

NO LAND RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH

A report on the plight of the tribal
people of Chadigang,

By Colin Johnson

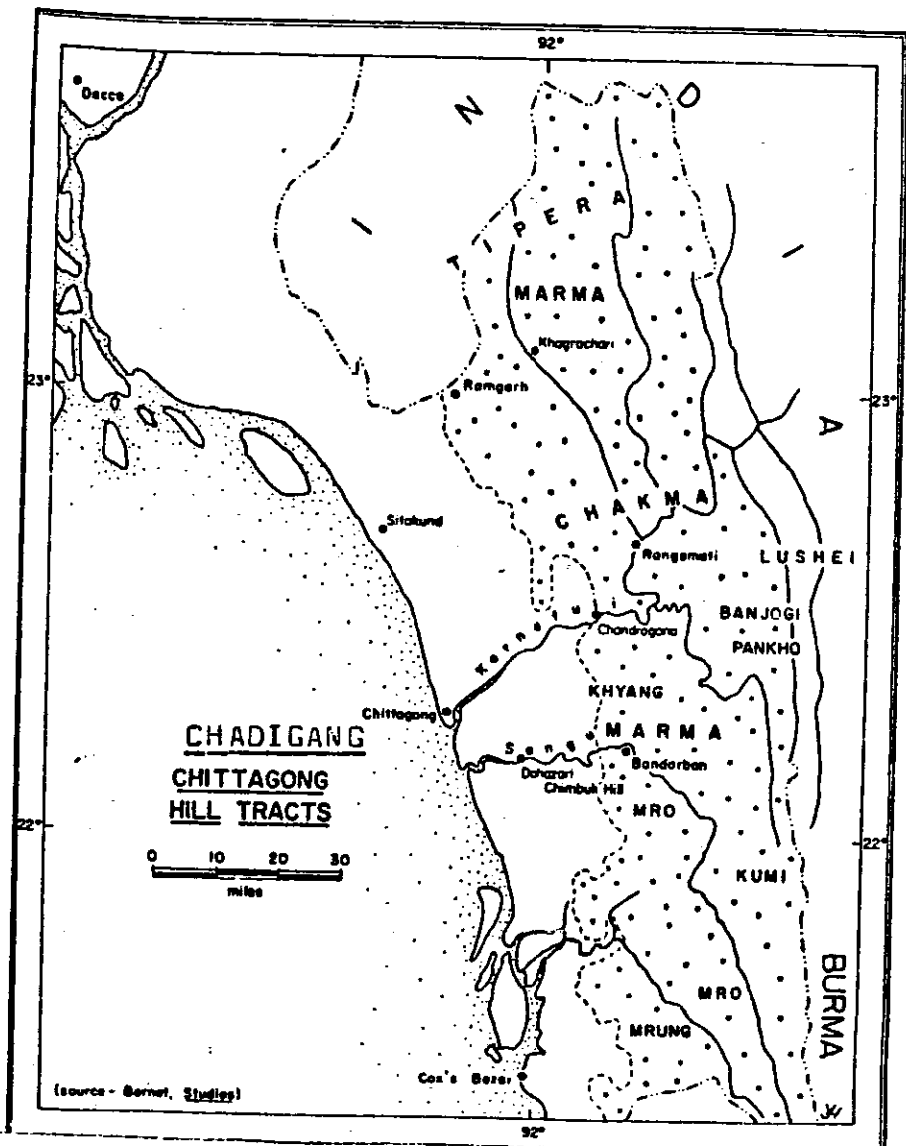
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(source - Bernier, Studies)

