

Damned for Progress. About the Perversity of State
and Nation-Building in Bangla Desh.
The Chittagong Hill Tracts Case.

Paper presented to the Symposium:
"The Fourth World: Relations Between Minority Peoples
and Nation-States". XI ICAES, Canada, 1983

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The Fourth World: Relations Between Minority Indigenous Peoples and Nation-States.

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In this paper I intend to outline how the relationships between minority peoples and the nation state Bangla Desh are structured by a political theory which has by its implications paved the way to the willful and large-scale destruction of cultures and the annihilation of thousands of people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangla Desh. To start with I give a few background informations of my particular case.

"We want the soil, and not the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts" 1)

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are situated in Bangla Desh, bordering Assam and Upper Burma to the east, Arakan to the south, the Chittagong District to the west and Tripura to the north. 13 different ethnic groups live in this district; they have mostly immigrated into the hills from Burma and except the Tippera all belong to the Tibeto-Burmese language family.

Corresponding the geological division of the hills into steep-sided hillocks and broad river valleys the ethnic groups have chosen different habitats.

Chakma, Marma and Tippera are valley-living groups; Mru, Khumi Bawm, Pankhua, Mizo, Taungchengya, Khiang, Sak and Mrung live on the ridges of the hills.

Official figures of the population are not reliable. According to the CHT District Gazetteer of 1971 which quotes the Census of Pakistan of 1961 (1-1), the CHT had 385,079 inhabitants (CHT-DG 1971:39f.). But as this figure was too low already for the sixties I refer to estimates which had been made in the late fifties; they give at least a relationship of the size of the different groups. Chakma, numbered about 130 000, the Taungchengya, a subgroup ca. 12 000, the Marma approximately 130 000, Tippera and Mrung (a subgroup) about 35 000.

There were approximately 15 000 Mru and 2000 Khumi and about 8000 Bawm. Pankhua had 1000 members, the Sak about 2000. Khiang and Mizo, the smallest groups in the hills, numbered a few hundred each.

In 1947, 97.5% of the hill tracts population consisted of tribal people, 2.5 % were Hindu and Muslim Bengalis. Today Muslim Bengali account for 40% of the district's population.

Different waves of immigration brought these groups into the CHT. The Chakma lived further south in the Matamuri area originally; they entered the Karnaphuli area, their present habitat in the early 17th century. The Marma came to the hill tracts shortly after the Burmese occupation of Arakan at the end of the 18th century. They settled down in the southern and northern parts of the hills, some of them pushed north as far as the Sundarbans and settled there.

The Tippera came from Tripura and settled mainly in the alluvial river valleys of the northern hill tracts.

The Bawm, a Chin group, left the Chin Hills at about 1800. They migrated south, got mixed up in fights with Mru, Khumi and Marma and settled finally of the fringes of the Marma territories in the southern hills at 1840. Mru, Khumi and Khiang, Chin groups too, had to leave their habitat in Arakan as a consequence of the Chin expansion in the early 19th century. A part of them migrated into the CHT, the

majority, however, lives still in northern Arakan in Burma. The Sak came from northern Burma. They were settled by the Arakanese kings in the area of Akyab; from there they entered the hill tracts.

Swidden cultivation had been the only form of land use in the hills, plough cultivation was unknown at the time of the British annexation of the area (1860) and was accepted by Chakma, Marma and Tippera peasants only after swidden lands had become scarce in the northern river valleys at the end of the last century.

Kinship groups and families had the right to cultivate, the ownership of the land rested either with the clan, the whole tribe, in some cases with the spirits. Agricultural products belonged to the producer, surplus had to be distributed in times of need.

Jungle clearing, weeding the fields, watching the jhum (swidden field), harvesting, housebuilding and organization of rituals and celebrations used to be performed by cooperating age groups and families. Systems of mutual help and reciprocity structured the relationships between neighbours, families and kinship groups.

After the British took over the area they applied a territorial form of administration to the hills with a high British officer at the top of the hierarchy. The 3 Chiefs of the Marma and Chakma were made responsible for the administration management and tax-collection in their resp. circles. These circles were subdivided into mouzas, the smallest administrative units in the hills. Villages used to be represented by a "roaja", a village chief; with the application of the territorial administration, these "roajas" were made subordinate to the mouza headman who was directly in charge of the upkeeping of law and order and the tax collection.

