

THE NEW PARADIGM OF CONFLICT:

A STUDY ON THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF PEACE AND CONFLICT IN CHT,
BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

Despite of having different geographic location and ethnic diversity between hill and plain, the dominant presence of 'local state' (Gupta, 1995) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has propagated an unprecedented violence between ethnicity. After the independence, the state (Bangladesh) declared itself as a Bengali nation-state and imposed this sense of nationalism upon the other existing ethnic communities. Therefore, the state denial of recognizing ethnic identity of hill people and constant socio-economic marginalization has led them to engage an armed insurgency movement against the state. Consequently, in the pretext of security and control the state deployed military force and promoted Bengali nationalism through huge resettlement. After two decades of bloody conflict, both party reached in a general agreement of signing an 'accord' on December 2, 1997 for that apparently put an end to insurgency in the region. The accord was projected as one of the most successful stories of conflict management and peace building in South Asia. But after the accord, the dynamics of conflict has turned into diverse dimension. This paper will focus on the newer trends of conflicts in the after accord situation and how different agencies and 'state actors' are initiating intra-ethnic conflict by creating unequal participation and promoting class relation among the ethnic communities. Most of the scholarly writings interpret this conflict as an ethnic violence between 'pahari' and Bengali. But my field level experience and the ground narratives strongly challenged what has been written about so far on the conflict, which constitutes the central focus of the study.

[Keyword: Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), South Asia, ethnic diversity, peace and conflict, state actor, intra-ethnic conflict, ground narratives.]

Introduction:

Chittagong Hill Tracts situated in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh constitute with three hill district (Bandarban, Khagrachari and Rangamati). CHT is the home of more than 12 ethnic/indigenous communities¹ with huge cultural diversity, natural resources and geo-political significance. Despite having cultural difference between hill and plain there were a congenial cooperation and coexistence between the upland and lowland people with various dealings and sharing from the dawn of history. But, in the regime of Pakistan (after the partition of sub-continent in 1947) a hydroelectric dam was made by Pakistan government in the name of development destroying the livelihood and cultivable land of Jumma people and displaced countless from their own land has made the hill people agitate for the first time against the state. After the independence of Bangladesh, the constitutional framework didn't recognize the ethnic diversity and denied the demand and aspiration of hill people. Moreover, the process of nation-state building in Bangladesh at that time which apparently imposed the homogenous sense of nationalism upon the existing other ethnic communities. The negligence of the state to recognize the identity of hill people and their political and economic marginalization led them to form the JSS² and claimed *Jumma* Nationalism for Hill People in March 1972 (Mohosin, 1997:58) and claimed regional autonomy by announcing an armed struggle (Shanti Bahini) against the state. The central government called army in the name of 'civil aid' in 1976 that has created the situation of CHT worst and the confrontation between security forces and *Shanti Bahini* has turn the situation into insurgency (Shelley, 1992:133). But the resettlement of hundred thousand landless and destitute Bengalis into the CHT during 1979-81 with rehabilitation program by the

¹ Eleven groups are the Chakmas, Marmas, Tripurs, Khumis, Mro, Lusha, Bawm, Khyang, Pankhu, Tanchangya, Chaak, Murung and Riang other then Bengalis

² JSS means Jana Samhati Somiti (People's Solidarity Association), a political organization of Pahari people.

government, the land became the crux of further conflict. After the two decades of bloody conflict, the JSS and the state reached a general agreement by signing an 'accord' on December 2, 1997 that apparently put an end to the long-standing insurgency in the region. Aftermath of signing an accord, it was expected to have prevailed 'peace' in the CHT but the post-accord situation is not served the purpose of the accord in all respect.

From the known past, there were congenial relationships between the inhabitants of the CHT; between Bengalis and Pahari. However, various policies adopted and implemented by the central governments over decades particularly in Bangladesh period, the congenial relationships turned into conflicting one which we observed during the seventies, eighties and nineties.. The State also took authoritarian roles through militarization of the region and migration huge Bengali population which eventually resulted in violent ethnic conflict. This conflict was officially ended with signing a peace-accord between the state and the Pahari political leaders on December 02, 1997. During the post-accord situation, many scholarly attempts were made to understand the state of peace in respect to the signing accord (See Uddin, ed. 2012). The dynamics of conflict in before accord was between state and stakeholders but after accord situation it turns into multifarious dimension. Most of the academics, policy makers and international agencies have considered the treaty as the landmark for the conflict resolution and the precondition of development in the CHT. But it needs a critical assessment whether it really unfolds the ground reality of the CHT. In the after accord situation it is observed that newer forms of conflict arose continuously among the ethnic communities and so as to between hill and plan. The main thrust of the research is to examine how conflict manifested with alternation in response to the after accord situation and re-examine that the accord never end conflict,

besides it welcomed international intrusion, brings security cause and so try to reinterpret the conflict on the premises of post accord reality. This paper is one of ventures in this line of thought.

