

# The Dynamics of Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh in the Post Peace Accord Period

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*The Chittagong Hill Tracts, located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh, are regarded as the home of the indigenous people, resided in by 11 different indigenous ethnic groups, who are ethnically and culturally different from the mainstream Bengali people. However, the area has been subject to violent ethnic conflict since the late 1970s between the security forces of Bangladesh Government and the indigenous ethnic groups. A peace treaty titled the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed in 1997 between the government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) to end the armed conflict. However, the search for peace remains elusive as the region is still engulfed by violence in different ways including direct, structural and cultural violence. This has happened because the Accord has failed to pay due attention to transforming the conflict through reconciliation, community integration, and ensuring environmental sustainability, which could pave the ground to create peace from the bottom up. It is against this backdrop that the study focuses on the dynamics of conflict in the post-accord scenario in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.*

KEY WORDS: Chittagong Hill Tracts, Peace Accord, Dynamics of conflict

## Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh, covering 13,295 square kilometres, that is 10 per cent of the total land area of the country. The area is regarded as the home of 11 different indigenous groups, who are ethnically and culturally different from the mainstream Bengali people (Panday and Jamil 2009: 1053). The area has been subject to violent ethnic conflict since the late 1970s, initially between the security forces of the Bangladesh Government and the indigenous groups. In 1997, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT Peace Accord) was signed between the government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS). The PCJSS was the representative body of the indigenous community of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), formed in 1972 to realise the demands of the CHT indigenous people for regional autonomy. The aim of the 1997 Peace Accord was to end the armed conflict. Its signing and the resultant disarmament of the members of PCJSS has largely reduced the direct violent confrontation between these contending groups. However, the search for peace remains elusive as the region is still engulfed by conflict although in new ways (Alauddin 2017: 63).

Indeed, the signing of the treaty has contributed to the achievement of a kind of 'negative peace' (Choudhury 2017: 5, Sajib and Sohad 2018: 272); or what Chakma and Cosa refer to as 'violent peace' (2013: 141), due

to the emergence of the new dynamics of conflict and violence. This includes direct, structural, cultural, and ecological violence in the everyday lives of the CHT indigenous community. Furthermore, the post-Peace Accord violence had become multi-layered, moving from the initial government versus indigenous people conflict to a situation which now involves indigenous versus government security forces and the Bengali settlers; and now ethnic intra-group conflict within the indigenous community (Panday and Jamil 2009: 1067). This situation emerged due to a number of factors including the exclusive nature of the Peace Accord negotiations; the failure to address social and cultural differences between contending actors; a top-down approach in dealing with the conflict; the continuation of land grabbing and the presence of military camps.

## Historical background of the CHT Conflict

The roots of the indigenous movement in the CHT region can be traced back to the repeal in 1963 of the CHT Regulation of 1900, enacted by the British. Under this regulation the CHT enjoyed a 'Special Status' and was an autonomously administered region. The sale and transfer of land to non-indigenous people was prohibited, as was the migration of non-indigenous people into the CHT region. In 1935, the region was declared a 'Totally Excluded Area' by the Government of India Act. Under this Act, the region enjoyed relative autonomy and was

administered by the traditional tribal chiefs. In 1947, after the partition of India the CHT became part of Pakistan. An amendment by the Pakistan Government to the Constitution culminated in the withdrawal of the CHT region's special status and autonomy. This development opened up the region for the non-indigenous people to immigrate and settle in the region (Pandey and Jamil 2009: 1054-1055).

Apart from problems arising from the influx of non-indigenous immigrants to the CHT region, the building of the Kaptai Hydro-Electric Dam in 1962 by the Government of Pakistan caused immense hardship for the indigenous people. The dam submerged 218 square kilometres of land, approximately 40 percent of the total arable land of the CHT region, and displaced some 100,000 indigenous people from their homes. The government did not provide any compensation to the people affected by the dam. The dam is considered a 'death trap' by the indigenous people, as the lives and livelihoods of an entire generation – thousands of people – were adversely impacted (Pandey and Jamil 2009: 1054-1055).

