

The CHT Issue

The Hilly Areas, the Hilly Problems

by Rashed Khan Menon

On having arrived at the age of twenty-five, Bangladesh still finds itself set on by, and saddled with, a number of problems that have hitherto remained unresolved. Metaphorically — and at the same time realistically — speaking, one of the heavy albatrosses hanging round the neck of the nation is the issue of the Chittagong Hill Tracts — an issue which brings to the fore historical ironies, rhetorical resolutions, death and damage and destruction, and the obvious need for solutions. While suggesting some solutions, one of the prominent left leaders in the country who is at the same time a high CHT activist, here looks into the genesis and dynamics of the hilly problems which can be resolved more politically than otherwise.

BANGLADESH is the only country in the world in recent history which came into existence out of the womb of a neo-colony, establishing its national identity on the basis of its distinctive linguistic and cultural heritage. The Biafra in Africa, for instance, tried; but, failed! It was only Bangladesh which, with the support of the democracy-loving people of the world, could stand up to a genocide of the worst kind and liberate itself from the shackles of the colonial rule of Pakistan. It is also a country which is uniquely homogeneous, and thereby almost unproblematically exhibits the possibilities of shaping its future without conflicts among various nationalities, while such conflicts profusely exist in the neighbouring countries.

meeting a massive military action was started including the army, police and air force attacking villages in the tribal areas; several thousand men, women and children were killed according to sources close to the tribal people. The Constitution of Bangladesh also did not contain any provision for the CHT. And, hence, the trouble which was brewing in the area after the Kaptai Dam flooding took a definite shape. The hill people's political party, Jana Shughati Samity (JSS), was formed under the leadership of Monobendra Nayan Larna. Soon, they turned to armed insurgency. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman resulted in the deterioration of Bangladesh's relationship with India and the Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of the JSS, was lent active support by In-

began to realize strongly that Zia was doing nothing but was attempting deliberately enough to make them minority in their own land. The insurgency was stepped up, and so also the militarization and the settlement of the Bengalee population in the CHT on an ever-increasing scale. This policy of militarization and sponsored migration continued throughout the period of Ershad. The recurrent incidents of killings led the tribal people to take shelter in India. Thus, the issue was further internationalised. Besides India which certainly took a strong and active interest in the issue controlling the movement of the insurgents to an extent greater than before, other international organisations also got involved in the issue, particularly in the form of upholding human rights in the CHT as well as the rights of the indigenous population. In fact, the people of Bangladesh, remaining mostly in the dark, came to know about the CHT issues and concerns, events and experiences through these international organisations. The mainstream democratic movement of the country was more absorbed in, and concerned with, their own problems of establishing democracy and constitutional government. However, it is only the Left leaders and activists who, though sporadically, tried to raise their voice on the issue. But, in the din and tumults of the democratic movement which was raging throughout the country, the issue of the CHT was submerged, or lost sight of. It needs mentioning here that the movement of the hills people, led by the JSS, did not

want to establish, let alone sustain, any contact with the mainstream democratic movement of the country. The JSS, instead, preferred international interventions rather than help from within — from the people of Bangladesh. The international opinion led the then government to embark on negotiations with the Shanti Bahini. The Ershad regime established district councils and held its elections which the SB/JSS refused to accept. And the peace efforts in the CHT failed.

The political shift in 1990 towards democratisation opened up a new opportunity for the resolution of the CHT problem. Though the Sahabuddin and Khaleda Zia governments continued in the man with the policy of the Zia-Ershad regime, the new democratic atmosphere brought the issue of the CHT to the fore by way of debates in the Parliament, and ultimately, the government agreed to form a National Committee comprising of the members of Parliament from different parties to resolve the problem politically. Though the Parliament is in a state of limbo, the Committee still exists, and is actively operating. But, it appears from the latest stand of the JSS about negotiations and the extending of the ceasefire that it might also come to a naught and the situation might go back to square one.

The JSS has accused the government of its deliberate procrastination and refusing to come to resolve the real issues. The government is, on the other hand, somewhat sandwiched between its own inde-

well as upholding the constitutional framework of Bangladesh.

The most tricky part of the issue is the land question. Practically, the crux of the CHT problem is land. The land system in the CHT is different from that prevailing in the rest of the country. The 1900 Regulations protected the land rights of the tribal people by way of prohibiting the transfer and acquisition of land by the non-tribe people. But that restriction gave in to the lust for land-grabbing by outsiders from the poor and needy hills people. The construction of the Kaptai Dam and provisions for the reserve forests also denied the hill people of their right to their own land. The hill people look with suspicion at any attempt by the government to settle the land question in the CHT. There are also

communal backlash, with which no government would perhaps like to take any risk. So, here also a cut-off date with the rearrangement of the Bengalee settlers vacating the tribal land, voluntary return to the plains, resettlement in other areas and the like are to be worked out. And, of course, there are examples of harmonious solutions to causes like these around the world.