Historical Background

During the constitutional debate within the basic principles,³ the state has emphasized exclusively on Bengali culture, heritage, and language which exclude “cultural other”. The constitution declared ‘Bangladesh’ as a Bengali nation state. Since, the constitution did not recognize the existence of different ethnic identities other than Bengalis. Moreover, the process of nation-state building in Bangladesh at that time which apparently imposed the homogenous sense of nationalism upon the existing other ethnic communities. The negligence of the state to recognize the identity of hill people and their political and economic marginalization led them to form the JSS and claimed *Jumma* Nationalism for Hill People in March 1972. Subsequently, a military wing called Shanti Bahini⁴ was added to it. Thus the seeds of Jumma nationalism – an identity that the JSS now claims for hill people – were shown. (Mohosin, 1997:58). Consequently, a tension between the state and the JSS rose through unprecedented militancy and an opportunity for accommodation and co-existence was lost and the nation was faced with what amounted to an armed insurgency movement. In addition, considering the economic and infrastructural development of the region, the government felt to call in the armed forces as a security force in “Aid of Civil Power” in 1976 that has created the situation of CHT worst and the confrontation between security forces and *Shanti Bahini* has turn the situation into insurgency (Shelley, 1992:133).

³ After the independence of Bangladesh the constitution has been formed with some basic principles such as nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism.

⁴ An armed wing of JSS

But the resettlement of hundred thousand landless and destitute Bengalis into the CHT during 1979-81 with rehabilitation program by the government, the land became the crux of further conflict.

During the period of 1982 to 1990, the state has followed a three-fold approach :(1) it continued counter-insurgency operations, (2) it took steps to develop socio-economic structures, and (3) it pursued initiatives to ensure a comprehensive political settlement (Shelley, 1992:135). The government declared the CHT a Special Economic Area (SEA) in August 1985, with the objective of integrating 'tribals' and 'non-tribal' into the mainstream economic activities.

Although, the government rejected the demands⁵, yet negotiations continued and the both sides expressed considerable flexibility and compromising attitude by 1995, an agreement was almost reached barring two issues – the form of regional autonomy and withdrawal of Bengali settlers (Chakma, 2012: 128). After the two decades of bloody conflict, the JSS and the state reached a general agreement by signing an 'accord' on December 2, 1997 that apparently put an end to the long-standing insurgency in the region. Aftermath of signing an accord, it was expected to have prevailed 'peace' in the CHT but the post-accord situation is not served the purpose of the accord in all respect.

Understanding of Conflict in the CHT: A Critical Assessment

With a certain set of objectives that we mentioned earlier, we undertook intensive fieldwork in three districts of the CHT in May 2017 and interviewed cross sections of the people living

⁵ The demands are regional autonomy, land rights, withdrawal of military security forces and Bengali settlers from the CHT and recognition of identity.

there. we primarily followed unstructured interview methods guided by a short checklist that was framed based on three central questions of the research. Apart from general Pahari and Bengalis, we interviewed JSS leaders, Bengali leaders and some aged 'Paharis' who have experience of observing the CHT situation during the last four decades. We also did some Focused Group Discussions (FGD), used some case studies and followed life history method to make the research more empirically grounded and analytical substantiated.

The accord has made a congenial atmosphere for international intrusion in the name of development. This international intrusion have made multifarious context of changes and grown the sense of individualism among the Pahari people. Eva Gerharz pointed out that, "Immediately after the peace was established (actually state policy was established), different institutions started to access the situations in the hills in order to contribute to the development process of the CHT, which had been at that point almost untouched by donor agencies' interventions (2002:144)." As soon as the treaty was signed, many international agencies established a well relationship with the Bangladeshi government resulting from long years of development cooperation, lunching an area of activity devoted to development and peace building in the CHT showed responsibility on behalf of international community. Predominantly, those kinds of international agencies prefer to support local and national NGOs on a small scale. Some of those agencies were specially concentrate on some exclusive issues in the CHT, such as administrative and political capacities, state of health and education services, the problem of land issues and rehabilitation of ex-combatants. The international community has considered the so called "intra-state conflicts" from the previous two decade predominantly appearing in developing and transformation countries and prior the "Local Framework" by which is meant the context surrounding for a possible

project. The accord has created the opportunity for community's interactions and opened the windows of correlations between hill and plain. Uddin (2013) depicted his understanding in the time of his fieldwork in *Khumi* village.