The Bangladesh Government's drive to "Islamise" Chadigang (Chittagong Hill Tracts), the homeland of the Chakma, Maung and other allied ethnic groups, has taken on the proportions of genocide. In 1981 over 10 000 men, women and children fled through the jungles to India to escape the operations of the Bangladesh Security Forces. They gave grim accounts of how the soldiers burnt their homes, looted their possessions and raped women on the pretext of flushing out "insurgents". These so-called insurgents, the Shanti Bahini, had been organised as a defence force after similar atrocities in the past. Repression has been going on since the founding of the Moslem state (East Pakistan) in 1947, but over the last few years it has reached the stage of deliberate genocide. Australia among other countries supplies aid to Bangladesh. It is time that such aid has conditions attached to stop continuing massacres and oppression. Bangladesh is extremely weak economically and if donor nations take a firm stand, it should bring results. After the last elections the new government under pressure from India agreed to let the refugees return home, but since then the military has overthrown that government and the situation is uncertain. The Shanti Bahini is conducting operations against the security forces and this could bring about reprisals as it has done in the past.

LOCATION: Chadigang borders Burma and Mizoram (India) to the east and Tripura (India) to the west. It is a peninsula-like strip of land known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Naf river forms a natural boundary between Chadigang and Burmese Arakan. Other rivers are the Karnafuli and Sangu. Rivers are the main means of communications and flow north to south and into the Bay of Bengal. Roads are few, far between and impossible in the wet season. The main one goes from the port of Chittagong to the chief town of Rangamati. Footpaths follow the ridges above valleys choked with jungle. This has been the salvation of the people. They can hide from the guns of the soldiers and trek through the jungle which extends to and over the Indian border into Tripura. Foreigners have restricted access to the area, usually only to Rangamati, and it is extremely difficult to get information directly on what is happening in the district. Refugees are the main sources of news.

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The main commercial product of Chadigang is bamboo and to exploit this a large mill has been built at Chandraghona on the Karnafuli river to make paper. The construction of a large reservoir submerged the best arable land and left over 100 000 people landless. 40 000 people fled to India where they were eventually settled in Arunachal Pradesh. In the near past the inhabitants of Chadigang practiced Jhum cultivation, that is burning of a strip of jungle and planting crops for a season or two, but owing to the increase in population and Bengali immigration fixed agriculture is now the norm.

The peoples of Chadigang:

Chakma	....	400 000
Tangsongya	....	80 000
Chak	....	20 000
Mogh	....	100 000
Khiang	....	2 000
Khumi	....	2 000
Tripuri(Tipperera)	....	15 000
Murung	....	20 000
Mro	....	5 000
Lushai (Lushei)	....	2 000
Bown	....	3 000
Bonjugi(Bonjogi)	....	2 000
Pankhui (Pankho)	....	2 000

		653 000

The Chadigang peoples are ethnically different from the Muslim Bengalis. Their original languages were Tibeto-Burmese and most of them were Buddhists, Christians or animists with the Tippera (or Tripuris) being Hindus. It is difficult to trace the original homelands of those peoples. It has been said that some came from South East Asia and others from South China. Others are the original inhabitants of the area.

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These are the Bonjugi, Pankhui and Lushai who are concentrated in the Chakma area. The Chakmas (and the allied Marma) are zealous Buddhists who came from Burma. They form the backbone of the resistance against Bangladeshi oppression .

A breakdown of the population of Chadigang at the time of partition (1947) clearly shows that the Bengalis were in a minority.

Mongolian-type ethnic groups	....	97%	of	total	population
Bengali (mixed race)	....	2.5%	of	total	population
Non-Muslims	....	98.5%	"	"	"
Muslim	....	1.5%	"	"	"
Buddhist	....	85.5%	"	"	"

At present (1982) the Chakma community are estimated to be about 400 000 or $\frac{1}{4}$'s of the population, the Tripuras or Tipperas, 15% and other communities 10%. From 1974 the Bangladesh Government began moving Muslim Bengali families into Chadigang under army escort. Up to March 1980 over 200 000 families were settled into the area depriving the inhabitants of their best land. The Chadigang-Bengali population ratio in 1951 was 90.9 to 9.1; in 1974 this had changed to 82.4 to 11.6, and in 1980 67.1 to 33.9. To make room for this massive influx, the tribal communities have had to give way and the army is on hand to quench any resistance. The Bangladesh army has launched a massive road-building programme in the hills. Chadigang has been divided into 11 development circles and all-weather roads are being constructed from Bandarban to Ruma, from Chiringa (on the Chittagong-Cox's Bazar Road) to Alikadam, from Ramgarh to Dighinala via Khagrachari, from Chittagong to Khagrachari via Fatikchhari. The result of the development of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is that there has been widespread social and economic deterioration among the tribals. Now over 100 000 persons have been rendered landless and poverty-stricken.

