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**POST-COLONIALITY AND RACIAL
SUBJUGATION IN THE SOUTH ASIAN
CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHITTAGONG
HILL TRACTS**

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Abstract

The absence of colonial and post-colonial examinations of the conflict-ravaged Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) – a Bangladesh’s distant fringe– warranted me to explore how colonial legacy facilitated the post-colonial statist approach and majoritarian Bengali supremacists’ tendencies to exploit and subjugate the distinct CHT culture. This reconnaissance endeavour finds that the history of extortion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) indigenous peoples is a suitable example of racism victims, and thus it examines in the light of the colonial and post-colonial discourses. This explorative study – based on secondary sources of data – finds the very ideas

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of racism practices, especially identity politics, demographic politics, and women's subjugation, are prevalent in this post-colonial (and internally colonised) terrain.

Introduction

The common understanding about racial subjugation is a sort of harmful – e.g., stereotyping and prejudice – belief and practice that some communities have some characteristics that mainly discern them as superior over others (Sue, 2003). Such a supremacist belief and trend in the form of both structural and direct violence against minorities is common and apparently legitimized– i.e., what we call cultural violence – in many parts of this planet to such a degree we are tolerant of and feel it as normal (Galtung, 1969; Schmid, 2014). The well-known examples of racism include anti-Semitism that was initiated with draconian laws and practices instigated by German Adolf Hitler against Jews minorities between the 1930s and 1940s which systematically extorted and forced to leave many Jews from Europe (Midlarsky, 2005). The perpetration against Australian Aborigines who were considered as flora and fauna (less than human) and enslaved Africans are other examples of racism (Anderson, 2012). Similarly, the extortion history of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) – the only extensive hilly region of the present Bangladeshi state – indigenous peoples is a suitable example of racism victims which can be examined in the light of the colonial and post-colonial history of subjugation. Colonialism is generally understood from policy and practice perspectives that aimed at physical occupancy over other nations to exploit both politically and economically (Bulhan 2015). For this study, I refer to the post-colonial intervention as internal coloniality where the majoritarian state supremacists tend to exploit and subjugate

subnational culture – i.e., the CHT indigenous community – in the name of assimilation, multiculturalism, and neo-liberalism. Zizec (1997) has marked such so-called modernization projects as a new form of racism. Note that the economic and political systems and cultural traits of the CHT population in terms of language, culture, physical appearance, religion, regular outfit, and agricultural methods significantly differ from the mainland dominant Bengali practices. In examining so, I opted for the fundamental and the most dominant issues and ideas of racism practices: identity politics, demographic politics, and women's subjugation.

Methodologically, this research paper relied on findings, arguments, and narratives around colonialism and post-colonial ground reality to see the relationship, i.e., how colonial legacy inherited by the post-colonial statist regimes counted responsible for the continued racial subjugation. In doing so, I relied on secondary academic resources like referred journal articles, books, and reliable op-ed of national and international newspapers. I reviewed those of relevant resources to respond to the said research enquiry, i.e., how internally colonised territory in the South Asian conflict-affected Chittagong Hill Tracts' indigenous peoples are victim of persistent racial subjugation.

Background: Bangladesh and the CHT

South Asian Bangladesh state hosts about 54 different indigenous sects speaking 35 different languages (IWGIA, 2012). Only the CHT approximately comprises one-tenth (13, 184km²) of Bangladesh's total area. The 2021 population census counted total population of this region as of 18,42,815. Of whom 9,20,217 are local tribes and the rest are Bengali –

