

A Preliminary Report of Socio-Economic Change among the Ethnic Groups and Communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangla Desh

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The data collected during our field-research among the tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in former East Pakistan, now Bangla Desh, are the results of an inquiry in 600 households in 24 villages of 7 different tribes. One of these villages was visited for a longer period in 1968, two more in 1969, and in the rest of the villages inquiries were made in the first months of 1971.

According to the traditional division in hill people and valley people – the hill people are swidden cultivators (or shifting cultivators) of hill rice, animists or Christians like the Bawm by faith, the valley people are plough cultivators of wet-rice, Buddhists by faith – the approach to the socio-economic sphere is also divided into two parts; the results of both sections are compared later on.

These results are not without political significance, they are to be considered as an answer to the official policy of the Bengali administration which lacks any systematic empiric foundation as a basis for her future planning efforts. The agrarian policy of the Bengali administration for the CHT is characterised by an indiscriminating acceptance of the economical point of view of the early colonial administrators, namely that the traditional shifting cultivation economy of the hill tribes is a wasteful and ruinous exploitation of the soil. Guided by experience, however, British officials changed their point of view later on almost radically.

A quotation may show the current Bengali prejudices as far as the shifting cultivation is concerned: "... the Hill Tracts may be said to be East Pakistan's land of promise. If the crude, primitive, and shifting cultivation called 'jhum' is replaced by settled cultivation and the problem of soil erosion is met by terracing the hill sides ... some of the plain's growing population can possibly be absorbed in the thinly populated areas" (Ahmad/Rizvi 1951 : 20).

Another quotation not only shows the Bengali evaluation of a different agriculture, but the ignorance when looking at an altogether different way of life: "All the areas are covered with thick forests of garjan, teak and bamboo. Cultivation is negligible and is found only in a few places in the valleys" (Johnson/Ahmad 1957 : 160).

Let us keep these two quotations in mind and at first have a look at the natural environment.

The CHT form a transition zone between two distinctive regions and types of economy. In the west, in the alluvial plains of the Chittagong District, the wet rice cultivation is dominant. In the east we find the ridges of the Mizo Hills, the Chin Hills and the Arakan Hills where shifting cultivation, locally known as jhum, is commonly practised.

"Only a small part of the valleys lying between the ranges in the (Chittagong) Hill Tracts is level land; the greater part is a highly dissected terrain of steep-sided hillocks, often less than a hundred feet in height. Despite their moderate relief, such areas are to be classed ecologically together with the hill ranges" (Sopher 1964 : 107). The climate closely resembles that of the adjoining plains. High temperatures and plentiful rainfall create a landscape of evergreen forests, nowadays mostly consisting of secondary jungle.

The principal economic activities of the indigenous population are shifting cultivation and wet-rice cultivation. Until 1860 only jhum was practised in the hills, after that, plough cultivation, advocated by the British colonial administration gradually spread into the Hill Tracts, together with an increasing influence of Bengali plainsmen. It was, however, not British esteem for a "settled" way of life that caused the valley tribes to adopt plough cultivation, but decreasing returns from their swidden fields. I use this instance to characterise the organisation of shifting cultivation at that time to make it possible to recognize the change mentioned later.

Everybody had the same rights to the land, a condition which has not changed among the tribal people. In recent years, however, the Bengal Government has allowed the purchase of land by Bengali plainsmen, which formerly had not been possible.

Jungle clearing and burning was and still is done collectively, by mutual help. The valley tribes, however, had a more individualistic outlook, but nevertheless organised their labour collectively too. Weeding and similar activities were done by the cultivating family, the yield was and is private property though the village community had in former times a sort of social right to the surplus, articulated in the institutionalised feasts of merit. Cash crops like cotton and chillies were produced only for paying taxes and buying luxury goods.