History: Many of the problems of the peoples of Chadigang stem directly from the British and their policies.

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Chadigang has never been part of India and was never under the rule of the Nawabs of Bengal or Mughal Satraps, but in 1666 A.D. the Chakma king, Dhabana acknowledged Mughal hegemony. Under an agreement the Mughals recognised the dominion of the Chakma over the whole of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, except the town of Chittagong. The agreement was renewed by Mir Jumla, Mughal Governor of Bengal in 1715 and the Chakma King Fateh Khan, adopted Muslim names and titles without embracing Islam. Chadigang up to the event of the British was never part of Bengal.

The British East India Company entered the picture in 1760 A.D. when Mir Kashem Ali, the Nawab of Bengal ceded whatever interest the Mughals had in the area to the Company. They attempted to destroy the independence of the kingdom by establishing kuthis (camps) well within its boundaries. The Chakma king, Sher Doulat Khan refused to recognise the suzerainty of the British and naval battles took place at Silak and Jibtali in 1777 and 1780 A.D. in which the British were defeated. In 1785 A.D. to bring peace to his kingdom, King Jan Box Khan finally recognised the hegemony of the British.

The British established a stranglehold on the kingdom and eventually made it a part of the Presidency of Bengal. The Chittagong Hill Tracts was demarcated as a district in 1860 (vide Act XXII of 1860). At the time there was not a single Bengali in the area. In 1900 Chadigang was given the status of an "Excluded Area" with a certain amount of autonomy. Except for a few higher post district administration was in the hands of an indigenous body of representatives selected from the different ethnic groups. They were under a British Superintendent and later a deputy Commissioner. Only the Governor-in-Council was authorised to interfere in the administrative and judicial proceedings.

After the second world war and the approaching British withdrawal from the sub-continent the problem of the people of Chadigang began. Although it was a non-Muslim and non-Bengali speaking area, the Chairman of the Boundary Commission, Sir Cyril Radcliffe awarded the district to Pakistan, perhaps because the then East Pakistan would have been without a major port if the whole area including Chittagong had gone to India.

The inclusion of Chadigang in Pakistan was an injustice. Pakistan was created as a "Homeland for Muslims" as demanded by the Muslim League. It was carved out of British India on the basis of Muslim majority areas such as Punjab and Bengal. The arbitrary act of placing a non-Muslim people in a Muslim homeland was bitterly resented by the tribal peoples. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peoples' Association, the only representative body at the time, presented a memorandum to the Boundary Commission arguing that as religion was the main criterion for partition they should be made part of the secular republic of India. This was turned down, the reason given was that the region was inaccessible from India.

The Peoples' Association refused to accept the terms of the Boundary Commission. They formed an Action Commission which took possession of Chadigang when partition came into effect on the 15th August 1947. The Indian flag with the Chakra or wheel of Buddhism was raised. It flew for 5 days. On 17th August the Action Committee convened an emergency conference at the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow at Rangamati. The Chakma king, headmen and other leaders attended and declared: The Chittagong Hill Tracts shall not abide by the Radcliffe Award. Copies of the resolution were forwarded to Delhi, Karachi, Calcutta and London. They were received with indifference. Resistance squads were formed all over Chadigang. These were suppressed by the armed forces of Pakistan. Delegates were sent to India to seek support and a supply of arms, but India ready to go to war over Kashmir with a Muslim majority, refused to help the non-Muslim peoples. The tribal people were considered by the Pakistani authorities to be pro-Indian and forced to suffer the consequences.