mostly Muslims and Hindus – mainly transmigrated to this region from mainland (IWGIA, 2012). Throughout the history of the CHT hill-peoples the question of indigenous identity has always been contested with different identity elements by different stakeholders. Sometimes these identities are provided by the scholars, governments, academics, and politicians mostly from a nationalistic perspective. For instance, though the NGOs and emancipationists traditionally called “Indigenous Peoples” or “Adivasi” or “Hill Peoples” or “Hill-Tribes” or “Tribal Peoples”, the governments and the pro-government intellectuals derogatively called “*Upajati – subnational*” or “ethnic minority” – *khudranri-gosthi* in Bengali”. While they themselves collectively prefer to be identified as “*Jummapeople* – meaning Highlanders” as well as “*Jummanationalism*”, by which they claim they came first in the CHT region. However, the recent phenomenon is that with the rise of indigenous politics across the world they also started demanding themselves as an indigenous community. Bangladesh is identified as a country with diverse ethnicity, language, and religion but most of the ethnic minorities belong to the CHT region where there are about 13 distinct ethnic hill-tribes exist.

Historically, almost the entire ‘Bengal Delta’ – today’s Bangladesh was covered with deep forests and its southern part was under the sea of the Bay of Bengal. In those days, many Indigenous peoples including present CHT hill-tribes started living in different parts of the forest and depended on *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation including hunting wild animals for survival. Bangladesh’s only hilly area is CHT. Geo-strategically the region is important for its biodiversity, natural resources, and shared borders with India and Myanmar. It has a territory

of 13,295 sq.km which is ten percent of the country's total area measured as 143,998 sq.km. This region covers the country's three hill districts – Rangamati, Khagrachhari, and Bandarban. Also, it shares borders with India's Tripura and Mizoram provinces and south-east of Myanmar's Arakan province.

Looking back at the history of the emergence of newly independent states in the late 1940s in South Asia we can see how this affected the distinctness of the CHT region and its distinct tribes. After the end of World War II, the world heads from 51 states founded the United Nations Organizations (henceforth the UN) on 24 October 1945 and its Trusteeship Council was one of the main six organs. The crucial function of the Council was to decolonize the dependent territories from the colonial Powers in different parts of the globe. The 'decolonization' efforts and effective role of the UN after the World War II and the collapse of the USSR in the early Nineties increased the chances of many more territories to achieving independence! But, in practice, the independence leaders began to carry the colonial legacy and thus emerged as post-colonialists (or internal colonialists) in their respective territories. In this regard, they conceived the very divide-and-rule colonial strategy and continued its abuses to dominate the minorities, sub-nationals, and people with different identities. The CHT is a suitable case to explicate the post-colonial theory and practice.

The British colonial regime for India apparently ended in 1947. The Indian Independence Act 1947 bifurcated the sub-continent into two conflicting states, India, and Pakistan – India with a Hindu majority and Pakistan with a Muslim majority. After the partition, millions of Muslims remained in Hindu-dominated India and since then there are several instances

of targeted (e.g., both direct and structural) violence against Muslims. For example, between 1954 and 1982 there were 6,933 incidents of communal violence and riots recorded between Hindus and Muslims in India. Even more than 7,000 people died due to 4,500 communal incidents only in the 1980s. On the other side, Pakistan was composed of two halves – one in the east (formerly East Bengal) and the other was 2206 kilometres away from East Bengal on the extreme west of the subcontinent. The Hindu dominated giant India lies in between these two halves. The leaders of the partition named the Eastern half East Pakistan and considered it to be one important province of Pakistan. In fact, there was nothing identical other than religion – Islam and Muslim identity- between these two parts of Pakistan. For instance, the result of the very first 1954 legislative election of united Pakistan implied a sharp difference in ideological position between East and West Pakistan. The communist alliance gained a landslide majority in East Pakistan, while the pro-American capitalist alliance gained its majority by ousting the Islamist party – Pakistan Muslim League – in West Pakistan.