"I observed a general tendency among most villagers to bring about changes in their everyday life by adopting some components of urban life in order to, according to their view, lead a nebi-heina (better life). Nebu-heina is a Khumi phrase which nearly means 'better life' or a life better than what they currently lead but doesn't essentially denote urban life. Through a gradual connection with the urban areas, increasing number of educated people, watching TV and movies regularly ... the villagers gain a sense of comfortable life what they consider a 'better stage' on the way to nebu-heina which they see as contrasted to the hill life."

Although the overlong armed conflict between the indigenous guerrillas and the government security forces led the both side to a contract for diminishing the bloodshed and building peace in the CHT but the process of negotiation has rendered another polarization into the movement of indigenous. Devasish Roy has mentioned that the post accord situation has been the rise of a new conflict that threatens peace, a conflict between erstwhile allies from among the indigenous autonomist activities (2003: 71). Within the decade it has been evident that many young in the hill met violent death events being divided into two opposite ideological groups which known locally as 'pro-accordists' and the 'anti-accordists'. The 'pro-accordists' are lead by the JSS and the 'anti-accordists' are consisting a large number of Hill students heading faction group that formed 'UPDF'⁶ had rejected the pre -1997 negotiation process.

⁶ 'UPDF' stands for "United People's Democratic Front."

Uddin (2012) stated that the entire process of conflict management and peace building didn't include the spontaneous engagement of mass *Pahari* people beyond some political elites from among the *Chakma*, *Marma* and *Tripura*. Consequently, other *Pahari* people gradually realized that peace accord have not brought peace for them but brought power, position and wealth for a few leaders of *Chakma*, *Marma* and *Tripura*. But, in our recent field observation we found a counter narrative of this argument that portrayed a changeable scenario of the [re]engagement of mass *Pahari* people which is the gradual outcome of signing the Peace Accord. *Pahari* mass people deemed that although most of the demands of the peace accord have been implemented yet and the participation in the process of conflict minimization has not ensured them, they are now not only able to take part in socio-economic, political and educational circumference but they also feel free in the movement of their everyday life. Considering this assertion they reckoned it as 'Peace'. According to Uddin (2012), peace is not in practice but in paper. This statement seems analogically coherent and metaphorically symphonic. Because, substantial documents of the accord and any clause of the treaty cannot support the statement that peace in paper because the accord was not for peace but for power and position of political purpose of elites.

Jamil & Panday sorts out some impact of Accord on the situation of indigenous people in CHT - such as using military as a means for solving the problems, land snatching by resettlement and initializing the illegal settler-oriented development programs (2008:174). The state policy of encountering the problem of CHT in different regime of political ideology was frequently reestablished the interest of major political groups and polarized the interest of the *Pahari* indigenous people.

Re-interpretation of Conflict: Impact of Ground Reality

We have visited to CHT to unveil the metamorphosis of 'conflict' in respect of 'Peace accord' before and after circumstances. We observed that the increasing tendency of taking possession of hilly land by plain land Bengali migrants aggravated the CHT problem and impeded the viability of peace building process in CHT. Taking into a consideration on the gradual estrangement of the *pahari-adibasi* from their land and resources from the beginning of the history of CHT, the issue of land rights increasingly materialized the major essence of the *pahari* People, which took a serious turn from the early 1980s. The process of demarcation between *pahari-adibasi* and *paharibengali* has been sowed the land dispute seed from the following decades. At present, there are 24,000 Rohingya⁷ Bengali settlers living in the CHT. The political and commercial elites of *pahari* and *rohinga* settlers and plain lands Bengali are occupied the hill land and forest resources by using the act of leasing which has been mentioned.

But this law has been manipulated under continuous patronization of stakeholders of the state. The natural landscape and cultural heritage of the Hill Tracts are gradually defiled and destroyed through violating the regulation of the CHT accord. By leasing the land for 99 years⁸ and buying the Hill land and forest, the politico-business leaders, retired military personnel, administrative officials and some local elite people employ the tea garden, agro-project and tourist spot. As a result, the subsistence patterns and Jum⁹ cultivation of *pahari-adibasi* people are slowly but surely fallen into decay. In the Hill tracts, the land allocation

⁷ The people who has illegally migrated from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

⁸ According to *Pahari* people, treaty for land leasing is for 10 years. But leasing holders continue the project for lifelong.

⁹ A kind of cultivation of hill people which is tilled by slashes and burn method.

system of CHT was maintained by the 'Raja'¹⁰, 'Headman'¹¹ and 'Karbari'. The land management is now controlled by district commission. If anyone wants to buy a land in CHT, they have to fill up LR (Land Registration) form and pay for it 10% of the total land price which is not deposited in the treasury of the state.