Level land for plough cultivation was never abundant, the mountain slopes are a natural border to an extension of plough cultivation. According to the 1961 Census of Pakistan there were 385 000 inhabitants in the CHT. It is a useless question to ask whether all inhabitants in the hills could live by plough cultivation under normal conditions, as from the end of the 1950's there were no more normal conditions in the hills. In the process of development planning — for the benefit of the plains'

population only — the Karnafuli Hydro-Electric Project took shape. Following old British plans a dam was constructed near Kaptai. It was to create a lake of considerable extent, intended to produce 80 000 kw for use primarily in the Chittagong and Dacca areas. In short: the final result was the submergence of 50 000 acres of settled, cultivated land, which is about 40 % of the district's total cultivable area. Worst affected was the Chakma tribe, whose economy was totally shaken. Even before the dam's construction the Chakma were pressed for land, as the majority of them was living on plough cultivation. In the end, more than 100 000 persons, 90 % of these Chakma, were displaced and until now they are only partly and not adequately rehabilitated. 40 000 Chakma set forth on an exodus to the neighbouring Indian states of Tripura and Assam, a large proportion of them was settled later on by the Indian Government in NEFA.

As to the rehabilitation, the affected Bengali plough cultivators were resettled first on the best land, the hill tribes had to take second place. Totally "forgotten" were the displaced shifting cultivators of the reservoir area, who lost 113 000 acres of land. The best solution might have been to deforest land in the Reserved Forests, which comprise 1/3 of the Hill Tracts' total area. But the Forest Department Officers were particularly uncompromising in holding on to Reserved Forest land, which is a rich source for the production of teak, bamboo and other timber, the profit of which goes into the pockets of Bengali contractors and the Forest Department.

So the actual situation is that of a high rate of land scarcity not only of flat land, but also of land for shifting cultivation. Some of the inadequately rehabilitated plough cultivators had to return to the traditional method of swidden cultivation, the displaced shifting cultivators of the reservoir area had to look for land on the hill ridges and tops, thereby additionally pressing on the land. Rotating land use as in former times is no longer possible as Government keeps check on internal migrations, and trans-border migrations are possible only to a small extent.

Former anthropological works on the CHT drew their conclusions from a small and generally not specified number of households mainly from one or two villages only. Our investigations were the first to use a large sample of 600 households, which does not only allow interethnic comparisons but also takes into account the three-fold ecological and economical division of the Hill Tracts. From among the villages situated in the north of the hills three villages with plough cultivation of wet-rice and gardening have been chosen. The cultivators are Marma. For the Chakma, two villages with shifting cultivation, one village with plough cultivation (here a type called fringe-land-cultivation) and gardening, and two villages with plough and garden cultivation have been chosen, corresponding in a way to the less homogenous agriculture of the Chakma.

Fringe land, by the way, is arable land in the reservoir area which is submerged

during the rainy season and emerges in the dry period when the water level of the lake drops. This land may be cultivated only during a very short period in the dry season. The cultivators of this sort of land are Chakma and Taungchengya, a subgroup of the Chakma.

The swidden cultivators in the south of the Hill Tracts are represented by 16 small villages, 7 of which have taken to gardening in recent years, besides shifting cultivation. The cultivators are Bawm, Khiang, Marma, Taungchengya, Mru, Khumi and Tippera.

Agriculture is the basis of the economy in the hills, though there are decisive differences.

The hill tribes practise exclusively shifting cultivation and gardening, the valley people are to a large extent plough-cultivators of wet rice, many of them, however, practise shifting cultivation as well, and quite a number are shifting cultivators only. One reaction to the pressure on the land, which leads to decreasing yields and carrying capacity is the establishment of fruit gardens. This new branch of production has gained importance as a new method of obtaining cash crops. At the time of our investigation it was practised by most of the valley people; among the hillmen by Bawm and partly by some Bawm-influenced Khiang and Marma villages. One part of traditional farming is the keeping of live-stock, which provides all ethnic groups with a meat diet, the cattle serving the plough cultivators as draught animals. Hunting, fishing and collecting are supplementary means of acquiring food, practised more or less according to the circumstances. Besides the food-production, various crafts are playing a role in the economic life of the people. In addition to the traditional cottage-industries for their own consumption there are already tendencies among the Bawm and valley-inhabiting Marma to produce for a market-economy whereas the other tribal communities are still to be considered as target marketers.