All the above issues are clearly related to the question of the security of the people of the area. While the process of demilitarization of the CHT should begin immediately, violation of human rights must cease to an end. But, to counter any argument in favour of the military presence in the area, the insurgency should also come to an end.

Solutions to the CHT problem can only be found in an atmosphere of peace, without any of reprisals from any side. The question with regard to the CHT issue is no longer this: whether there should be a political or a military settlement. Political settlement is definitely the only answer. The

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year of its coming-into-being, the people inhabiting the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) came to understand that they were to go a long way to establish their minority nationality right in a country which upheld the cause of ethnic and linguistic identity and ardently waged a struggle of almost epic proportions for years to realise it.

The report of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission quotes Upendra Lal Chakma, the leader of the refugees who crossed over to India, as saying about Sheikh Mujib, the founder and leader of Bangladesh who talked to the delegation of the hills people's leader voicing their demand for an autonomous state of the CHT: "No, we are all Bengalees; we cannot have two systems of the government. Forget your ethnic identity, be Bengalees."

Now, what are the main issues involved in the CHT problem? Though the amended five-point massive demands, the main issues involved can be summarised as follows: (i) the constitutional position of minority nationalities; (ii) the politico-administrative structure of the CHT; (iii) the law questions, and (iv) the question of the Bengalee settlers.

As indicated earlier, the Bangladesh Constitution, once acclaimed and accepted as an ideal constitution by the countries in the sub-continent, failed to make any provisions for the hills people. It not only denied the hills people of their place in the Constitution, as has been contrarily done in the Indian Constitution by including the provision for the scheduled tribes, it also rejected the models of the tribal rights guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan.

Attempts to address the question of political administrative structure were made through establishing the local government in the three hill districts with the specific provision of the tribal people to be at the helm of affairs of that council and subjects handed over by the central government to them to deal with independently. But, this could not satisfy the JSS/SB as well as the hills people. A new format should be adopted to satisfy the demand for a regional autonomy by way of a regional council. This needs a detailed deliberation keeping the interest of the tribal people as

Any effective solution to the CHT problem, therefore, demands and deserves a constitutional amendment that would make necessary provisions for the constitutional position of the hills people. This, however, calls for a consensus and agreement of the political parties of the country. But, unfortunately, neither the government nor the opposition, except the left, has so far exhibited a well-defined, well-spelt-out position with regard to the hitherto-unresolved issue of the CHT.

The mainstream democratic movement of the country was more absorbed in, and concerned with, their own problems of establishing democracy and constitutional government, often losing sight of the CHT issue. However, it is only the left leaders and activists who, sporadically though, tried to raise their voice on the issue.

problems with the local elite: they think that their holding of land would be threatened by any rearrangement. The pressure of an increased number of settlers from outside has added a new dimension to the problem. Prior to migration somewhat sponsored by the government from the mid-seventies, the demographic change in the Hill Tracts was set in by the way people from the mainland went there for business and other activities. Now, the hills people strongly demand that all the Bengalee settlers whom, with the introduction of a communal angle, they now call 'Muslim settlers', should leave the CHT. This is now deemed to be an 'ideal solution', so far as the hills people are concerned; but, in no way, it is achievable without a tremendous political as well as

people of Bangladesh must accept the fact that there should be special provision for the hills people in the Constitution as well as in the political-administrative structure.

It is the same struggle the hill people are waging on a miniature scale, which we, too, did to preserve our own right in our own land and to establish our national identity and quicken national advancement. Bangladesh would definitely carve a niche in history if it can prove its ingenuity in solving an ethnic problem which, in a changed world is haunting many countries of the world, leading to tragedies of immense proportions. If the Bengalees could find their own self, they should be able to help others to find their self too.

RECENTLY we (Atiur Rahman, F Chowdhury and Lenin Azad, 1994) completed a study on 'Socio-economic perspective of the War of Liberation on behalf of the BIDS. The study based on both primary and secondary information has thrown interesting light on the nature of people's participation in the War of Liberation. It is a pity that, even after a quarter of a century since the momentous War of 1971, there has not been a serious attempt at documenting and analyzing the socio-economic positions and aspirations of the participants in that way by social scientists. Of course, Late Hassan Hafizur Rahman made a lasting contribution to collating some of the vital documents on the War of Liberation. The nation should remain ever grateful to this illustrious son of Bangladesh.

