upon by a group of masked Paharis and four Bangalis were injured, and it was following this incident, that local Bangali businessmen from the Bazaar and those from the cluster villages came together to chase away these Pahari attackers, and that soldiers from the nearby Army Camp also came out on hearing the firing, and when they reached the sluice-gate, the enraged Bangalis attacked Binod Bihari Khisha and then entered Babupara village, followed by/following the Army.

Several other Paharis were also assaulted. For example, the army allegedly bayoneted Nidorshon Khisha, 19 years, son of the late Binod Bihari Khisha, as he stood near his father, close to his shop near the Sluicegate, as Bengali settlers and then the army were attacking the latter. Another A Pahari boy of Babupara, was also beaten while in custody at the Army camp situated between Babupara and Mahalchhari Bazaar.

The assembled Bengalis, accompanied by soldiers of the 21st East Bengal Regiment, then went into Babupara village. They looted the houses, poured petrol and kerosene onto them, setting them alight as they went. They also looted and set alight a private Buddhist temple in Babupara. The houses of the few Bangali Hindus in Babupara were left untouched. From there they proceeded to Rameshu Karbari Para and Saw Mill Para, again settling light to houses and looting them as they went.

They then proceeded in engine-powered boats to several other villages, first to Pahartali. In addition to burning and looting houses, they also assaulted several women and girls. Several Paharis who were trying to swim to safety were attacked with lathis, were beaten on the back and shoulders with a stick by a Bengalis, while they were still in the water.

The mob then swept onto Tholipara, Kerengyanal and Durpojyanal. In each village, they looted houses, and then set them alight after pouring petrol and kerosene from canisters into smaller bowls and then onto the houses.³ A resident of Kerengyanal village, whose house was burnt to the ground, described how the arson was carried out:

“...We could see the smoke rising from near Babupara... Many people had come to Kerengyanal from other areas, Rameshupara, Saw Mill Para, Pahartali, because they thought they would be safe here from attack. At about 12/1pm, as I was sitting down to eat rice, the attack happened. We could hear brush firing as they approached the entrance to the village, and we all fled towards the jungle. I was hiding a little way away. Three boats came. There were both Bangalis and army soldiers there. Initially there were about four of each, and by the end about fifteen of each. The Bangalis came up to our houses. They were carrying containers of petrol or kerosene, and they poured these out into shallow receptacles in order to scatter it more easily over the houses. They then set the houses alight. The army stood by. This went on for about three hours.”

One woman of Kerengyanal village, along with many others was kept standing in waist high water, while she attempted to flee her village:

The Bangalis kept us standing in waist high water. About 10/12 Bangalis armed with knives, scythes (daos) and sticks (lathis) surrounded us on all sides and there were with them six army [personnel]. At that time another engine-powered boat came and took the Bangalis and the army away from there. Then we came out of the water and started towards our homes, and when we reached there, we saw that all our houses and homes had been totally burnt and destroyed. Afterwards we came to know that the Bangalis had restrained us in order to burn down our houses and homes in the presence of the army.

³ Army sources claimed that after armed Paharis fired on the Bengali processionists, they chased them on engine powered boats up to the border between Khagrachhari and Rangamati Districts, and on their informing Naniarchar Police Station by wireless, several Pahari youths, one of whom was in army dress, were arrested as they reached the Naniarchar canal.

In Kerengyanal village, several women were raped or sexually assaulted, and an infant was killed. Kala Sona Chakma, 40, wife of Shushoma Ronjon Chakma, recounted the twin horrors of her rape by two Army personnel near her house in Kerengyanal, after she intervened to help her daughter escape from their hands, and the murder of her grandson:

“I saw a fire on 26/08/2003 at around 11 a.m. around Babupara. After some time I saw Bangalis in engine boats and army heading towards our village. In the meantime women and children started to escape using boats. Women and children took shelter in the bushes and near the cremation ground after being chased by the military boat. The Bangalis and the army personnel, who were on the boat, started to torture the women at the above-mentioned place after coming out from the boat.

At this point when they started to torture my daughter. I went to free her. During the struggle, my granddaughter, who was on my daughter’s lap, fell down to the ground as a result of which I had a heated argument with the army and the Bangalis present there. My daughter then escaped.

At that moment, five army personnel and eight Bangalis grabbed me. Two army personnel raped me.