A division between hand- and brain-work is already noticeable on a small scale. Some men with higher education are holding offices on the lowest administrative level or are employed as teachers at government (or in the case of the Bawm also missionary) schools. The christianised Bawm furthermore have the chance to work as pastor or mission's clerk.

Analysis of the collected data shows the following facts: manpower is still the main productive force and the tools used for work are simple and mostly homemade. The main part of social labour is needed traditionally for one's own requirements, and consequently the productive capacity of labour is still low. Though already a systematical production of cash crops has taken place the means of production have not yet developed further, but only changed as to quantity. The forms of cooperation, formerly a must for all ethnic groups are developing into different directions. The hill people still are working in voluntary groups consisting either of relatives,

neighbours or friends of the same age-group. The valley people, however, widely employ hired labourers; mutual neighbourly help has lost its importance. The same tendency is to be seen in the garden cultivation. Gardens are worked by family members, partly with the help of day-labourers. Gardening is organised according to the principles of private enterprise, there are no voluntary working groups.

To get information about the rice-economy, we put seed and yield into a relation. The general comparison between shifting and plough cultivators shows that in both cases the average harvest rate (relation between input and output) was about 30. But in reality these rates differed considerably among the plough cultivators (village average from 18 to 45), and varied less (villages averages from 24 to 40) among the shifting cultivators. This means that the differences do not vary as much in the quality of swidden fields as in flat land fields (already classified and taxed by the administration as 1st, 2nd and 3rd class land).

As to the relevance of the different branches of production for the income of the ethnic group it is to be said for the hill tribes except the Bawm that they are still living mainly on rice. But the yields are low and production of the traditional cash crops like cotton, chillies and sesam does not add much income. So their general economic situation is bad, consequently they fall prey to Bengali money-lenders who exercise an uncontrolled economical rule over them, almost completely dictating the terms of trade.

The situation of the Bawm is much better; though having rather low yields too, they have taken to producing new cash crops, i. e. fruit, especially pineapples and oranges.

Among others, three factors are mainly responsible for this change: 1. decreasing returns, 2. the modification of a formerly rank-stratified society into one of a more egalitarian type, thus providing the formerly underprivileged kinship groups institutional means for their emancipation and 3. the expression of Christian norms and values in terms of a (modified) rank-stratified society of the Chin type, in which the accumulation of goods (luxury goods mainly) was highly esteemed. Formerly practised feasts of merit were abolished due to Christian influences.

In comparison to the other hill tribes the Bawm are well-to-do people; 67 % of their population can read and write. Their standard of living is the highest among the hill people.

For comparative reasons the valley people have to be distinguished as Marma and Chakma plough cultivators and Chakma and Taungchengya shifting cultivators. The latter are the victims of the dam construction. As already said, displaced shifting cultivators were not rehabilitated at all. The Chakma and Taungchengya we questioned have not only lost the bulk of their former area but are now subject to the so-called Jhum Control Scheme, the ultimate object of which is "to introduce correct forms of land use and to discourage jhooming" (Pilot Scheme, n. d.: 3).

Shifting cultivation is restrained and controlled. No wonder that under these conditions the yield of a field which has to be cultivated every second to third year must be extremely low, with a tendency to decrease further. The shifting cultivators of this region have to spend a lot of money on the purchase of rice. Their main cash crops are turmeric, cotton, and ginger, they practice no gardening yet. They are comparatively better off than the shifting cultivators in the south, because they have easier access to the markets, and their cash crops, root crops as opposed to chilli and oil seed, are more suited to the demands of the present market economy established by the Bengali. But if the cash crops do not earn sufficient money for their food together with a small amount of rice they harvest, these people are compelled to migrate to other parts of the hills in the hope of finding better swidden fields. That way, a number of villages are disintegrating. The richest families are to be found among the plough cultivators, particularly among the Marma. The quality of the plough land varies, but with first-class land one can gain considerable results, results not only from the high yields, but also by subletting the land in return for half the harvest, or the money for the value of half the harvests three years in advance. Though such transactions are prohibited they are widely practised.