For political reasons, the CHT groups were kept isolated from the administration of the plains; they were administrated by the "Regulation of 1900", a set of rules drawn up to suit the multi-ethnic situation in the hills.

This was the administrative set up until the 1950s. The further development will be outlined below.

History links most of these groups with either Arakan or the Chin Hills. Their cultures show similarities with either Arakanese or Chin societies, the Chakma society, however, has been shaped by some degree through contacts with Bengalis. Chakma and Marma have kinship groups which are all independent of each other. They were headed by representatives who have lost their influences due to political centralization in both societies. Chakma and Marma profess Buddhism. Buddhist rituals

and festivals structure their life cycles.

The Bawm society was headed by strong, authoritarian chiefs and was divided into high and low ranking clans. The former held clientèle from the latter who used to work in the houses and the fields. This enabled them to accumulate a certain agricultural surplus which was distributed by so-called fiests of merit. Like the Mru and Khumi they were divided into wife-giving and wife-taking clans, but as each clan performed both functions this differentiation had no influence on the political structure. They followed "animistic" beliefs until Lushai missionaries came from Assam and converted nearly the whole tribe in the 1920s.

Rigidly organized kinship groups were the most important levels of socio-political integration among the Mru and Khumi. Some of these groups had "rulers" whose political influence however, did not transcend their resp. kinship groups and those clans who had asked for protection in times of intertribal feuds during the last century. Fiests of merit by well-to-do families led to the distribution of wealth and surplus and prevented accumulation in the hands of a few. Mru and Khumi had acephalous societies. They too, followed "animistic" beliefs and Buddhism and Christianity have found it impossible to penetrate into their systems of belief.

In traditional tribal culture, villages were headed by elected representatives, often assisted by an informal council of elders.

This background information on traditional cultures of the CHT groups may suffice to indicate their ways of life and to show the fundamental difference to and incompatibility with Bengali culture, economy and political systems.

For the first years after independence the CHT continued to be administrated according to the separate legislature, the Regulation of 1900. In 1959, however, with the application of the Basic Democracies system a new body of institutions introduced new duties to local representatives and officials appointed by the Central Government; and with the "new constitution of Pakistan, in 1962, a systematic but clandestine colonialization of the hills by the Bengali began" (AI 1980:2). In 1964, the special status of the hills was totally abolished and "all branches of the district administration were brought under the control of Central Pakistan administration" (AI 1980:2).

Modernization and Development Strategies in East Pakistan

From the late 50s onwards, East Pakistan experienced a population explosion hitherto unknown and the soil resources of the country were being pushed to the limits.

"As the crunch on resources worsened, the government made dramatic efforts to emulate the industrialization-economic development route of the developed nations, and soon directed

special attention to the still largely self-sufficient Chittagong Hills tribal areas which had so far managed to remain outside of the cash economy and had avoided major disruptions due to industrial influences" (Bodley 1975:5f.).

This development -route policy is subject to a few organizational conditions which have been described in the "State and Nation-Building" context. This concept

1. tends to interpret the nation state as the highest form of political development, the nation-state being at the same time the most favourable unit to promote modernization.
2. This model stresses the "crucial importance of nation-building and thereby place(s) a high value on strengthening national identities and loyalties as opposed to sub-national identities, often assuming that the two are incompatible and in constant conflict." (Gellar 1973:384),
3. State-building is perceived as the primary instrument of nation-building and modernization
4. State-building is often associated with the development of a strong, centralized bureaucracy (cf. Gellar 1973).

Subnational, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural minorities, their attempts to guard their own cultures and their resistance to "integration" into the nation state have been equated with "tribalism". Thus a fictitious dichotomy between "stagnant" tribal societies and a "dynamic" nation-state has been established. This approach denies minorities

the right to self-determination even within a limited context since "they threaten the existing state-system and represent an inferior level of political organization" (Gellar 1973:391).

This "inferiority" and "backwardness" justifies outwardly the forcible integration into the nation state in the name of progress.

The CHT-groups fitted almost perfectly into this picture²⁾.

Development and Minority Policies

Development has been the key word for East Pakistan and the CHT from the 60s onwards. To the Bengali this meant: acquisition of natural and human resources of the hill tracts, to the ethnic groups this meant: deprivation of communally owned resources, expropriation of land, eviction, finally genocide.