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the indigenous people then faced a new crisis: their identity was not recognised by the newly formed Constitution of independent Bangladesh, resulting in a sense of 'otherness' among the indigenous people. Article 9 of the Bangladesh Constitution adopted in 1972 states that 'Bangali Nationalism' will be the basis of state nationalism, ignoring the unique ethnic identities of the indigenous people, declaring that:

The unity and solidarity of the Bangali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangali nationalism (Article 9, The Constitution of Bangladesh 1972).

However, this definition of Bengali nationalism was instantly rejected by the indigenous people under the leadership of Manobendra Narayan Larma, who argued against the provision in the Parliament saying that:

You cannot impose your national identity on others. I am a Chakma not a Bangali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh, Bangladeshi. You are also a Bangladeshi but your national identity is Bangali... They (Hill People) can never become Bangali (Government of Bangladesh 1972 cited in Pandey and Jamil 2009: 1056).

On March 7, 1972, the indigenous people formed the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS)

under the leadership of Manobendra Narayan Larma to fight for a constitutional guarantee of their ethnic identity. This later turned into a violent movement for more than two decades.

The post-independence governments of Bangladesh not only overlooked the demands of the indigenous people for a constitutional guarantee of their ethnic identity and rights, but also adopted policies which substantially changed the demographic balance of the region. For instance, during 1979-83, the government of Bangladesh resettled approximately 500,000 Bengalis onto the land of the indigenous people. The majority of these settlers were environmentally displaced people from different coastal areas – victims of natural calamities such as floods, riverbank erosion and tropical cyclones. The government provided them with land ownership, rations, and monetary benefits as inducements to move to the CHT. In 1941, indigenous people had proportionately constituted 98 percent of the total population in the CHT region, with Bengalis constituting the remaining two percent. However, by 2003, the indigenous proportion was reduced to 51 percent and the Bengali proportion increased to 49 percent.

These developments inevitably posed enormous challenges to the identity, culture and economic security of the indigenous people (Pandey and Jamil 2009: 1057) – so much so that the indigenous people responded with an armed movement which only ended in 1997 through the CHT Peace Accord (Zahed 2013).

#### **Post-1997 Peace Accord: new schisms of conflict**

More than two decades after the signing of the Peace Accord, the road to peace in CHT remains rocky, as indigenous people continue to live with the fear of being evicted from their traditional land and even tortured. On the one hand, the government did not address the underlying causes of the conflict which pre-dated the Peace Accord, between the indigenous community and the government security forces and Bengali settlers. On the other hand, the promises in the Accord are yet to be realised. New schisms have emerged from this situation, resulting in new dynamics of conflict and violence.

The indigenous community became subject to new schisms. One was the emergence of two contending groups, the pro-Accordists (PCJSS) and anti-Accordists (UPDF) (Alauddin 2017: 67). This development started with dissent around the nature of the Peace Accord when it was signed in 1997. The Peace Accord had been negotiated between the government and the PCJSS, on the basis that the PCJSS was considered at least by those parties as a unified voice of the indigenous community. However, the student wing of PCJSS had opposed the

Peace Accord's terms and already formed a new platform with other like-minded groups opposing it. Thus, from the beginning tensions arose between those who favoured the treaty and wanted its implementation and those who were against the treaty.

By 1998, the disgruntled members of the PCJSS in collaboration with other groups who felt excluded from the negotiations formed a new group: the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). The UPDF claimed that PCJSS did not represent the voices of the 'downtrodden masses', and accused the treaty of 'selling out' the autonomy movement of the indigenous people (Wilkinson 2015: 188). They opposed the Accord due to its failure to meet their long-standing demand for complete autonomy; the absence of provisions for constitutional safeguards in relation to their identity; obscurity in relation to the land rights of the indigenous people; lack of a clear time-frame regarding the withdrawal of the military; and absence of provisions to repatriate the Bengali settlers from the region. The mass of the indigenous community believes that if they had been given 'indigenous' status in the treaty, then the land conflict could have been resolved through indigenous customary law (Alauddin 2017: 69). The violent conflict between PCJSS and UPDF has resulted in the loss of more than 500 lives and injuries to some 1000 people in less than a decade (*The Daily Star*, December 01, 2004).

