

From Dr. R.S. Dewan,
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Sub: An appeal to save the Chakma and other tribes of the
Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) from the total annihilation
by the Bangladesh Government.

Dear Sir,

May I present to you another document about the Bangladesh Govern-
ment's wilful violation of human rights in the CHT. I enclose with the
letter a copy of the Paper, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts Case. A Bangladeshi
Understanding of Human Rights" presented by Dr. Mey to the Symposium:
Anthropology of Human Rights, XI ICAES, 1983, Canada.

Dr. Mey has carried out intensive research on social, political
and economic aspects of the indigenous nationalities of the CHT. He
has established the fact that in the late 60s the Bengali Development
policy was "aimed at the

1. destruction of tribal economies and
2. eviction of tribal farmers

The methods employed were harassment, theft, blackmail, exploitation,
fraud and last not least, rape of tribal women by Bengali development
personal." After independence in 1971 the Government allowed large scale
Muslim Bengali immigration and encouraged forcible occupation of tribal
farmlands, harassment of tribal people, raping of tribal women and killing
of innocent tribals. Badly shaken by these attacks, the tribal people sent
a delegation to Mujibur Rahman asking for autonomy and enforcement of the
CHT Regulation of 1900. These demands were rejected and "massive military
operations were carried out by the army, air-force and police in the hills.
Thousands of men, women and children were murdered and hundreds of villages
were burnt. Similar actions were repeated again and again, and finally the
Bangla Desh authorities adopted what I call an annihilation line resulting
in deliberately planned massacres on a wide scale. Mouza after Mouza was
cleared from its tribal population by the army and Bengali settlers were
settled there by thousands."

The Bangladesh Government's programme of systematic extermination
of the defenceless tribal people is continuing unabated. I fervently appeal
to you to take all positive actions including the rescission of all foreign
aids to Bangladesh in order to protect the people of the CHT from the violent
Muslim Bengalis invasion.

Yours sincerely

To

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Ramendu Dewan

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Case.
A Bangladeshi Understanding of Human Rights.

Paper presented to the Symposium:
Anthropology of Human Rights
XI ICAES, 1983, Canada

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1.

It is my argument that Human Rights and the destruction of tribal cultures have a common link.

All state organizations have one notion in common, be they capitalistic or socialist : they demand, basically speaking, their economic and political concepts to be of universal validity.

Human rights have been formulated in an economic, political and epistmological context which cannot, by definition, question its very basis:

Human Rights have been formulated in Europe¹⁾ as self-expression and self-understanding of legal positions in a State-context. They are, to put it the other way round, the necessary consequence of legal positions which grant equal rights to everyone.

The nation-state concept is comparatively young in European history. It has been conceived , generally speaking, at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. This political concept has been the result of a particular development which has had its foundations in processes of both economic and political centralization. The development of European capitalism, to be more precise, at first the development of (British) industrial capitalism, demanded free access

to the resources of the country as a whole irrespective of regional economic and political structures and simultaneously the destruction of local ethnic and other socio-political units so as to benefit the demands of the ruling class of the capital.

Pre-nation state political organizations in Europe were formed by regionally scattered, petty aristocratic centres. The process of both economic and political centralization laid the roots to the destruction of these regional centres.

The formulation of general and basic human rights has been undoubtedly a major legal achievement which put an end to arbitrary aristocratic rule, at the same time political structures of minority peoples in the evolving nation state were done away with. Ultimately, the State emerged with its particular political philosophy.

We are thus confronted with a system which accepts itself as The System, and subnational systems only in the perspective of development and change towards a final aim which is defined by the state itself.

These human rights, from now on I'll speak of minority rights, have been expressed in either type of societies for minorities by majorities²⁾ in the state context and in the perspective of State's notions. These notions have been expressed in a historical context which was to unfold its political potential:

The State is considered the most progressive, the ultimate form of economic and political development and the most suitable form of "running a society". This approach stresses the overall importance of state and nation-building (both in Europe of the 18/19th century and 3rd world countries of today and emphasizes and demands the strengthening of national identities and loyalties as opposed to subnational identities. It is generally assumed that these two are incompatible and in constant conflict. The nation state is considered the most suitable instrument of development and often associated with the formation of a strong, centralized bureaucracy (Gellar 1973). The crucial point is that all other forms of political organization are thus perceived as subsystems as opposed to The System.