Isolated and without International support, they could only suffer in resentment as the Pakistani government launched a two-phased programme to bring the district under control. It began a policy of settling, though on a small scale, a number of Bengali families in the area and then removed the constitutional safeguards that the district enjoyed. In 1959 with the application of the basic democracies order the indigenous political systems were substituted by a new political order of the military Government under Ayub Khan. The indigenous police force was disbanded, its officers sent to other districts and Bengali police and officials replaced them. Several hundred Muslim

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families were settled in the Tubalchari and Belchari areas of the Feni river valley, Ramgarh area, and Bandarban, Lama and Alikadam areas of Matamuhuri valley and Nakkhyong Chari in the southern part of Chadigang. The policy of the Pakistan government was: "We want the land, not you - the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts". In the 1961 census, the Muslim population was given as 50 000 out of a total population of 386 000.

Worse was to come. In 1963 a hydro-electric plant was constructed at Kaptai. 50 000 acres, 40% of Chadigang's cultivable land, became submerged and 100 000 people became landless. Few of them were rehabilitated and none adequately. The dam created disruption and disintegration of the settlement patterns of the Chakmas. The Kaptai dam benefited only the non-tribals. The new industries such as fish farming were allotted only to Bengalis.

The tribal peoples found themselves becoming a depressed minority in an Islamic state. Kidnapping of girls, forcible conversions, riots and forcible occupation of lands became part of their life. In terms of per capita income, literacy and life expectancy they dropped below the level of the majority who are themselves among the wretched of the earth ruled by a quarrelling educated elite united only in their efforts to keep a monopoly of jobs in trade, commerce and government.

The tribal people could do little to right their wrongs through peaceful means. But in 1966 the Chittagong Hill Tracts Welfare Association was formed to try and protect the interests of the peoples of Chadigang. It was and has remained an underground organisation and eventually split into two groups. One wished to use peaceful means and the other to employ force, if necessary, to protect their lives and property. In 1971 in response to the violent repression, the Parbottya Chattagram Jana Sanghati (PCJSS)

headed by Manabendra Narayan Larma was formed. In 1972 the PCJSS formed an armed wing, the Shanti Bahini, to protect the tribal peoples.

Bangladesh: The creation of the state aroused hope in the hearts of the people of Chadigang. On 15th February 1972, Manabendra Larma led a deputation to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the newly independent country, which pressed four demands.

1. Autonomy of Chadigang with its own legislature.
2. Retention of the 1900 Regulation in the Bangladesh constitution.
3. Continuation of the tribal Chief's offices.
4. Constitutional provisions restricting the amendment of the Regulation and imposition of a ban to the influx of non-tribal people into the district. None of these demands were met. Instead the deputation was told to go home and do away with their ethnic identities. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted the tribal peoples to see themselves as Bengalis but Manabendra Larma retorted: "None of us is a Bengali". The Sheikh visited Rangamati, the district headquarters and advised the tribals to join the national mainstream.

The peoples' feelings on this was shown in the first general election of Bangladesh in 1973. The PCJSS contested the election and won both the seats of the Hill Tracts on the programme of "Autonomy".

The result of this was a crackdown on Chadigang more severe than ever before. S.K. Chakma, Convener of the Buddhist Minorities Protection Committee based in Tripura, says about this period: "The Pakistani rulers were too far away to pay much attention to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, so whatever action they took was never intense, but with the formation of Bangladesh things changed. The problem of the tribals automatically assumed much more importance. The Bangladesh government had to seriously take note of the fact that here was a group of people demanding more autonomy and who had their sympathies with India. For Bangladesh it became a major security problem and had to be dealt with in the way they thought fit. So there followed repression of the tribals!"