As Kalashona states, several other women were raped, but did not dare to speak out, for fear of shame and the ensuing social stigma. Kalashona Chakma also stated that her grandson, 8/9 months, was snatched from her arms and strangled to death, allegedly by an army soldier:

Later that day about 3pm, the Paharis in Lemuchhari and Noapara villages, to the north and on the road to Khagrachhari, were attacked by a group of Bengali settlers from a nearby cluster village, Chongrachhari.⁴ A Buddhist temple and several houses and shops were looted and torched. Several Paharis reported that these incidents occurred within a short time after the local MP, Mr Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan, had travelled through the area en route to Mahalchhari, and that he had incited the local Bengalis to instigate this particular attack.

Implications for the Mahalchhari Incident of August 2003

This review of the Accord and its current status points to three issues, which may have implications for the Mohalchhari incident. They are:

- a. The persistence of militarization;
- b. The politics of vote; and
- c. The non-resolution of the land and settler issue.

(i) *The persistence of militarization*

Since Independence, successive Governments of Bangladesh have always legitimized the militarization of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, predominantly because it is a frontier state and more so because of the existence of a movement for autonomy and self-rule among the indigenous people, which, from the perspective of the State, came to be called an ‘insurgency’. During the period of ‘insurgency’, the CHT underwent total militarization. They divided the entire area of

⁴ In 2001, Bengalis from Chongrachhari village had attacked Lemuchori in an attempt to occupy the land. However, prompt action by the authorities at that time reportedly prevented any serious outbreak of violence.

the Hill Tracts into three zones: white, green and red. ⁵The white zones, considered 'neutral', covered an area two miles adjacent to the Army Head Quarters and were jointly populated by Bengali settlers and Hill people. The green zones were the Bengali settlement areas. The red zones were the areas in the interior of forests and those populated by Hill people alone and it was here that the military carried out the majority of its counter insurgency operations.

In the name of counter insurgency, massive violations of human rights were committed by the military. These included cases of extra-judicial killings, torture, abduction, forced religious conversion, religious persecution, forced eviction, destruction of homes and properties, and wide scale arrests and detention. There were also as many as eleven massacres of Hill people, the most known among these being at Longodu, Logang and Naniarchar. Although inquiry commissions and other investigative processes were initiated following public protest, in respect of some of these incidents, none of their findings ever saw the light of day. The military continued to enjoy impunity regarding all allegations of human rights violations. The failure to address these questions of impunity in the CHT Accord legitimized and reproduced the hegemonic control of the Bangladesh state and Bengali nationhood over the Hill people, coming to epitomise the notion of 'peace without justice'. Thus, in the aftermath of the Accord we see that the lack of any provision on justice, as well as the very limited withdrawal of the military camps (according to one source only 35 of the estimated 520 military are reported to have been dismantled)⁶ had contributed to the persistence of military hegemony in the region.

(ii) The politics of vote

At the time of the Accord, all three MPs of the three Hill Districts were from the then ruling Awami League and, despite all kinds of criticism lodged against them, were members of the indigenous population. In the first election since the Accord, in October 2001, a major upset occurred when the PCJSS, protesting the inclusion of non-permanent residents of the region as voters, withdrew from the polls. This factor, together with the UPDF's decision to contest the Khagrachhari seat, split the vote of the indigenous people and threw open the door for BNP candidate Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan, himself a Bengali settler, to be voted in, predominantly by the Bengali settler population. As a consequence of his victory, Bhuiyan has become the first Bengali person to be Member of Parliament from the CHT. He is also currently chairperson of the CHT Development Board, which has access to significant amounts of development funds. Bengali government sponsored settlers in the CHT have therefore consolidated their position vis a vis the indigenous people, more so since they are no longer threatened by an active guerrilla force. Many of them rally around the banner of the right of centre BNP and the right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and have been vocal critics of the CHT Accord, alleging that it subjects them to discrimination vis a vis the Paharis.

(iii) The non-resolution of the land and settler issue

Many believe that the success and failure of the CHT peace process is dependent very largely upon the resolution of land-related issues.⁷ Land has become a complicated issue in the CHT because of (a) government sponsored settlements being used as a counter-insurgency measure by our military rulers in the past and (b) the different perception of land and land ownership between plain land Bengalis and hill people.