Accordingly, it is cogent and conclusive that minority rights can, at the most, define the frame of minorities survival - if at all, as legal concepts for instance cannot transcend legal positions of the nation state.

It is certainly significant that - as far as I know - minorities have never been asked to define something they consider as their own natural or basic rights. This has always been done for them by so-called representatives of the majority.

To put my argument more straight: Not by legal procedures but by application of for instance modernization concepts, minorities

are deprived of their basic rights.

I see an ethnocentric tradition in the realization of human/minority rights: racist and imperial notions emphasizing white superiority return in the cloak of an alledged superiority of western concepts of state and nation-building and modernization.

Today, this is more openly practised in 3rd world countries than in industrialized states. Minorities in the west are in a less open conflict to the state organization, or, to put it the other way round, they have to a very large degree internalized state's concepts. So-called regionalistic movements in Europe (Celts, Basques, Corse, Catalan peoples) however prove by their activities the fallacy of state concepts even in Europe.

2.

From these more theoretical considerations I turn to what is happening in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangla Desh today. Again we meet an ever recurrent theme: what is called human/minority rights on one side is called secession and revolt once minorities start to fight for these rights.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are situated in Bangla Desh. This area borders Assam and Upper Burma to the east, Arakan to the south, the Chittagong District to the west and Tripura to the north. 12 different ethnic groups³⁾ live in this district; they have mostly immigrated into the hills from Burma during the last three centuries and except two groups, all belong to the

Tibeto-Burman language family. Most of the tribal people are Buddhist, a few groups animists and one group has been converted to Christianity by fellow-tribesmen from Assam.

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

Swidden cultivation had been the only form of land use in the hills and plough cultivation was unknown until the British annexation of the area in 1860. Some groups accepted wet-rice cultivation only after the swidden lands had become scarce in the river valleys at the end of last century. During the last three decades, fruit gardening has gained increasing importance because the returns from the swidden fields have been decreasing heavily.

In traditional culture, kinship groups and families had the right to cultivate, but the clan, the whole tribe, in some cases the spirits were the ultimate owners. Agricultural products belonged to the producer, surplus had to be distributed in times of need. Agricultural work like jungle clearing, weeding, harvesting, housebuilding and also organization of rituals and celebrations used to be done by cooperating age groups and families. Mutual help and reciprocity structured the relationships between neighbours, families and kinship groups.

After the British annexed the area they applied a territorial form of administration to the hills with British officers at the top of the hierarchy. Three Chiefs of the tribes were made responsible for the administration, management and tax-collection. For administrative purpose the area was divided into three circles and again subdivided into mouzas, the smallest units in the hills. Traditionally, villages used to be represented by a "roaja", a village chief, assisted by an informal council of elders; with the application of the territorial administration these village chiefs have been made subordinate to new administrative representatives who are directly in charge of keeping up law and order and tax collection. For political reasons the hills were not administrated by laws applied in the plains but by a digest drawn up to suit the heterogenous ethnic situation in the hills.

This short information on traditional culture in the hills may suffice to indicate the way of life of the tribal people and to show the incompatibility with Bengali culture, economy and political systems.

During the first years after independence, the CHT continued to be administrated according to its separate legislature. In 1959, however, with the introduction of the Basic Democracies System, new duties were forced upon local representatives and newly appointed Bengali officials. 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).

From the late 50s onwards, East Pakistan faced an alarming population increase 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.).

Development has been the key word for East Pakistan and the CHT from the 60s onwards. To guarantee a constant and cheap energy supply for the residential areas and the port of Chittagong, a hydroelectric plant was constructed in the hills. The catchment area of the artificial lake submerged 50 000 acres, 40% of the district's total cultivable area. 100 000 persons were displaced, 40 000 Chakma who have been most affected, migrated to India.