Furthermore, a sense of grievance persists among the non-Chakma minority indigenous communities. The leadership of PCJSS is from the dominant Chakma ethnic community, who are blamed by the non-Chakma minorities for claiming all the benefits provided to the indigenous communities by the Peace Accord (Alauddin 2017: 69). While the violence between Bengalis and the indigenous community is now less frequent, the violent conflict between PCJSS and UPDF has become more frequent. This is a significant shift from the pre-Peace Accord period where the indigenous community was frightened by the attacks of security forces and Bengali settlers. Now, after the signing of the treaty, one indigenous group was frightened by the attacks of another indigenous group upon them. The emergence of this intra-ethnic conflict within the CHT indigenous community has weakened their position in a number of ways: the indigenous community is becoming increasingly divided, its economy is being negatively affected, and its social and human development is facing setbacks. This has diminished the hope for sustainable peace in the region (Panday and Jamil 2009: 1067).

Over the years since it was signed, the Accord has not only created schisms within the indigenous community, it has also exacerbated poor relations between Bengalis and the

indigenous community. The Bengali settlers initiated the Somo Odhikar Adhikari or Equal Rights Movement (SAA) in protest against the Accord (Uddin 2017: 8), as they felt that it had disadvantaged them. They believed the Accord made them second class citizen in the region (Uddin 2017: 8) while the interests of the indigenous community had been served through gains in power, position and authority (Sajib and Sohad 2018: 270). The founding of the SAA has created consternation in some parts of the indigenous community, as it calls for the abolition of the treaty (Panday and Jamil 2009: 1067).

In addition, the continuation of land grabbing by the settlers post-Accord is one of the underlying reasons for violent conflict between settlers and the indigenous community (Chakma and Costa 2013: 143-144). It is also alleged by the indigenous community that the government security forces always side with the Bengalis when violence erupts between the two communities (Panday and Jamil 2009: 1067). Continued migration of Bengalis in the post-Accord era also fuels conflicts between the two communities. Speaking in the British House of Lords, Lord Avebury opined that '(t)he very demography of the CHT is being changed under military occupation' (Quoted in Chakma and Costa 2013: 143-144).

### ***The exclusive nature of the negotiation***

In the negotiation process leading to the signing of the Peace Accord the government did not include all the relevant stakeholders from the indigenous communities. This consequently created more polarisation in the region. The government perceived the conflict as a 'two-sides' conflict (that is the conflict between government and PCJSS), which reflected their ignorance of the multi-faceted patterns of conflict within and between indigenous communities in the CHT (Wilkinson 2015: 184).

The Awami-led government had negotiated with PCJSS, which was considered by them to be the representative of the collective indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, when considering PCJSS, the indigenous communities in the CHT not only differ from the majority Bengali population, they also differ from each other in terms of religion, language, history, and social and political structures (Wilkinson 2015: 189). Accordingly, there is an ethnic dimension regarding the leadership of PCJSS, as it is dominated by the Chakma ethnic group. For this reason, the 'Jumma Nationalism' propagated by PCJSS is also regarded by many as a 'Chakma movement' (Chowdhury 2008: 66).

During the time of insurgency, some smaller ethnic groups distanced themselves from PCJSS, and even fought against it. For instance, the Mro Bahini, which was formed to secure Mro tribal interests, waged an

extended violent conflict against Shanti Bahini (the armed wing of PCJSS) throughout the 1980s, and also opposed any peace agreement involving the PCJSS. In 1997, another indigenous group named the Jumma National Army also carried out violent attacks in Rangamati and Khagrachari, opposing the Accord and the PCJSS as its signatories. Even within PCJSS a number of divisions grew over ideological disagreements. The first division within PCJSS happened in 1983 when dissident PCJSS members formed a new Priti group under the leadership of Priti Kumar Chakma. Indeed, the complex nature of the political landscape of CHT with more JSS Reformist groups indicates that PCJSS did not reflect the voices of all indigenous communities of CHT (Wilkinson 2015: 183).

Various civil society groups advocating the interests of the CHT indigenous people such as Pahari Gono Parishad (PGP/Hill People's Council), the Pahari Chatra Parishad (PCP/Hill Student's Council), and Hill Women's Federation (HWF) were also excluded from the negotiation process. They attacked the legitimacy of the PCJSS arguing that it did not reflect the voices of all tribal groups of CHT (Chowdhury 2002: 28). The Accord only engaged with some political elites of three dominant ethnic groups namely Chakma, Marma, and Tripura. As a result, smaller ethnic groups perceived that the Accord did nothing to protect their interest, rather it brought power, position and wealth for these elites (Uddin 2012). Indeed, the exclusive nature of the Accord negotiations has polarised the political landscape in CHT, and was responsible for the emergence of new patterns of violence in the post-Accord milieu (Wilkinson 2015: 185).

