

Feature

Murongs — the Bhumiputras of Chittagong Hill Tracts

by Muhammad Anisur Rahman

If somebody is left in the remote hilly forests of Bandarban Hill District, he would find himself among the people in shortest robe carrying weapons of primitive age. It would not be unlikely if he thinks himself to have been driven back to the pre-historic period through a time machine. In fact, they are the people very much of the present time: The Murongs, third largest tribe amongst 16 ethnic groups in the hill tracts region, of whom the civilised world know little yet.

Anthropologists assume that the Murongs and Khumis (a small tribe with almost similar language and culture like Murongs) were the first aboriginal groups to settle in the region some 400 years back. With the influx of other tribes, particularly the Marmas (popularly known as Mogs in Bengali society), the people of these two communities were compelled to withdraw themselves from the foreground as the Marmas, strong in armed power, did not allow them to enjoy their natural rights and freedom. Being oppressed and tyrannized by them these two tribes spread away throughout the hilly, remote and inaccessible jungles of Bandarban and since then remained there in almost complete isolation avoiding contacts with the outside world.

When the other tribes especially, the major two groups, Chakmas and Marmas, have registered their names in the book of world community, remaining on the track of development and keeping pace with the fast running modern world, the Murong and Khumis still survive on dwindling shifting cultivations locally known as 'Jhoom'. Till now, their economy is almost subsistence in nature and level of technology is pre-historic.

Basically animist, these two tribes, therefore, might be regarded as the original sons of the soil, the 'bhumiputras' of the region. The traditional life system of the Murongs and Khumis were hit for the first time in history when, late President Ziaur Rahman established a multi-dimensional school, the Murong Residential Complex (MRC) in 1980 to introduce them with the modern world and pave the way for their overall development. Another objective of its foundation was to free the third biggest tribe of the hill tracts from historical suppression and merge

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them with the mainstream nation-building activities in view of ensuring national integration.

Consequently, the people of these two most backward communities took the institution as the holy 'mecca' and their dreams and aspirations to become a respectable partner of the civilised world began to take shape centring round the complex.

It is a matter of great regret

school and renamed as the Murong Residential School (MRS).

Over the last 13 years, since its inception, 40 million taka has been spent on the school with only six third rated SSC pass students, while, the per student allocation is around Tk 12,000 a year.

The supercilious and step-motherly attitude of the teaching body of MRS that has no Murong or Khumi teachers is a

school is also constituted in an arbitrary manner discarding Murong or Khumi representation and ignoring government regulations principles regarding the private school management committee and undermining Murong demands or wishes.

Taking the opportunity of the situation some quarters are now strongly advocating for the nationalisation of the school and turn it into a general one and thus to make it open to all tribes and communities. The Murongs and Khumis feel that this is nothing but a conspiracy to deprive them of the light of education. Due to their own backwardness and supercilious attitudes of other tribes towards them, the two tribes are at the risk of losing their ways in the wilderness and never become



The Murong, the colourful tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

that the institution, which is funded by the UNICEF and run under the supervision of local bureaucrats, could not maintain their enthusiasm for soon after its inception the institute deviated from its objectives and the weak, inefficient and self-seeking management was entrusted with the charge of the school.

As a complex, the institution was supposed to conduct vocational and technical programmes side by side continuing general education, so that, these 'primitive' people could establish their position in society having necessary skills. But within a year the complex was turned into a general

major obstacle for Murong education which causes drop-out of students at an alarming rate. Most of the teachers of this costly school are simple matriculate for which the standard of education naturally is not up to the mark.

According to the former students of the school, the medium of education, Bengali language, is another big problem for the Murong students particularly those at the beginning level. The language seems, to them almost like Greek and the Bengali teachers are alien to the young children.

It is learnt that the management committee of the

ing man of the age.

A letter that was sent to Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia by the Murong and Khumis on January 9 last year has clearly depicted their feelings regarding the MRS. It contains, "...Your husband Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman loved the Murongs and Khumis from the core of his heart. He stayed one night at the MRS premises in the mud house with us on January 16, 1981, which reflects the depth of his feelings for us. To save the school which was set up by your husband, please take the responsibility of its management yourself to ensure our progress."

liberalised trade regime would swamp their markets with Indian consumer goods and hinder their own industrialisation. This explains the delay in SAPTA.