⁵ Amena Mohsin, 'Gendered Nation, Gendered Peace', Journal of Social Studies, 2002, Dhaka.

⁶ (IWGIA, 2002)

⁷ (Mohsin, 1998, CHT Commission, 1991)

“In 1979 the Government of Bangladesh through an amendment to Rule 34 of the CHT Manual did away with the restriction against settlements of CHT lands by non-residents. It was decided to settle 30,000 landless Bengali families on government-owned ‘khas’ land in the CHT the following year and Taka 60 million was allocated for the project.” (Mohsin, 2002)

In a land hungry situation with 0.29 acres per capita land in Bangladesh, the settlements proved popular with Bengalis many of whom were themselves landless. But this myth of the “emptiness” of the CHT, compared to high density of population in the plain lands and the idea that Bengalis were settled in Government owned *khas* land was seriously misconstrued.

Research has established that the area of cultivable land in the Hills is very small. Research by Soil Scientists on the CHT land in the 1960s revealed that only 3.2 % of CHT land was suitable for all purpose agriculture (A category land) while 15% was suitable for forestry and fruit gardens (B category land) and 77% suitable only for afforestation.⁸ Further, and more important, what the Government of Bangladesh calls ‘khas’ land is understood by the Hill people to be common land or land, which they use for traditional *jhum* (swidden) cultivation and forests.⁹ The fact that this conflict persists between settler communities and the administration on one hand and the hill people on the other is borne out by the Mohalchhari incident of 26th August 2003.

The Mahalchhari Incident, a post accord watershed

Localized conflict between settler communities backed by law enforcing agencies and hill people has taken place sporadically and indeed, been a regular feature of the Hills from time to time. However, the Mohalchhari incident was a watershed in the sense that this was the first time after the Accord that such an incident has taken place at such a large scale. The area between Lemuchhari village on the one extreme, Babupara at the centre, and to Kerengyanala on the other outer limit is extensive, consisting of several kilometres. The widespread extent of the arson attacks in all the affected villages resulted in the burning and destruction of the majority of houses belonging to Hill people, as well as the incineration of tall coconut trees and even water pumps used for irrigation. The incident caused thousands of people to flee in terror and be displaced from their homes and villages. The threat of false cases issued against those hill people who dared to protest or open their mouths, means that a reign of terror continues to prevail across the area. This is effectively preventing many young men (those falsely implicated in the cases) from returning safely to their homes. Some of the possible implications of this incident for the future political landscape of the Hill Tracts are noted below.

(1) Occupation of land

Many people in the affected villages were concerned and anxious that the ultimate effect of incidents such as that of 26 August 2003 would be the occupation of the Hill peoples land. Since their economic activity has been worst hit by this incident, many people would be forced to sell their lands at cheap prices or mortgage them in order to survive.

⁸ Willem Van Schendel cited in Mohsin, 2002.

⁹ “For the Hill people this land is common property, belonging to the community, kinship groups and even members of the spiritual world. The colonial state had declared all land in the CHT government property; the indigenous people were given tenancy rights. This however did not create any conflict as according to the Hill peoples’ notion of land ownership individuals and individual families cannot own land, they only preserve the right to use it. The government ignores this view and this is regarded by the Hill people as a gross violation of their inalienable rights.” (Mohsin, 2002).

(2) Economic power targeted

Many of the villages affected are in low-lying land surrounded by the waters of the Chengi river, which is rich in fish and marine resources. Since Bengalis are generally considered to be skilful in fishing, the villagers seem to think that Bengalis are anxious to occupy these lands on the waterfront, as it would prove lucrative for them. The villages are also in an area that produces only one Boro rice crop. Irrigation is therefore considered essential. The targeting of irrigation pumps in the richer households has thrown the whole household into a situation of deep uncertainty as to what to do [can we be more specific, 'as to how to carry out their farming activities/harvest rice'] this season.

(3) Divide and rule plays into power politics

There have been a number of allegations that Bengali Hindu households were implicated in the incident. Several Paharis told us that the Bengali Hindu households were considered to be 'old settlers' and therefore distinct from the predominantly Muslim settler population of the eighties. But in this incident the rioters and armed forces created a division between the Bengali Hindus and the Hill people by successfully using them. In Babupara, all the houses of the Hill people were burnt, and the only ones left standing were the three to four houses, which belonged to Bengali Hindus.