To secure a constant energy supply for the residential areas and the port of Chittagong, a hydroelectric plant was built in the hills. The catchment area of the artificial lake inundated 50 000 acres, 40% of the districts total cultivable area. The lake displaced 100 000 persons, 40 000 Chakma migrated to India. For the ethnic groups this has been a catastrophe, for the Bengalis this means the development of new economic potentials (energy, fish farming, water ways for the timber exploitation of the Karnaphuli basin).

A number of agricultural projects were started in the 60s and 70s. Officially they should turn the CHT into an agriculturally

useful area ³⁾, the result has been the further destruction of tribal economies, social and political structures.

The Fallacy of "Optimum Land Use"

Though population growth in the hills had been slow in comparison to the plains, the tribal areas experienced an increasing pressure on swidden lands from the 50s onwards. In order to accelerate the development of the hills, the Pakistani government enlisted in 1964 "an eleven-man international team of geologists, soil scientists, biologists, foresters, economists, and agricultural engineers to devise a master plan for the integrated development of the area based on what they considered to be optimum land use possibilities. The team worked for two years with helicopters, aerial photographs, and electronic computers. They concluded that regardless of how well the traditional economic system of shifting cultivation and subsistence production may have been attuned to its environment in the past, today it 'can no longer be tolerated' (Webb 1966:3232). The research team decided that the hill tribes should allow their land to be used primarily for the production of forest produce for the benefit of the national economy because it was not well suited for large-scale cash cropping. The report left no alternative to the tribal peoples. 'More of the Hill Tribesmen will have to become wage-earners in the

forests or other developing industries, and purchase their food from farmers practising permanent agriculture on an intensive basis on the limited better land classes⁴). It is realized that a whole system of culture and age-old ways of life cannot change overnight, but change it must and quickly. The time is opportune' (Webb 1966:232)" (Bodley 1975:6f.).

Optimum land use could only mean: restriction and finally abolition of shifting cultivation.

The Pilot Scheme for Control of Jhuming

The project was implemented in those areas where a large part of the peasants who had been evicted by the dam, had been "rehabilitated". Fast growing soft-wood plantations and fruit gardens had to be worked compulsory by tribal people. After 5 years the plantations and orchards were either to be sold or leased out to non-tribal persons. A second phase of the program aimed at the timber extraction and afforestation of 500 000 acres which should also be worked compulsory by tribal people. The scheme, however, failed thoroughly due to inadequate staff and financing.

The Standard Horticultural Holdings Program

This program aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the hill tracts into the fruit garden of East Pakistan. It was implemented in the rehabilitation areas, too. The scattered, uprooted, heterogenous population which had been settled there had been easier to handle than that with a sound economic basis and stable structures. Evicted farmers were the guinea-pigs for

incompetent agricultural engineers. Every household in this area was to get 6 acres which had to be planted with a prescribed variety of fruit trees. The true face of the project turned up in the details: Rice production, the very basis of the hill economy was to be given up entirely. Even without granting a transitional phase, the program was set to work. The results came soon. Shortly after the implementation lack of foodstuffs was reported, then local famines, then starvation.

The practical implementation of these programs revealed already at this time, in the mid-sixties, the pattern of Bengali development policy.

1. destruction of tribal economy and
2. eviction of tribal settlers.

The area where the SHHP had been implemented had been deserted by the tribal inhabitants due to harassment, exploitation, theft, blackmail and rape of tribal women by Bengali personal.

The war of independence brought all projects to a complete stop but paved the way to a "reconsideration" of the land question. Already during the war, between 30-50 000 Bengalis entered the hill tracts and occupied forcible Chakma-, Marma-, and Tippera land. Similar actions followed after independence and what at first looked like spontaneous acts of eviction and land-grabbing turned out to be a well planned, military backed program of the distribution of the hill tracts to Bengali peasants.

After the forcible occupation of land had been going on for almost two years, a delegation of CHT representatives led by former M.P. M.N. Larma met Mujibur Rahman to discuss 4 demands of the hill people.

- "1. Autonomy of the CHT with its own legislature,
2. retention of the 1900 Regulation in the Bangla Desh constitution,
3. continuation of the Chiefs' offices,
4. constitutional provisions restricting the amendment of the Regulation and imposition of a ban to the influx of non-tribal people" (AI 1980:2).

Rahman replied that fulfilling such demands would encourage ethnic feelings. He told the delegation to go home and "do away with ethnic identities" (Montu 1980:1511).