Professor Rehman Sobhan, a leading Bangladeshi economist, said: "For SAPTA to serve a more useful purpose, it must be sued to extract tariff concessions from India to the point where they make their imports duty free to Bangladesh exports as the Indians have done with Nepal and Bhutan."

He believes a deal like that should be negotiated with India on a non-reciprocal basis for at least five years to allow Bangladesh the time to build its own export base.

Said Sobhan: "If we can collectively focus on an agenda for the economic transformation of the region, we will help to both eradicate mass poverty and enable South Asia to become a full partner in the dynamic Asian region which will dominate the world economy by the first quarter of 21st century."

'Development' that Displaces the Poor

by Bharat Dogra

In modern-day development, where a lot of emphasis is placed on large-scale infrastructure projects, displacement has emerged as a serious problem. India is a densely populated country with population settlements extending to some of the most remote areas. The concentration of good quality land in a few hands has also pushed the weaker sections to the marginal lands. Hence several of the big infrastructure projects involve large-scale displacement. In particular the impact of displacement on tribal or aboriginal population is highly disastrous.

The 29th report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes 1987-89 says. The situation in this new phase of development is entirely different compared to the earlier. Now it is not only a question of just a few people being displaced, instead entire villages, entire communities are being forced to leave their ancestral homes, they are obliged to roam about aimlessly in an unknown and strange world. It is regretted that this new aspect of development has not been considered with the seriousness which it deserves.

Consequently, entire villages and entire communities are facing disorganisation, the people are being deprived of the very basis of their life and they have nowhere to go. The biggest impact of this has been on the tribal areas... but the problem even in non-tribal areas is horrible.

Even though the scale and intensity of the problem of displacement have increased greatly, the apathy of the authorities has continued unabated. In the words of this report, "It is an irony that in a country which resolved to establish a socialistic society by abolishing an earlier iniquitous system, even after 40 years of that resolution, when a village is abandoned and the community gets scattered, what happens to the majority of the people in that process, is no one's concern — the law is silent, the system is mute, and no one else need bother about them. This situation is not only unjust, it amounts to violation of the constitutional safeguards provided for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes."

The problem of displacement is most acute in tribal areas. The report warns, "It is said that about 10 to 15 out of 100 tribals in our country have already been displaced by now for one reason or the other. If this process continues and the paradigm of development remains unchanged, the pace of displacement will become still faster and the condition of the tribal people will further deteriorate."

The spree of development in the tribal areas, without any consideration for the situation of the tribal people living there, is in a way a declaration of war against those people."

Further, the pace of change in the tribal areas, has been very fast because of the rich natural resource endowment which they possess. One enterprise after another is being established, one dam after another is being constructed basically in a bid for optimal utilisation of these resources."

This injustice done to tribals is part of a wider failure to recognise the essential rights of tribals. In the words of the report, "The biggest anomaly is that the basic right of the tribal people to maintain their identity as a community and to adopt the system according to their will is nowhere in sight."

There is no mention in any law whatsoever about the right of the community over the natural resources including land, its dependence on them and their intimate relationship which together form the base of any social system. And when any action is taken by the government or others within the frame of such a legal system, the law may be followed but the spirit of the constitution is ignored and the basic human rights of the people are violated. The root cause of this anomaly is that the State has ignored its responsibility."

Attempts to resettle tribals away from their traditional life have often ended in failure. As the report says, "The (new) system is so precarious, particularly in the beginning, that he is not able to bear its risk. Therefore, he has to dig into his capital even for meeting the ordinary requirement and gradually the entire compensation money is frittered away. And he is then forced to roam about without any support. These facts often remain unseen in the studies of economists."

Even the forests have not been able to provide shelter to the displaced tribals, owing to new rules and regulations. As the letter to the President which accompanies this report says, "When the tribal, after the loss of his resource base, runs

towards the forests for refuge, he is not allowed to set his feet there, they are out of bounds for him. He is obliged to join in the end the army of landless labourers in the countryside elsewhere or to seek the "security" of city slums and their side walks.

While the problem is so serious, efforts to collect essential information on displacement have been inadequate. The Commissioner writes, "All my efforts to collect information from the State Governments and public sector enterprises about the number of people who may have been displaced so far in the tribal areas since independence did not yield much result. Some states have given only some figures, that too for some areas which did not mean much.

could have been easily accepted by the government.