While freeing the colonized territories was an undoubted achievement but problem arose in response to arbitrary and faulty boundary demarcation. Certainly, the decolonization in the Indian sub-continent left unresolved a great many crucial issues. This partition resulted in the world's ever-largest human exodus of some 10 million people and about one million civilians forced to be killed amid riots and local-level sporadic conflicts and violence which mostly took place in Bengal and Punjab provinces ("BBC History," n.d.). Violence and conflicts spread from Bengal and Punjab to many other regions in the sub-continent and continued unabated for decades. As a result, there

has been a sharp decline of Hindus and other non-Muslims found in the area that today we call Pakistan and Muslims in India. The 1941 Census counted 13.5% Hindus in British Pakistan territory which was significantly reduced to 1.6% in 1951. Similarly, the Sikhs counted as 5.2% in 1941 and were reduced to .1% of the 'others' category in the 1951 Census. On the other hand, the 27% of Muslims of British Indian territory counted by the 1941 Census declined to 9.8% in the 1951. The 1941 Census counted 318,660,580 people in British Indian territory which increased to 361,088,090 enumerated by the very first census of independent India held in 1951. Note that the disputed Kashmir remained uncounted in the 1951 Census¹.

Racial Subjugation in the Post-colonial CHT

The post-partition conflicts over Kashmir and CHT regions are crucial events in the contemporary history of South Asia. According to CNN Library, India, Pakistan, and China, all claim partial or full ownership of Kashmir, and exchanges of fires between them after the partition saw hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris die ("Kashmir Fast Facts," 2018). Like the Kashmiris, the CHT peoples are also victims of partition – independence. The CHT hill-tribes used to live independently until British colonial rule was initiated in 1858 in the Indian sub-continent. In 1860 the British rulers, for the first time, brought the entire CHT region under an administrative system and named the region "The Chittagong Hill Tracts" – formerly known as

¹ Collected from online official data source named Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India - Retrieved on September 7, 2018 http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/old_report/Census_1941_tebles.aspx

'KorposMohol' (Gupta 2006, pp. 459, 528). Within this system, they recognized three tribal chiefs for the three respective regions/circles – Rangamati, Khagrachhari, and Bandarban. Subsequently, they introduced another act in 1900 titled “The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900” name (Roy, 2000). Though the Regulation provided some provisions to protect common ownership of lands and preserve their socio-political and cultural traditions based on customary laws, it is often treated as a classic colonial strategy: “indirect rule” and “divide and conquer.” (Commission, 1991)

The CHT ambiance deteriorated with the British colonialists' departure and the emergence of two nations – namely India and Pakistan. From the very inception of Pakistan statehood that came into existence in 1947, the successive Governments started to look at the CHT peoples with a *curved* – meaning inferior – and suspicious eye. It might be for the denouncement of the CHT locals against the decision of merging the CHT region with Pakistan and for hoisting the Indian flag in Rangamati and the Burmese flag in Bandarban under the leadership of Sneha Kumar Chakma (alias SK Chakma) during partition. The Pakistan governments treated the Regulation as the legacy of British rulers that helped to separate the CHT from plain land and thus they simply took over the “classic colonialist strategy”. Doing so they amended the Regulation several times which mainly opened the door to settling the plain-land Bengalis in CHT. Furthermore, between 1957 and 1963 the government built a dam at Kaptai in the Rangamati hill district to produce hydroelectricity, inundating 40% of the total cultivatable land in the CHT. It is noteworthy that this hydroelectricity project was mainly installed to meet the electricity demand of Chittagong city

and port not for the hill-tribes! Due to this artificial lake 100,000 hill-peoples became landless, and 40,000 fled to neighbouring India where many remain stateless. (Commission,1991) Many of those who still living in Arunachal Pradesh province of India still bear stateless status.

In line with the CHT peoples, the plain landers of East Pakistan had to fight against both structural and direct violence. Soon after the birth of the Pakistan state in 1948, the then government refused to accept the majority of people's language Bengali as an official language. In response to the government's position, the Language Movement began in the same year and ended with the killing of dozens of demonstrators by the then Pakistani state on 21 February 1952 finally Bangla was adopted as one of the state's languages along with Urdu in 1956 through a constitutional amendment(Helal, 2012). The Bengalis had to fight against extreme exploitation, deprivation, inequality, and overall socio-economic injustice until they had been awarded independence in 1971.