The demand to reconstitute the former status quo was called a secessionist movement, and immediately after the delegation had left, massive military operations by the BD army, air force and police were carried out in the hills.

"Thousands of men, women and children were murdered and hundreds of villages were burnt" (EPW 1978:723).

Similar actions were repeated later on.

From these years onwards a constant influx of Bengali settlers into the hills has been taken place. Landless peasants from all over Bangla Desh are being brought into the hills.

The ultimate aim is obvious: The hill tracts bordering India and Burma are to become a Muslim majority area.

During this time the army had launched massive road building programs to facilitate army movements and bring settlers fast and deep into the hill tracts' area. This program had been financed with Australian funds meant for the development of the hill tracts.

The Roots of Resistance

"The reaction to governmental policy of integrating the district came from the (CHT - W.M.) students who began to organize themselves (...) in the form of the Hill Students' Association (in 1957, W.M.) Confronted with a martial law administration, they decided that the front rank leaders should go to the countryside, open schools and develop tribal consciousness" (Phadnis 1981a). In 1966, after the alarming effects of the Bengali development programs became visible, the CHT Welfare Organization was founded. One wing supported peaceful means to realize basic rights of the hill people, the other armed struggle. After the army raid on the hill tracts in 1972, leadership went into the hands of the militant wing. The same year, the CHT Welfare Society (PCJSS) was founded with the Shanti Bahini, a guerilla force as its armed wing. The main target of this guerilla force⁵⁾ is to curb Bengali intervention and to protect the own people. They "serve a 'quit' notice on the settlers in a particular locality. This is followed by an attack in which the new settlements are often razed to the ground" (Phadnis 1981b).

The guerilla force has successfully integrated into the traditional social system of the hill people. The political

wing has established its own administrative and judiciary system in the countryside. Without the consent of the underground party no decisions are taken on local levels.

"In fact, the district seems to be run by two parallel administrations - the civil-military apparatus of the state and the Shanti Bahini (...) with a fairly affective intelligence network and a disciplined cadre" (Phadnis 1981b). Except the military camps, the guerilla is in control of the CHT.

The Annihilation Line

Early in 1977, Bengali infiltration and settlement policy changed; "the Bangla Desh Government sent troops to 'massacre' the tribals living in Matiranga, Manikchari and Lakshnichari, and 5000 tribals were forced to go to Tripura (Appeal 1978:vff.) The "clearing" of this area from tribal people lasted about 3 years. From this time onwards, the army pursued an annihilation line. Two more examples may suffice to describe what is going on in the hills still today.

In December 1978, "troops invaded Dumdumya, Maidong, and Panchari mouzas (mauza: smallest administrative unit in the hills, W.M.), a large area with a population of more than 75 000 covering over 50 villages. On January 9 and December 22 last year (1978/1979) 35 villages were set on fire" (The Statesman Weekly, 10.5.1980). A deliberate massacre took place on March 25, 1980 in Kalampati Union. The 'commander of a local army unit "arranged for an assembly of the leading tribal people of the Kalampati Union in the market to hold a religious congregation and the ordinary hillmen were made to gather for the

repairing of the Poapara Buddhist temple. While they were at their repairing work they were asked to line up; and as soon as they stood in line, the army men began to shower them with bullets" (AI 1980:3f.). 300 persons were killed on the spot, a large number of women was abducted to military camps and kept there for rape. Immediately after the army attack, thousands of Bengalis entered the "pacified" area. They looted and burnt the tribal houses and occupied the lands. At least 6 similar operations had been carried out in 1980. which have led to mass scale emigrations to neighbouring Tripura in the following years.

Genocide is but one aspect of persecution. An unknown number of tribal people are held captive in underground pits which they had to dig for themselves (Sunday Amrita Bazar Patrika, 11.5. 1980). Rape, torture, mutilation etc. are common practices to terrorize the people who have been put to jail.

International Development Aid to East Pakistan/Bangla Desh

Apart from Bangla Desh designed programs, a number of foreign aided "development programs" have been implemented in the hills in recent years.

1. a Swedish financed forestry project,
2. a UNICEF sponsored drinking water supply program,
3. a WHO organized malaria eradication project,
4. a livestock and fisheries program assisted by the Asian Development Bank.
5. an Australian-aided road building program,
6. the Joutha Khamar (Joint Farming) project, partly financed by the Asian Development Bank.