But in reality the amount given as compensation was five times below the average amount expected by the villagers. Several affected families went to lower courts against this injustice and in most cases got decisions in their favour. Even then the authorities did not relent and instead of giving the people their dues, chose to appeal to the High Court, thus causing a long delay in justice reaching the evictees.

As a result of the lower fixation of compensation, the inordinate delays in payment, the money given to advocates, bureaucrats, middlemen and personal expenses incurred by them, the villagers were left with little money at the end of

the operation (acquisition and compensation). The people were in no position to move out but a cruel demolition operation was launched in May 1981. Utensils and other belongings were thrown out, cattle were let loose. People were driven out and entire families were hounded out in a big swoop."

A survey of the 'resettlement' hamlets of these evictees three years later by Lokayan, revealed that from an average annual income of Rs. 9,116 per family in the old villages, their earnings had been reduced to Rs. 2,347 per year per family in the new settlements.

The Rengali dam in Dhenkanal district of Orissa has displaced over 50,000 people, most of whom were resettled on barren land extremely difficult to cultivate. A

Development is supposed to be a process that alleviates poverty. In reality 'development projects' often displace poor people from their homes and livelihoods, sometimes in the thousands. Bharat Dogra reports on the situation in India.

These figures mostly relate only to direct displacement, which in the case of industrial enterprises concerns only the land formally acquired in the beginning for their establishment. For a number of areas, no figures were available or they were incomplete. When the situation about the figures of direct displacement is so dismal, the question of getting any reasonable account of what happened after displacement acquired a torrential dimension simply does not arise.

It is also important to examine carefully whether a project which causes large-scale displacement is really necessary and worthwhile. The report says that a careful evaluation of several projects may reveal that benefits are overestimated and costs are underestimated. The balance

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Dangerous way of sitting — glaring anomalies persist

is reversed. The benefit of development accrues to the elite sections while the ordinary people have to bear the cost... The benefit of many and the loss of a few gets transformed into the benefits of a few and the loss of many."

Unfortunately officials have not been careful in their evaluation efforts and have given orders for acquiring large-scale land for doubtful projects. "Whatever an official of the government of the day considers appropriate can be given the honourable status of public purpose. Once an activity is accepted to be in public interest, land can be acquired for that purpose under the law. Therefore, it has been possible to use land acquisition law for almost all sorts of programmes."

Further, the report says, "The story of acquisition of land and displacement of the people living on it is a story of utter disregard of rights of the common people, of injustice in the name of law, of empty promises and false hopes. The state and its representative and under their shadow all sorts of elements have used the law of acquisition in an arbitrary fashion. And that was not all. They have grossly and openly misused it."

In particular the displacement caused by large dam projects has been on a very large scale and has had a very disturbing impact on the affected people, especially tribals.

The Srisaillam dam is built across river Krishna 200 km away from Hyderabad city. With the completion of the main dam, over 100,000 people in 117 villages were forcibly evicted in May 1981. Over 107,000 acres of land were submerged. The affected families were asked to give a rough estimate of the market value of their land.

According to a study made by Lokayan Research Project of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies at that time, the total cost of compensation based on these averages worked out to less than 1% of the total project costs. In other words, the compensation desired by the people

news report from these villages (The Week 26 August 1986) said, "The resettled villages resemble a prehistoric dwelling place without any basic amenities. Reports of diseases caused by malnutrition and of starvation deaths are heard periodically... Only those who could go to the court got adequate compensation. Several settlers have been forced to work as casual labourers in distant places or to collect wood and sell it in Deogarh town. All this happened despite the many rosy promises of satisfactory rehabilitation made by the government."

The Rihand dam in Singrauli region displaced nearly 50,000 people spread over 108 villages. A study by Satyajit Kumar Singh, 'From the Dam to the Oletos, the Victims of the Rihand Dam', has described the hasty, cruel and hazardous eviction of the people (Economic and Political Weekly, October 1985). "Soon, all of a sudden the dam gates were shut and the water started rising. The people were forced to flee. Advance warning of only 24 hours was given and while people were still contemplating the next move their villages were flooded."

This, the study notes, was only the beginning. The following two and a half decades were a period of extreme agony and helplessness for the oustees of the Rihand."