For the ethnic group this progress meant: deprivation of privately and communally owned land, expropriation and eviction.

For the Bengalis the lake introduced new economic potential (energy supply, fish farming, water ways for the timber exploitation in the hills).

A number of agricultural projects were started in the 60s and 70s. Officially they should turn the CHT into an agriculturally "useful" area, the result, however, has been the further destruction of tribal economies, social and political structures.

Population growth and density in the hills had been significantly lower in comparison to the rest of East Pakistan, but as far as the developed resources were concerned, the CHT were as constrained as the most thickly populated district in the plains. In order to speed up the exploitation of the resources of the hills, the Pakistani Government enlisted in 1964 an 11-man team to draw up a master plan for the integrated development of the area. The research team concluded finally that regardless of how well the traditional form of land use (shifting cultivation may have been attuned to the environment in the past, today "it can no longer be tolerated" (Webb 1966:3232). It was the recommendation of the research team that the hill tribes should allow their land to be used primarily for the production of forest produce so as to benefit the national economy. For the tribal people, no alternative was left. "More⁴) of the Hill Tribesmen will have to become wage-earners in the forests and other developing industries, and purchase their food from

framers practising permanent agriculture on an intensive basis on the limited better land classes 5). It is realized" the team expressed "that a whole system of culture and age-old ways (of life) cannot be changed overnight, but change it must and quickly. The time is opportune" (Webb.1966:3232).

The aim of the team had been to work out principles of "optimum land use" for the CHT - not for the people living therein. "Optimum land use" could only mean: restriction and final abolition of shifting cultivation.

Accordingly, a number of development projects were implemented in the 60s which pretended to aim at the uplifting of tribal economies. In large areas, shifting cultivators were compelled to work in soft wood plantations which were, after a 5-years' period to be sold or farmed out to non-tribal, private entrepreneurs. These programmes resulted shortly after their partial implementation in food-shortage, local famines, starvation.

Already in the late 60s, the aim of the Bengali development policy was obvious: It aimed at the

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

The methods employed were harassment, theft, blackmail, exploitation, fraud and last not least, rape of tribal women by Bengali development personal.

The war of independence brought a full stop to all projects of this sort, but paved the way for a radical "reconsideration" of the land question. Already during the war, 30-50 000 Bengalis entered the hills and occupied forcibly tribal land. Similar actions, backed by military support followed repeatedly on a large scale after independence.

After this had been going on for almost two years, a tribal delegation met Mujibur Rahman, demanding a ban on the influx of non-tribal settlers. Rahman replied that fulfilling such demands would encourage ethnic feelings. He told the delegation to go home and "do away with ethnic feelings" (Montu 1980:1511). Immediately after the delegation had left, massive military operations were carried out by the army, air-force and police in the hills. "Thousands of men, women and children were murdered and hundreds of villages were burnt" (EPW 1978:723).

Similar actions were repeated again and again, and finally the Bangla Desh authorities adopted what I call an annihilation line resulting in deliberately planned massacres on a wide scale. Mouza after mouza was cleared from its tribal population by the army and Bengali settlers were settled there by thousands. In a secret, military designed operation, hundreds of thousands of landless Bengali peasants were registered, put on trucks and busses and brought into the hills.

In 1947, 97,5% of the hill tracts' population consisted of tribal people, 2,5% were Hindu and Muslim Bengalis. Today, more than 40% of the districts' population consists of Muslim Bengalis.

To check the fast growing Bengali influence in the hills, already in 1957 a Hill Students Association was founded. The organization concluded that the best way to counteract the desintegration of tribal cultures was to send teachers to the villages to reinforce tribal consciousness. In 1972, shortly after the first massacres in the hills, leadership went into the arms of the militant wing. From this time onwards, a tribal guerilla is operating in the hills with the aim to protect tribal people and to curb Bengali immigration. The guerilla force has successfully integrated into the traditional social systems of the hill societies. The political wing of the guerilla has established its own administrative and judiciary system in the hills and without the consent of the underground party no decisions are taken on local levels. Except the military camps, the guerilla is in control of the hills.