1. The Forestry Project turned out to aim at the ruthless extraction of timber in the hills. The Swedish development agency pulled out of the project because Bangla Deshi authorities refused to guarantee and safeguard the interests of the tribal people.
2. The Drinking Water Supply Program benefitted only army camps and Joutha Khamar settlements, Bengali colonies and urban areas.
3. The Malaria Eradication Program was meant to protect army personal,
4. The Livestock and Fisheries Scheme benefitted only Bengali newcomers to the district,
5. The Road Building Program had two objects:
 1. to facilitate swift army movements in the hills,
 2. to enable Bengali settlers to push deep into the district,
6. The Joutha Khamar project is meant for tribal people who are given money, seeds and technical assistance once they agree to join the scheme. The guerilla claims that these settlements are concentration camps, a Bengali observer compared them to the "strategic villages" the US Army constructed during the Vietnam war. Once the people are in these settlements, they are kept under close surveillance.

It is obvious that so far all development projects which have been implemented in the hills had two aims only: to destroy tribal economies and to support Bengali settlers who had been brought into the district by hundreds of thousands by now.

A British military mission is assisting the martial law authorities in enforcing military rule and provides the necessary equipment to deal effectively with "tribal insurgents". Large sums of Saudi-Arabian money is channelled into the hills to finance construction of mosques and the forcible conversion of tribal people to Islam.

Repeatedly the military government had declared to seek a political solution to the problem. Tribal leaders and the guerilla have agreed to negotiate. But talks have always turned out to be a hoax: Immediately after the last offer for negotiations with the junta, military authorities have started the Third Phase of Muslim Bengali rehabilitation program by settling another 250 000 outsiders in the district.

I shall not go into details any more. The facts I have given are meant

1. to relate the destruction of peoples and cultures to a greater international forum and
2. to show how the ethnocentric content of the State and Nation-Building approach unfolds its potential in bloodshed.

Notes

- 1) Declaration of Brigadier Hannan and Lt. Col. Salam at a public meeting at Panchari, in: Appeal 1980:8
- 2) A few quotations from the literature on the CHT may suffice to outline the range of prejudices.
 "Life and conditions of these tribes have not changed much ever since their legendary migration to this country from the Arakan and Lushai Hills, according to one tradition or from the Indo-Gangetic plain, according to another" (Rajput 1965:19).
 The CHT are, so it has been said, a "rendezvous of some of the most primitive tribes who are known to have existed ever since time immemorial" (Rajput 1965:1).
 To emphasize the backwardness and illustrate the primitivity of the CHT groups, Sattar wrote a few years later, the CHT had been the "cradle of human evolution" (1971:193), where "wild tribes, rude, primitive and aboriginal" live (1971:193).
 Man is wild, so is nature: "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).
 The challenge is at hand:
 "the Chittagong Hill Tracts may be said to be East Pakistan's land of future. If the rude, primitive, and shifting cultivation called 'jhum' is replaced by settled cultivation and the problem of soil erosion is met by terracing the hill sides which are extremely fertile, some of the plain's growing population can possibly be absorbed in the thinly populated areas. What we need is a scientific approach and a planned effort firstly, to make the Hill Tracts an agriculturally useful area" (Ahmad/Rizvi 1951:20). But: "Land suitable for intensive field cropping accounts for less than 5% and is limited to the bottoms of river valleys; about two thirds of the land is of steep slope and considered suitable only for forests" (Rashid 1980:6f.).
- 3) The mere fact that the hill tracts fed a population of several hundreds of thousands persons at that time didn't obviously make the CHT an agriculturally useful area.
- 4) It is in fact hard to imagine that Webb doesn't know that 40% of the district's total cultivable area has been submerged by the Kaptai lake. But obviously he knows where sufficient flat land to feed wage-earners can be found. Most probably he has another Master Plan worked out in the meantime.
- 5) According to their statements, they fight against the
 "(1) continuation of feudal, colonial, and undemocratic contents of the 1900 Regulation; (2) threat to the cultures and languages of different tribes; (3) continuous influx of Bengali settlers; (4) non-settlement of tribals used to shifting cultivation; (5) obsolete anti-hillman tenurial system; (6) poor communication; (7) inadequate facilities for education, medical care, accomodation, trade, and commerce; (8) non-rehabilitation of the major portion of those who were displaced by the Karna-

nafuli project; (9) unemployment; and (10) lack of incentives on the development of cottage industry" (Montu 1980: 1511).

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