### ***The failure to address the social and cultural differences between the Bengalis and the Indigenous communities***

Peace is not a matter of an accord imposed from the top but it is actually a nexus, a co-existence and mutual integration between diverse socio-cultural and ethnic groups located in the low rungs of society (Sajib and Sohad 2018: 272).

In a multi-ethnic society, addressing social and cultural differences between communities is fundamental to ensuring social stability, security and peace. It can be promoted through building trust, which is the most important social capital to promote social cohesion and resolve differences in a multi-ethnic society (Islam et al. 2022: 9). CHT was originally considered to be a land inhabited by 13 different ethnic groups. The down shift in the proportion of the indigenous population in the CHT between 1947 and the 1980s from 98% to 51%, the balance being Bengalis, was dramatic (Pandey and Jamil 2009: 1057). Indigenous people regard Bengalis living in

the area as intruders, forced settlers and occupiers of their land. On the other hand, the majority of the Bengali settlers consider the indigenous peoples as outsiders, having their ancestral roots in Myanmar or India. Furthermore, Bengali settlers formed Somo Adhikari Andolon (SAA) to demonstrate their position against the Accord, perceiving that it has provided undue privileges to the Pahari, with Pahari being a generic term for indigenous hill people, by depriving the Bengali settlers (Sajid and Sohad 2018: 271). These developments have consequently deepened the schism between the two communities, resulting in clashes over many aspects of everyday life.

The CHT Peace Accord did not address the social and cultural differences between Bengalis and the indigenous communities (Uddin 2017: 17-18). Furthermore, the post-Accord period has created more polarisation between and among indigenous communities in CHT, marked by mistrust, religious extremism, discrimination and marginalisation of the Pahari people. The low level of social interaction between these two communities is mainly responsible for the emergence of inter-community violence in the post-Accord milieu (Islam et al. 2022: 9).

Today there are three possibilities awaiting the region: first, resurgence of the conflict situation that prevailed prior to the peace treaty; second, the continuation of the current conflict situation; and third, creating an environment for peaceful coexistence. It is predicted that there is a real possibility of the resurgence of ethnic conflict that crippled the region in the 1980s and 1990s unless peaceful coexistence between communities is ensured and the new post-Accord violent divisions addressed (Alauddin 2017: 73).

### ***The failure to connect to the ordinary people at grassroot levels***

The Peace Accord was signed without the participation of eight indigenous communities who felt they should have been represented in the negotiations (Alauddin 2017: 68). The Accord has accordingly failed to engage the majority of the indigenous community, instead engaging only the political elites of the three dominant ethnic groups. For this reason, the Peace Accord is perceived by many as a bilateral contract between the government and the political elites of three major ethnic groups, excluding the voices of those eight other smaller indigenous ethnic communities (Uddin 2017: 18). Accordingly, the treaty reflects an elitist and top-down approach that ignored the voices of the relevant stakeholders. The search for peace and stability so far not yet achieved still continues in the region (Panday and Jamil 2009: 481) because the peace process remains detached from the people – their needs and voices ignored (Rahmat and Ali 2019).

The government also did not listen to the opinions of the Bengali settlers who now constitute almost half of the total population of the region. The Bengali settlers consider the Peace Accord to be discriminatory, as it did not address the concern of the Bengali community and made them feel like second class citizens (Alauddin 2017: 7; Pandey and Jamil 2009: 473). The Bengali settlers also perceive that the development activities carried out by the national, regional, and international NGOs in the post-Accord era only focus on the welfare of the indigenous communities. Bengali settlers also claim that the practices of NGOs are also discriminatory in the appointment of staff and their activities (Alauddin 2017:70).