It has been stated that during the war of independence the Pakistan army had recruited a large number of razakars and mujahids (collaborators) from among the tribals. Some may have been collaborators, but the tribals say that they were left to the mercies of the Pakistani army during this period and that it is strange that a tribal people dubbed as anti-Pakistani since 1947 should suddenly be seen as pro-Pakistani in 1971. Large scale infiltration of the Hill Tracts had already commenced under the rule of Pakistan. 50 000 Bengali Muslims entered the Khagrachari sub-division in Ramgarh area and Nakhyangchari area in Bandarban sub-division with the help of the army and took over tribal lands. The Bengali Muslims attacked the tribal people, burnt their homes, raped their women, looted properties and destroyed Buddhist temples. No action was taken by the government in this matter. When the Pakistani army withdrew from Panchari area, the Bangladesh army (Mukti Bahini) came and plundered the area. 18 people were killed when they came out to receive the Mukti Bahini and another 16 were slaughtered in the jungle. 2 people alone survived to reveal the facts. On December 14th 1971 200 houses were burnt to the ground and 22 people were found sheltering in trenches in Kukichara and killed out of hand. Over December and January more atrocities followed and tribals were indiscriminately arrested as collaborators.

After the August and November 1975 coups in Bangladesh a delegation of tribals again went to Dacca, the Capital, to meet the new rulers. They met the President of Bangladesh, Justice A.S. Sayem. The only result was repression. The army carried out raids to quell the opposition. This has been the pattern ever since and in response the Shanti Bahini began its own operations to protect the people of Chadigang.

The Armed Forces The 24th Infantry Division is stationed at Chittagong cantonment. In 1972 the Division was strengthened with three additional brigades. A new Bangladesh Rifles sector was established with headquarters at Rangamati. It has a strength of 3 armed battalions. 2 Ansar (Islamic guards) are stationed at Khagrachari and Ghagra. The strength of the armed police has been increased from 1 to 5 battalions.

An anti-guerilla training centre has been established at Mahalchari under Khagrachari Sub-division. The full strength of the armed forces (including para-military forces) now arrayed against the Shanti Bahini have been estimated to be: -

B.D. Army	24th Inf. Div.	80 000 men
BDR Sector	6 Bns.	25 000 "
Ansars	2 Bns.	5 000 "
Armed Police	5 Bns.	10 000 "
Trg. Centre	-	800 "

In 1978 the Shanti Bahini issued an appeal in which it stated that Chadigang had been turned into an armed camp. Amnesty International who compiled a report on the repression of the Tribals has stated that between 20 000 and 100 000 armed personnel are active in the district.

Shanti Bahini: The numbers of the Shanti Bahini are unknown and much of what follows is speculation or open to verification. Their training seems to be thorough as is their ability to handle modern weapons. I have been told that they are trained by ex-policemen or veterans from the Independence war, but Indian sources have said that very few, if any, served on either side then. But during that period Bangladesh was flooded with arms and on the capitulation of the Pakistani army modern arms fell into the hands of the "Peace Force". Other arms have been captured from Bangladesh forces. From their operations they can be seen to be a very effective fighting force (Shanti Bahini sources give their number as 15 000, or a reserve force of 50 000 with 5000 fighters) armed with modern weapons and able to inflict heavy losses on the Bangladesh army. Recently they killed 20 soldiers in a well laid ambush.

After the unsuccessful hillmen's delegation to Dacca in 1972, the leadership of the Tribal peoples passed into the hands of the more militant wing and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti headed by M.N. Larma and his brother J.N. Larma was formed. The political activities of the PCJSS was aimed at establishing an alternative or parallel administration and they are said to control 90% of the area. They collect taxes from both villagers, contractors and even officials. So strong is their position that even police and BDR personnel posted in remote areas have to contribute their monthly levy. Contractors have to pay royalty for

collecting raw materials for the Chandraghona paper mills and in 1980 handwritten posters appeared demanding compensation for the establishment of an army camp at Dighinala.