Furthermore, a lot of money is earned through the marketing of garden products in big style. Even though the middlemen are Bengalis who dictate the prices, profits are still pretty high. The swidden cultivators' villages show little variation in income, whereas the flatland cultivators show a strong polarisation of rich and poor. The income may range from 300/- Rs. to 5000/- Rs. per year in the case of the plough cultivators, whereas the shifting cultivators had incomes from 120/- Rs. to 1800/- Rs. (the latter being an exception) per year.

Clearly we find the richest families among the Chakma and Marma cultivators, but considering the general condition of the villages the Bawm as an ethnic group are better off. The reasons for these different developments are to be found in the different forms of land rights. Land for shifting cultivators is not private property; officially it belongs to the state, but it is treated by the swidden cultivators as de facto property of the village communities in which the individual family has the rights to usufruct only. Nobody can buy or sell land. The tax the shifting cultivators have to pay is levied in acknowledgment of the supreme rights of the State to the land, but not as a rent for a particular plot. As access to the land is equal and swidden fields are not subject to any financial transaction, everybody usually has the same chance in the system of shifting cultivation. Therefore the society of the hill tribes who all practise shifting cultivation turns out to be a rather egalitarian one.

The plough land, on the other hand, is leased by the administration. The rent is paid according to the quality and size of the land. This land can be inherited, and

all potential heirs hang on to it. This is an explanation for the fact that the swidden cultivators usually have nuclear families (each family has to clear its own field) whereas the plough-land cultivators have their households full with relatives and are turning into a joint-family-system. Now the problem is that the plough land is limited anyway, not only due to the dam. So the land available is insufficient for the cultivating families; the percentage of the landless families among our sample of plough cultivators has already gone up to as much as 29 % in the case of one village. These people have to work as day-labourers, usually finding work only during the harvest-time, that is for 3—4 months each year.

The tendency to capitalistic wage-labour is inevitable under the existing conditions. But since the day-labourers are usually hired by their own fellow tribesmen who are better off, the ties of tribal solidarity still prevents the worst.

In that respect the shifting cultivators still are in a better position, because in so far as swidden land is available they can cultivate it. Plough land, on the other hand, is not available any more except to a small degree in the Reserved Forests. Under the given circumstances shifting cultivation, together with a general development of horticulture and the provision of marketing facilities has better prospects for the future.

As we have seen, the average productivity of plough land and swidden land is more or less equal — a point which falsifies the official land policy almost completely. If swidden cultivation is to be discouraged officially in favour of settled cultivation, Government must give land to the disposal of the swidden cultivators if they want to settle down, land which is not available any more. Swidden fields, however, are still workable, and shifting cultivation could be placed on a scientific footing.

The international discussion on shifting cultivation (Conklin a. o.) is obviously unknown to the respective Government officials. Agricultural experiments as to the best seed-combination, fruit-sequences and so on, proposed by the British during the late 1920's, could be taken up, but obviously it is easier and cheaper to restrain the economy of the tribal population in favour of economical concepts developed in the plains. The fact that under decreasing yields, increasing population and the consequent change in the land-man-ratio the Bengali Government is trying to forbid shifting cultivation (which yields as much as plough cultivation) only leads to the following conclusion: The ultimate object of this land policy is the displacement of the whole tribal population and/or their complete proletarianisation.

Though this might seem somewhat far-fetched, I mention a Government Development Plan outlined in the 1960's which envisages the abandonment of rice production in the hills.

True, there are some quite good plans as far as horticulture is concerned, but Government officials have up to now totally failed in executing even the smallest

proportion of these plans, channeling the money, instead, into their own pockets. What is called "development" for the Hill Tracts is in fact a semi-official way of adding to the monthly salaries of the officials concerned.

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