Subsequently, after the independence of the country, the new Bangladeshi government seemed to be hegemonic towards the diverse linguistic minorities including the CHT hill-tribes. The CHT hill-peoples stumbled firstly with the enactment of majoritarian language-based 'Bengali nationalism' in the country's new constitution which ignored their long historical identity. Although most of the people of the country are Bengali speaking, there is still a good number of non-Bengali linguistic minorities along with the CHT hill peoples. The total population of the country was counted at 166.37 million by the 2011 Census – conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) – where 2% out of 333,3091 total population belong to non-Bengali

status across the country. In fact, this stance of the government was largely contradictory to the country's inherent spirit – democratic pluralism and inclusiveness – of the independence war. Transmigration of the Bengali plain-landers that initiated minimally around the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 recently the local indigenous peoples reduced to an alarming situation. In 1871 the hill tribes were counted as 98 percent which is now counted as only 35 percent (Siddiqui, 2016). So, in their own land the CHT indigenous become minority over time only because of the state-sponsored transmigration projects taken purposively by the post-independent post-colonial Bangladeshi state to diminish this indigenous community.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly called *Bangabandhu*) was the founding President of Bangladesh. The very first draft of the country's constitution under his leadership was highly hegemonic, which is understood from the reactions of the CHT hill tribes. The draft constitution was finalized in late 1972 without mentioning the distinctness of the CHT region and its peoples. In fact, the constitution brought language-based nationality, which was discriminatory to the CHT hill tribes and other non-Bengali small ethnic minorities of the country. When a country's nationality and national identity considers only the religion or language of the majority people as core identifying factors for nationals, it no doubt agitates the minorities – people of other languages or religions. Such a non-pluralist and exclusive approach of any state authority towards its minorities could result in feelings of deprivation and discrimination. Presumably, the question of identity, citizenship, and autonomy of the CHT hill tribes resulted in the CHT conflict becoming intractable shortly after the independence of Bangladesh. (Mohsin, 1995)

Following the assassination of Mujib, General Ziaur Rahman became premier of the country. Between 1977 and 1981 Ziaur Rahman administration settled about one hundred thousand landless Bengali people in this region which in turn made the local indigenous population into minority (Kamaluddin, 1980; Shelly, 1992). Also, the governmental settlement project led to the official militarization in the CHT which can be dated back to 1977 and onwards, which also restricted the right to information and freedom of movement of the hill tribes (Mohsin, 1995, 1997). Again, in June 2011, the 15th Amendment of the National Constitution brought some significant changes. The Amendment redefined the status of the CHT hill-tribes and discarded the unanimously agreed interim caretaker government system for holding the country's national parliamentary election. Before the Amendment passed in the parliament the leaders of the CHT hill-tribes demanded and proposed to incorporate their identity as "Indigenous Peoples" or "Adivasi". Instead of doing so, the Constitution belittled their identity by reintroducing them as "small tribes", "minor races", and "ethnic sects and communities". In addition, like the first constitution of the country in 1972, the Fifteenth Amendment declares that Bangladesh's people shall be known as Bengalis (Bengali-speaking people) as a nation and Bangladeshis as a citizen. Such a constitutional stance readily reflects the government's hegemonic approach toward the rights of distinct ethnic identity and their self-determination. (Siddiqui & Aziz, 2017)

The 1941 Census of the Indian sub-continent counted 1239,783 total inhabitants in CHT of whose 97.06% were neither Muslims nor Hindus rather distinct hill-tribes having their other different religious statuses – mostly Buddhists and Animists.

This Census was to be considered as a baseline to determine the Muslim majority regions to be constituted for Pakistan state, and the Hindu-dominated areas for India. It was a great fallacy and mistake that the partition arbitrarily included this excluded CHT area in Pakistan despite its out and out non-Muslim majority inhabitants. The partition leaders – Jawaharlal Nehru for Hindus on behalf of India and Muhammad Ali Jinnah for Muslims’ Pakistan state – ignored the CHT locals’ voice and their leaders’ demands to leave this region either in India or Myanmar for practical reasons. For instance, in earlier times, the CHT region was under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Myanmar’s Arakan. Such outcomes of partition and decolonization happened due to religion-based power politics and conflict between the then nations’ political elites. In practice, these hill-tribes are inevitably distinct and different from the plain land Bengali and Hindu majority people in respect of race, colour, language, culture, religion, ethnicity, and even countenance. All these are clear signs of post-colonial racist interventions over CHT hill-tribes.