The Shanti Bahini although they consist mainly of the three main ethnic groups, Chakma, Tripuri and Marma have strong support from the other communities. They have extensive organisational networks in the Rangamati, Ramgarh and Bandarban sub-divisions and their main operations are directed against the new settlers. They first serve a quit notice on the settlers in a particular locality and if it is not evacuated an attack follows in which the settlement is destroyed. In January 1982 the Shanti Bahini captured 50 000 Rupees from four forest departments and looted three banks. In recent engagements the armed forces have come off second best in armed clashes.

A guerilla force must have the sympathy of the peoples among whom they operate and the Shanti Bahini appear to have. They have not clashed with the traditional hierarchies and according to reports from the refugees in Tripura they enjoy wide-spread support. The Chakma spokesman in the refugee camp at Korbook said: "A lot of us have been asked to leave by Shanti Bahini. We shall stay here till the Shanti Bahini tells us to return!"

Shanti Bahini operations have brought reprisals in their wake and these have been so severe that the guerillas are said to have asked the tribals to leave the district to escape them. Thus the mass influx of tribals into India. In 1978 in a massive search-and-destroy operation in Gomtachari, the army attacked a number of Mog villages, killing and looting indiscriminately. On 22 March 1979 the guerillas ambushed an army truck and killed some army personnel. The Officer commanding in Chittagong, Major-General Abdul Mazoor later announced that a meeting would be held between tribals and non-tribals in an effort to sort out their differences. A large number of tribals assembled at Kaukhali Bazar in Kalampati Union. The officer arrived, addressed the assembled people, then left. As soon as he had gone some hundred Bengalis armed with knives rushed upon the tribals. Behind them came soldiers. Over 300 people were slaughtered.

The pattern of attack and reprisal has resulted in an influx of refugees into India. Indian Border Security Forces and Central Government Officials in Tripura believe that there is a motive behind the persecution of the tribals. This is to create a non-tribal belt along the India-Bangladesh border. On October 1st, 1981 a meeting between Indian and Bangladesh officials was held and the Bangladesh authorities agreed to let the refugees return and they would be resettled on their land. They returned early in 1982, but little is known of their fate.

In addition to the annihilation policy pursued by the Bangladesh forces, an unknown number of persons are imprisoned mostly within the military camps. Some are even imprisoned in underground pits. Imprisonment for women means rape and young men have been crippled so that they cannot hold weapons. Forced settlement camps (read concentration camps) have been established to separate the people from the guerillas. These types of camps have been established in Bilaichari union, Moghban union, Balukhali union and some in the Bandarban and Ramgarh sub-divisions. Government sources say that they are trying to resettle the uprooted tribals in Government sponsored cooperative farming estates which are assisted by the Asian Development Bank. It is possible that the refugees that returned from India have been placed in such camps.

In order to obtain information and confessions torture has been widely used. It includes severe beatings, electric shocks, uninterrupted interrogations, starvation, burning, and many other forms of humiliation. Parents of Shanti Bahini fighters have been forced to exert pressure on their sons to make them surrender.

The army has established checkpoints on roads and waterways to control guerilla movement and the transportation of food stuffs. From all accounts up to March 1982, they have not succeeded in establishing their control throughout Chadigang and guerilla activity is increasing rather than decreasing. The Shanti Bahini refuse to negotiate until the repression and murder of the people stop.

They demand:

1. Self determination within Bangladesh with a separate legislature.
2. Restitution of all lands taken by Bengali immigrants since 1970 and a total ban on all immigration into Chadigang.
3. Constitutional arrangements for the preservation of the indigenous cultures and identity.
4. Free movement and commerce within the district.
5. Freedom from official harassment.

But with the continuing instability within Bangladesh itself, it seems impossible that a lasting settlement can be reached unless a lasting government is established at the Capital. As it is with the continuing political turmoil in which the military is heavily involved, the Shanti Bahini should be able to hold their own and consolidate their power.