### **Land grabbing**

While the treaty promised to secure the land rights of the indigenous people, the problem of land grabbing by both the settlers and the army continues. That is, the lands of the indigenous people continue to be taken away without their informed consent, for the purposes of building 'reserve forests' 'protected areas', 'national parks', eco-parks, 'tourism', and even for establishing military bases and training centres (Talukder 2005). The inflow of the Bengali settlers into the CHT continues, which has led to an ongoing cycle of violence over access to and control of land (Amnesty International 2013: 19). For instance, in 2004 reportedly more than 100 new Bengali settlers were settled on the indigenous land in Lalchari in the subdivision of Ramgarh in Khagrachari (one of the three hill districts of CHT) (Jamil and Pandey 2008: 476). From March 2007 to November 2007, 399.22 acres of land belonging to 133 Pahari people, were allegedly grabbed by the settlers with the help of the security forces (ACHR 2008 cited in Jamil and Pandey 2008: 475).

The government has established a Land Commission to settle land disputes in the CHT region in line with the Accord, and enacted the Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Dispute Resolution Settlement Commission Act 2001. However, the Land Commission has not been able to settle a single dispute since 2001 because of the difficulty of achieving a win-win solution in disputes between indigenous people and settlers moving into the region (ACHR 2008 cited in Jamil and Pandey 2008: 475).

### **The presence of military camps**

The Accord contained provisions that all temporary military camps, Ansars (paramilitary forces) and the Village Defence Parties, would be gradually withdrawn from the region. This provision remains a distant goal as there remains a heavy presence of the security forces (Amnesty International 2013: 23), which creates a securitised environment in the region (Chakma and Costa 2013: 141). In 1991, there was one member of the security

forces for every ten indigenous persons (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission 1991: 35). This situation has remained unchanged in the post-Accord period. The CHT hosted one third of the Bangladeshi army in 2011, yet CHT covers one tenth of the land area of Bangladesh (IRIN Asia 2011). Until 2011, only 235 out of 556 makeshift camps of Bangladesh military, BDR (Bangladesh Défense Rifles), and the Armed Police Battalion had been withdrawn. Only 35 out of 550 military camps had been withdrawn (less than 7 percent) (Chakma and Costa 2013:142). The heavy presence of security forces in the region is responsible for human rights violations against the indigenous people, including arbitrary arrests, torture, extra-judicial killings, harassment of rights activists and sexual harassment (IRIN Asia 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The signing of the peace treaty has failed to sustain peace in the region as the root causes of the conflict remain unresolved. The stated objectives of the Accord have failed to transform into reality due to the lack of political commitment by the successive governments of Bangladesh; the lack of participation of the indigenous people in the decision-making processes of local government; and the continuous presence of the military in the region (Pandey and Jamil 2009).

The euphoria surrounding the signing of CHT peace Accord in 1997 quickly faded away due to the emergence of new conflict dynamics. Peace remains a distant dream. Given the present situation, a number of initiatives need to be taken such as the implementation of the provisions of the Accord; securing the land rights of the indigenous people; stopping the immigration of Bengalis and meeting local needs and priorities. Most importantly, a process of non-violent conflict transformation needs to be begun to address the root causes of violent conflict. This will be hard as bringing in the Bengalis to the CHT opened a can of worms which now cannot be closed again.

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## The Writing on the Wall\*

Ground down,  
blown before the wind;  
the detritus of humanity  
piles up in drifts at checkpoints.  
Flotsam on the ocean,  
weary cavalcades on land,  
wanwood, nameless, mute,  
alien, foreign, other,  
But look, they are all like us.

Carrying infant bundles, fleeing  
flood and famine and persecution  
that kill as surely as a missile.  
Yet we sweep them into distant camps  
(or on our doorstep, out of sight).  
'No room, no room':  
No asylum. No refuge,  
For the innocent, a one way ticket  
from trauma to transit to detention.  
Temporary, we say.  
For years on end.

A tidal wave, sloshing round the globe:  
tens of millions  
overwhelming poorer nations.  
Momentum gathers to them.  
They cannot long be stayed  
at our carefully cultivated borders.  
So we double down,  
patrol and guard, turn back the boats,  
erect new fences and more red tape.  
construct dam walls, lest the flood:  
sweep us all away.

But look again:  
the world's refugees  
are writing on those walls  
as fast as we can build them.  
And their message tells us clearly:  
our own ways and days  
are numbered.  
Unless we read it right,  
and try to put to right  
their plight.

MARGARET JOHNSTON

\*Commended entry from the 2022 Seeking Asylum Poetry prize