The ethnic groups in the CHT have not now been felt anxious about identity crisis. Interestingly enough, the claimants of the Peace Accord¹² are almost departed from their demand of identity question. In spite of having major demand of long 25 years of movement for identity issue, the *pahari-adibasi* people come aside because of the state politics of demoralization, constitutional compulsion, and invasion of Bengali culture. Furthermore, at present, a growing tendency of re-establishment of identity formation emerged in *pahari-advashi* political party is not convincing and plausible to the younger generation. Because, a great degree of confusion in the younger's mind has been settled firmly in relation to the state politics of identity formation, the movement of *pahari* elite political groups, the confrontation between JSS and UPDF, Reformists group and Bengali settlers.

After the peace accord, the ethnic violation has, sometimes, a great influence to make an unrest situation in the CHT. Here, an ethnic conflict has been defined as a dispute about political, economic, social, cultural or territorial issues between *pahari-advashi* and Bengali settlers. A crucial element of ethnic conflict is ethnic identity which itself has received a lot of attention and has been subject to much dispute among scholars. Peace building is not seen an outcome of meditation and development initiatives but as a process that involves long term efforts. Peace building is there defined as the creation and nurturing

¹⁰'Raja' is the local name of King who is the chief of the *Pahari* ethnic people in the CHT.

¹¹'Headman' is the second administrative chief of ethnic people in the CHT.

¹². Here, the claimants are the leaders of PCJSS.

of constructive relationships at every level of society across ethnic and religious boundaries. Peace building is therefore part of the dynamic process of societal transformation. But, sometimes, the ongoing process of peace building is being flammable by the patronization of the elite political parties. These parties create some *bahinis*¹³ for their economic and political will. As a result, ethnic conflict makes peace environment instable. The *bahinis* provoke the Bengali settlers for creating chaos in the CHT. The conflict in the context of CHT are now changed its beam and that we observed in the time of the study. In respect of peace and conflict in the CHT, things and thinking are completely turned a newer form of dimensions. Before the peace accord the conflict was between the Hills vs Bengali settlers. But, the violation has now been turned into intra-ethnic violence that can be regarded as Hill vs. Hill.

According to informers, bloodshed has been stopped by dint of peace accord. Freedom of accelerating business, feeling free movement in their everyday life, participating in the socio-economic aspects in the everyday course of life and having opportunity to employ in the public and development organization have minimized the ethnic conflicts in the CHT. After 1997 CHT has turned into a place of peace and socio-cultural participation has established through the peace accord. Continuous penetration and patronization of the development donor agency in the CHT created a positive environment. Considering the other side the coin, the peace accord has been oscillated in course of time. The demanding party of peace accord is now divided into some small political groups. UPDF¹⁴ and Reformist have been established as new political platform in the context of peace accord in CHT. In addition to that the social and cultural differences between the *pahari* and Bengalis

¹³A cluster of political supporters.

¹⁴ . United People's Democratic Forum

have not been introduced respectably in the peace accord. The significance of integrated co-existence and interactive understanding has not been resolved in the peace accord. Consequently, the protester Bengalis living in the CHT constituted a new regional political group in the name *Somo Adhikar Andolon*¹⁵ to demonstrate their movement against peace accord. Through signing peace accord the *pahari-bengalis* have been deprived by the state giving power, position and authority to the *pahari-ativashi*. Recently, the wing of JSS, UPDF and some other *Bahinis* are involved in various criminal activities like abduction, stripping, robbing and hijacking etc. One of our informers stated that *shanthi bahini* and UPDF take money illegally even in front of military and police. If any *pahari* or Bengali businessman wants to run his business he has to pay some money as a tax. It is happening in everyday life of *pahari* in the CHT. Sometimes, they abduct businessman for demanding large amount of money.

Conclusion:

CHT bears the long history of conflict and bloodshed as though we can called it ethnic conflict between Bengali and indigenous people of CHT or *pahari adibashi*. Roughly, before the accord the conflict and confrontation was between Bangladeshi Army and *Shanti Bahani* (arms wing of PCJSS) but after the peace accord the collision and clash has assumed the disguise of multi-winged dimension. Though there is any clause or any reference for peace in the accord or the accord was not actually peace accord, after the accord was inked the turmoil consequences in the hill is totally changed. So we can say that the accord can be brought peace if it is to some extent or large. The failure of the implementation of the accord and the hostile attitude of the several influential's of Bangladesh political and defense

¹⁵ . Equal rights movement

establishment has the potential to aggravate local issues and increase the tension between the CHT communities inherent in any post- conflict situation. The failure to stop [re]militarization, the continued occupation of the land of the *Jumma* people for depositing army garrison and BGB camp many *Jumma* people are displaced from their land frequently. Now, the CHT problem has turned into multi-ferrous dimension which is not just a question of peace in hill but successively it has given a shape of broader political engrossment.

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