Nowadays, rapport between Bengali and Adivasis is far away from normalcy. When something new is wished to introduce before the Adivasis of which they don’t have prior knowledge – like vaccination – it fears them. From their experiences they know that excusing inefficiency and unskillfulness of the indigenous peoples the agencies take away their lands and livelihoods. So, they expose their reluctance to any modern initiative regarding agriculture. If the indigenous peoples are taught properly about modern agriculture and customised with their traditional means, they would be happy to accept it. (Siddiqui & Chakma, 2016)

In fact, the continued intervention from the central Bangladesh metropole has been increasing the fragility of the CHT especially through dissecting its indigenous community into many confrontational subgroups. In the hills, politics is a bit different from mainstream plainland politics. Generally, the indigenous community is of against the hegemonic Bengali nationalism but not the Bangladeshi statehood, nor even against its military. The perception about CHT peace between economic and political elites and non-elite plebeians are different. The Jumma nationalism through regional autonomy was collective demand which is preached by the Accord: But nowadays, the Chakma elites try to control over all other indigenous groups which induced intra hilltribes conflict to a remarkable extent. The CHT is insurgency-prone for its topographical and geographical conditions. Recently, Myanmar's dissident group Arakan armies added a new dimension to this problem. The PCJSS² leader Shantu Larma has created Chakma clan-based elitism. There are some other groups against such elitism and liaison with government to get support for their survival. Such groups are triggered by both ideological and conspiracy stances, and everyone sees their own interests. So, there is obvious internal conflict between the apparent beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the Accord. Some of them think that the elites are benefitted from the Accord. For instance, the UPDF – United People's Democratic Front of the CHT indigenous community – alleged that who signed the Accord in 1997 on behalf of the indigenous community – pointed to the PCJSS – failed to bound

² The short form of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti. It is considered as a founding unified political party formed to represent the indigenous peoples of the CHT.

the government to withdraw the military camps from this region. As a result, some tragic and significant incidents have taken place in the post-Accord regime like abduction of Kalpona Chakma. So, government has successfully transformed the CHT crisis into an internal conflict zone where the intra hill peoples' violent conflict is prevalent (Siddiqui, 2016). In sum, for instance, alone in 2018, the CHT indigenous community had experienced 56 sexual assault cases where the most perpetrators (75) are from the non-indigenous Bengali community. (IWGIA, 2018)

Conclusion

It is widely evident that subjugation of women, especially rape and abduction of CHT hill women, is more likely to endure gender-based savagery compared to non-indigenous ones. It is obvious that, in the case of innate ladies, their racial/ethnic personalities are not as they were making them fewer demanding targets of savagery but give the culprits a ground for rationalizing their savage acts. It is critical to inquire why and how inborn women's intersectional personalities of being "ladies" and being "innate" make them more helpless to viciousness. The accounts of the predominant culture of exemption and impunity and the "ineffectiveness of law" found to be responsible for indigenous women's helplessness. Due to Bengali hegemony and supremacist approach, the law enforcement agencies in the CHT are often found to protect the rapists while the rape victims and their families must go through mental trauma and social stigma. Numerous scholars, counting Maria Lugones, claim that it incorporates a parcel to do with the way the concept of sex was reconfigured due to colonial intercession, and how it changed the region's social relations—a preparation she recognizes as the "coloniality of sex" (Lugones,

2012). It is, therefore, not that decolonization is merely about bringing an end to the physical political control of the overseas colonialists rather freeing its citizens from internal colonialists/supremacists should be the priority. It is crucial to delve into how the oppressive process got inherited and entrenched into the post-colonial settings around the global south.

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