Even today, the situation remains tense between the two communities, Bengali Hindus and Paharis. Some reports suggest that Bengali Hindus as well as some Bengali Muslim settlers were virtually forced under duress to take part in the arson by the armed forces, who threatened to also burn down their houses if they refused.

(4) Sexuality used as an instrument of terror

Sexual aggression, which may culminate in rape, has been a common feature in incidents of community and state violence in South Asia. In conflict situations where the armed forces are involved it is a common enough method to spread hatred and terror among citizens. In Mahalchhari too this was used effectively. The case of Kala Shona Chakma has been elaborated above. Other women with whom we talked described their desperation as they were literally chased into the water and the jungle, their daughters hit by sharp instruments, their mothers beaten by heavy sticks. Many of these young women are afraid to come in front of strangers, especially Bengalis. Their participation in schools has decreased and their studies affected. Their mothers said that they only wanted that they would be able to go to school again without fear and insecurity, which accompanied them from day to day. When asked whether they wanted to protest and seek justice, they declined and said that silence is the best policy.

(5) Processes of internal displacement and rehabilitation

Arson attacks of massive proportions took place during 26 August 2003, and effectively made hundreds of people homeless and dislocated for days on end. The process is still continuing as mentioned above. Many people remain without adequate shelter even today. Among them many are unable to even return to their homes, for fear of arbitrary arrest by the police, who have implicated many of the Pahari villagers in false cases regarding the arson of their own homes. As one villager said,

"I feel like a bird whose nest has been destroyed, shelter-less, homeless, being buffeted around by the wind and weather."

In the village of Kerengyanala, we saw Kalashona Chakma, the grandmother who was allegedly gang raped and whose eight month old grandson, allegedly strangled to death, now

lies buried beneath the earth, cooking in the open air. Other villagers have gathered together whatever they could to make makeshift shelters for themselves to withstand the rain and cold. Kerengyanala village was the furthest from Mahalchhari Thana and not a single house has been built for them by any authority since the incident. Other villages that are closer to Mahalchhari Thana and to the local Army Camp by Babupara Bazaar, including Babupara, or Saw Mill Para, now sport a number of newly constructed one-room bamboo huts with tin roofs that the Army had built for the affected people. In many cases, these huts were much smaller than the original homesteads which had been burnt down during the arson attack. People told us that they had heard that there was a 30 lakh Taka budget sanctioned for this but that it had all finished. Others mentioned that UNDP officers had come to take measurements of their previous homesteads and that they expected that there would be further construction. Some of the affected families refused to accept the huts offered to them as it was much less than what was lost. Notably, although the shop of Binod Bihari Khisha, (who was killed on 26 August 2003) which is situated the entry point of Babupara was being rebuilt his teenage son, whose arms now bear the mark of bayonet wounds and heavy beating, is still afraid to talk about his ordeal.

(6) Strengthening settler vote banks for the future

The settler issue may be taking a new turn in the CHT. The Accord had not resolved this in any meaningful way and now an MP drawn from among them represents the settlers in Parliament. The politics of the vote bank had so far been used in Bangladesh to get rid of future opponents the rule of the game being to intimidate your opponent's voters to the extent required to ensure your own power base as well as enjoy the resources left behind. This has been the case during the last national elections of October 2001 where Hindu voters especially in Hindu concentrated areas of the south-west and the south have been threatened and put under heavy pressure by the BNP led coalition to not to go to the polling booths since they were considered ardent voters of the Awami League. Though many stayed away from the polls, they were not spared when the in the post-election victory march Hindu houses were burnt down, looted and women and children assaulted and molested. In a newspaper report ¹⁰, the Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikkyo Parishad gave the following figures. About 23 people were killed out of which 20 were women and children! About 32 women and children were reported raped. Besides this innumerable instances of abduction, threat, and the destruction of deities were reported. The dark side of electoral democracy, which had manifested itself in the last elections of October 2001, may just be making its way into the Hills too, thereby creating its own dynamics!

Paper presented at the conference on Ethnic Identity and Ethnic conflict in Multicultural Societies, organized by the Dept. of Sociology, University of Mumbai, March 3 to 5,2004

¹⁰ Daily Janakantha, 20 November, 2003. Also see Guhathakurta, 2001 for detailed analysis.

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