

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND EVERYDAY FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH.

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Background:

The research concerns the ethnic people of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which is located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh bordering Myanmar and India. The hill tracts host twelve different ethnic communities from the time immemorial. These ethnic people (popularly known as Pahari) differ significantly from the mainstream population (Bangali) of Bangladesh. The historical development of the CHT has marked it as an 'other' and 'isolated' place since the colonial administration started from around 1860 to date. Although British administration reduced some of traditional customs of indigenous communities, they also preserved the ethnic characteristics by proclaiming the CHT Manual 1900. During Pakistan period these non-Muslim indigenous people were treated as 'uncivilized', Pakistan government did not consider them as human or citizen of Pakistan rather they had adopted hostile attitude toward the indigenous hill people of the CHT. Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, conflict between the Pahari people and the state had worsened due to immigration of Bangali settlers, military occupation and environmental pressures in CHT. Nevertheless, on 02 December 1997 a historical Peace Accord was signed by the Government of Bangladesh and the *Jana Samhati Samity* (JSS- the political platform of the people of CHT) to establish peace and communal harmony in CHT that results the CHT neither a secured nor a peaceful land for its natives. However, the study focused on the local perceptions towards conflict and discrimination in CHT where according to the local people, cultural gap and cultural hatred generated the crisis over the years. The study also examined the significance of the Peace Accord-1997 that was signed 11 years ago.

Materials and methods:

The purpose of the fieldwork was mainly to understand the local perceptions toward conflict and discrimination in this region. In line with the above mentioned purpose, I visited the Rangamati District- the oldest district of CHT for fieldwork during September- October 2008. I conducted informal interviews with ten Pahari and Bangali people living in CHT to get their personal experiences and perceptions toward the crisis. Three focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted to understand the collective attitudes toward the problems. I also consulted with two key informants about the overall situation, and information I gathered from the informants through interviews and discussion along with observations. To get the perceptions of plain districts' Bangali towards the Pahari people and peace accord they were also consulted (informal conversation).

Result and discussion:

Local Pahari people who differ significantly from the Bangali people in terms of their appearance, language, religion and socio-cultural organization identify some causes behind the crisis in CHT. Cultural hatred or underestimation, ethnic chauvinism, cultural hegemony and ethnocentrism are behind the exposed conflict and violence. These cultural aspects were (and are) responsible for generating the following authoritarian policies and standpoints that turned CHT into the turmoil situation.

Hydro-electric project (Kaptai dam): In 1960 Pakistan government constructed a dam in Rangamati without prior consultation with the local people that displaced huge Pahari people from their land and livelihoods.

Population movement: Military government of Bangladesh planned to balance the population in CHT so that the government can easily control the Paharis. From 1979 to 1984, at least 0.4 million Bangali people were migrated into CHT from plain districts of Bangladesh who took overall control of CHT with the support of law enforcing agencies.

Insurgency and counter-insurgency: The Paharis had been reacting to the influx of the Bangali settlers by armed resistance. The government of Bangladesh termed this movement 'insurgency', had deployed huge number of military forces to control the conflict situation in CHT in the name of 'counter-insurgency'. Many Bangali, Pahari and military people were killed in armed conflict during 1979-1997.

Assessing Peace Accord 1997:

The Peace Accord recognizes CHT "as a region inhabited by 'tribal' people and also recognizes the need of preserving the characteristics of the region and development thereof". Through the historical peace accord ethnic people of CHT got few rights, but as vital clauses of the peace accord still remained un-implemented, it could not bring any significant changes in CHT. Nonetheless, Pahari people believe that once all clauses of the peace accord is implemented, there would be no problem in CHT for the Pahari people. Some Paharis opined that, the peace accord does not reflect the local demands and there is no direction toward preservation of tradition and ethnic culture. On the other hand, according to the settler Bangali (presently who are more than fifty percent), the peace accord is anti-interest of Bangali people. Many Bangali settlers including *Samo Adhikar Andolon* (Equal Rights Movement) have been moving demonstrating to cancel the peace accord.

Though the CHT Peace Accord has recognized the special status of the hill people, eleven years after the signing of the CHT Peace Accord, the Pahari inhabitants of the area are still continuing to live in fear of attacks from Bangali settlers often carried out with the apparent connivance of army personnel. Important clauses that have remained unimplemented by the last two political governments, and remained in a stage of stagnation present time; therefore the post peace accord situation in CHT is still neither peaceful nor secure. Merely political peace accord cannot solve the problem as it is deeply rooted with cultural phenomenon. The existing crisis would not be impossible to resolve, if holistic approach is taken.

Conclusion:

Although Bangladesh is widely known as a homogeneous country, it is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country in South Asia. The majority of Bangladesh is Muslims; traditionally they bear a modern mindset. The majority should ensure traditional way of life of the minorities. If government of Bangladesh doesn't want more conflict and violence in CHT and believe in the cultural pluralism, then there is no alternative but to take steps to preserve and nurture the ethnic characteristics of Bangladesh.