In fact most of the oustees of the Rihand have been displaced twice again, once for coal mines and then again for thermal power plants.

Over 16,000 families in 170 villages were affected in Surat and Bharuch districts of Gujarat and Dhulia district of Maharashtra by the Ukai-Kakrapar multipurpose project. In a survey of the condition of the evictees of this project a decade after their displacement, Kashyap Mankodi and Tanushree Ganapodhyai have pointed out that their impoverishment resulted in a large-scale emergence of migrant labourers among them. Malnutrition worsened. Alcoholism in-

sters who successfully encroached upon a substantial part of the land kept for them. Those who resisted were attacked. Looting of crops and grabbing of land became increasingly common, forcing some people to leave this area. Even domicile certificates were not given to children by the Rajasthan government, making their education and employment difficult.

The indirectly or subsequently evicted persons suffer from almost complete neglect. As the 29th report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes asserts, "The subsequent displacement is nobody's responsibility. Therefore, some measures may sometimes be taken for attending to the problems of people displaced directly by the projects. But the subsequent displacement so far as the people are concerned is like a natural calamity. These people have to contend with the most severe backlash of development without any help from any side. They get completely broken, they are literally destroyed but no one cares even to look at them."

While the impact of large dam projects has been the highest, large-scale displacement has also taken place due to several other types of projects such as thermal power projects, defence projects, wild life sanctuaries and plantation projects.

The displaced groups, or those threatened with displacement, constitute one of the most precariously placed groups who deserve all the attention and generosity of which the nation is capable. The approach has to be two fold. Firstly, wherever it is still possible to find alternative projects which will avoid displacement or reduce it significantly, these have to be selected. Secondly, wherever displacement appears to be unavoidable, satisfactory rehabilitation has to be taken up to ensure that at least there is no worsening of the living conditions of the displaced persons. — Third World Network Features

Asian 7 Take First Step towards Free Trade

by Roushan Zaman

TRADE between the seven nations of South Asia, till now at a negligible level, may be on the move at last. Their leaders have come up with a framework that they hope will stimulate all their economies.

It happened at the twice-postponed summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that was finally held in Dhaka. The leaders agreed to a South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) designed to spur intra-regional trade.

According to the International Monetary Fund, South Asia's intra-regional exports amount to less than three per cent of their total exports while regional imports are even lower, at 1.6 per cent of total imports.

The SAARC countries — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives — would help expand investment and production, create greater job opportunities and ensure better living standards for nearly a billion people of the region. At least half of them live below the poverty line.

The products identified for the first round of negotiations, which officials said will start soon, include primary products, agricultural and extracted raw materials, livestock, marine products, scrap metals and manufactured goods containing less than 50 per cent foreign input.

The agreement has designated Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) within the group, giving them more favourable treatment, including exclusive tariff preferences for exports to other member countries.

Besides, there are provisions for these three to negotiate long-term contracts with other member countries to enable them to "achieve reasonable levels of sustainable exports of their products." The LDCs, which often fear being swallowed up by the powerful Indian economy, are to be allowed to put temporary restrictions on imports from SAARC countries.

The agreement has extra provisions to help the LDCs, such as establishment of indus-

trial and agricultural projects to expand the production base of export-oriented goods.

In order to protect the member-states' trade relations with countries outside the region, SAPTA's provisions would not apply to other trade deals which supersede them. SAARC members may grant trade preferences to non-member countries without affecting SAPTA.

The agreement has left many escape routes for the member countries. They can impose restrictions on imports, such as at times of balance of payments difficulties, or even when the import of a particular product under SAPTA is seriously harming their economy.

The member nations have been given the option to modify or pull out totally from any preferential arrangement on any product after three years of operation.

But that may be a far cry as indeed, Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia told the summit: "The goal is an ambitious one. We must approach the goal with caution."

One leader who appeared to be totally committed to the idea of trade without frontiers in the region was Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao. "Let us break down the barriers between us," he said. "The one billion people of South Asia make up a mega-market... with the backing of positive political will we will become a serious player in the global economy."

India has been one of the doughtiest champions of trade liberalisation in the region. Its preponderance as a major industrial and trading power means that it has most to gain from free trade in the region.

Less industrialised countries in the region fear that a