Apart from Bengali "development programs" a number of foreign aided development schemes have been implemented in the hills ⁶⁾. These projects aim at the "opening up" of the hills by providing an infrastructure suitable for an overall "muslimization" of the area. The Swedish development agency has pulled out of an afforestation program because the Bangla Desh government would not guarantee the safeguard of tribal interests, but Australian and Asian Development Bank agencies are carrying on. Large sums of Saudi-Arabian money are channelled into the district to build up a Muslim infrastructure, mosques and madrasahs.

Forcible conversion of Buddhist tribal people have repeatedly taken place.

A British military mission is part of these projects. It is assisting the martial law authorities in enforcing military rule and provides the necessary equipment for dealing efficiently with tribal insurgents, as they call it.

Several times the military government has declared to seek a political solution to the problem. Tribal leaders and the guerilla have agreed to negotiate. But talks always turned out to be a hoax: immediately after the last offer for negotiations by the junta this year, military authorities have started the Third Phase of a 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 report on the destruction of peoples and cultures in Bangla Desh to a concerned international forum and
2. to show how ethnocentric traditions of development projects and concepts unfold its potential in bloodshed.

It is certainly necessary to expose these facts to a wider public; but at the same time I feel that meetings like this could go on forever. As long as papers of our sort are circulated in such a limited public only, we will meet again in 5 years' time and carry on like this.

We write, they act.

I suggest, therefore that somehow we should set up a network of communication which enables us to pass on informations quickly, to pool them somewhere where easy and confidential access is guaranteed. And, equally important, I feel we badly need informations for ourselves, for instance which organization and/or individual in governmental, religious, cultural etc. institutions and media we can contact on which particular issue in order to speed up the distribution of relevant informations.

On the hill tracts' issue, a total ban on informations has been declared. Why? Certainly, the Bangla Desh junta is much too afraid of facing their concept of human rights to be discussed in an international public.

Though powerful, governments are vulnerable, and this weakness we can exploit. So I ask: who in the UNESCO for instance could be contacted on behalf of our issues, who in the ILO...

I suggest the preparation of a Who is Who to facilitate quick contacts, I suggest to shower concerned government agencies, departments, mass media etc. with informations on a particular issue at a time, to contact anthropological departments of

universities and invite them to work on human rights issues. When a state visit of politicians, taking part in violation of human rights is announced, the guest state should receive selection of papers etc. in time, simultaneously, mass media should be informed so as to break through the veil of diplomatic hanky-panky.

In short, I suggest something like a "Human Rights International" on a decentralized basis, tying together concerned institutions and organizations.

Notes

- 1) I refer to the (unsolved) discussion in international law whether they were first defined by the Pilgrim Fathers, the French Revolution, the Natural Law discussion or the concept that every citizen is the representative of his state and as such subject to possible offense by another state or another citizen of another state.
- 2) I'd rather prefer to speak of mercy instead of rights majorities grant minorities from time to time.
- 3) This are the Chakma, Marma, Tippera, Mrung, Taungchengya, Bawa, Pankhua, Mru, Khumi, Lushai (Mizo), Sak, Khyang.
- 4) From the statistics available to Webb it must have been clear to him that in industrial enterprises in the hills there has never been a place for the hill people. Bengali recruitment policy favours Bengalis only.
- 5) A Swedish financed afforestation project, a UNICEF sponsored drinking water supply scheme, a livestock and fisheries program assisted by the Asian Development Bank, a WHO organized malaria eradication project, an Australian-aided road building program, a joint farming project, assisted partly by the Asian Development Bank.
The forestry project turned out to aim at the ruthless extraction of timber in the hills; the drinking water supply scheme benefitted only army camps and the joint farming project. The livestock and fisheries program benefitted only Bengali settlers who were brought to the hills, the anti-malaria program has been meant to protect army personal, the road building program has to facilitate fast army movements in the hills and should enable Bengali settlers to push deep into the district, and the joint farming project has been described by an independent Bengali observer as comparable to the strategic villages the U.S. army constructed during the Vietnam war. Once tribal people join this project, they are kept under close surveillance to prevent them from having contacts with the guerilla movement.

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