War and People

The Nature of Participation in the 1971 War of Liberation

by Atiur Rahman

"The social and economic history of the War of Liberation is yet to be written," observes one of the leading social researchers in this piece which, on a brief scale, aims at unearthing and totting up certain facts and figures relating to the participation of various classes in the War of Liberation. While doing so, it is shown how the War was veritably a people's war not only exhibiting a multi-class participation, but also reflecting a wide spectrum of people's aspirations.

working class, demonstrate all the characteristics and vulnerabilities of the impoverished classes. They too have uncertain livelihoods, perpetual threats of unemployment and declining social status. As a result, they can come very near to the level of consciousness of the working classes and forge an alliance with them and other classes at a particular point in time.

The year 1971 marked one such melting moment in the life of the Bengalees, when most of the members of the middle class came very near to the peasantry and working classes. All these classes fought hand in hand against the Pakistan occupation army and their collaborators for realizing a common dream — independent Bangladesh.

The social and economic history of the War of Liberation is yet to be written. Many of the participants have already started disappearing. The most significant ones had already been killed by the murderers. Vital documents are falling apart. The memories of many participants have also begun to fade away. So it is out of this felt imperative that we initiated a pilot study. There was not much time or fund for such a study. Yet we completed this study out of sheer commitment to the greatest event of the Bengalee nation. Now that the ground has been laid, others can come in to continue their researches on social, political, cultural and economic origins of this heroic event. Indeed, Prof Rehman Sobhan has already expressed his desire to invest time and money for conducting a more comprehensive study. Others should encourage and complement his efforts.



Victims of genocide by the occupation army on March 25, 1971 black night.

needs and aspirations of the Bengalee middle class. They were clearly shocked when the legitimate demand for declaring Bangla, the mother tongue of the majority, as a state language was not only ignored, but was brutally suppressed. The seeds of a Bengalee nationalism aspiring for a more respectable homeland of their own choice were sown around this time. These seeds finally grew into bigger tress passing through various phases of e.g. 1954 United Front election victory, 1962 education movement and 1969 mass uprising. The fruits of these movements were finally bagged by the Bengalees in 1971, when they were able to win a war of liberation and create an independent Bangladesh.

The police further accentuated the frustrations of the peasantry. The declining price of jute and the lack of initiative amongst the ruling elite for improving the lot of the peasantry further alienated them from the mainstream. The cosmetic programmes like V-AID, Rural Works Programme, Cooperatives a la Comilla model, Thana Irrigation Programme, etc. only strengthened the rural rich and the power elite, and failed to improve the quality of the livelihood of the peasantry in general. The stagnation of agricultural growth also affected the middle class which was organically linked with the peasantry. As a result, the participation of the peasantry in the War of Liberation was very high. Nearly four-fifths of the freedom-fighters originated from the peasantry. The scanning of daily newspapers for the period between 1969 and 70 clearly confirms widespread dissatisfaction and anger among the peasants. The election manifesto and the pre-election speeches of the national leaders, including Bangabandhu's eloquently reflected the frustrations of the peasantry. And, hence, the Awami League got a thumping victory in the 1970 elections.

The survey survey on a group of freedom fighters (conducted in late 1991) further confirms the overwhelming participation of the young, educated representatives of the middle class drawn mostly from the peasantry and many shades of the middle class. The quality of the participation of the technocrats, service-holders, working class, etc. was also no less significant. The sample survey suggests that the majority (78 per cent) of the participants of the War of Liberation actually came from the rural areas. The students constitute the bulk of the freedom fighters (60 per cent). Ordinary peasants (12 per cent) and service-holders (12 per cent) also participated significantly. However, the rural participants came from the middle and rich peasant background (75 per cent owning more than 7.5 acres of land). Sons of small farmers constituted another 20 per cent of the participants. The income

difficulties. However, the ordinary people firmly stood by

Looking Before and After

Continued from page 17 as medical specialist, gynaecologist, and surgeon. Each is also supplied with essential drugs and vaccines. Paramedical health personnel are also posted to each union to provide antenatal care to mothers, reproductive services to women, immunization and treatment for common ailments. All this compared to almost no services 25 years ago. The fatal flaw in this apparent success story is that very few people avail themselves of the services of the THCs, most of them going to the very same doctors in the local bazaar and pharmacies.

Service 'Without a Smile?' Firstly, who is responsible for this informal (not illegal) 'privatization' of services? Is a question that needs to be addressed. Secondly, the diagnostic aids available to any Thana or even District hospital is rudimentary, obsolete, and inadequate by any modern standards. The scientific and rational practice of medicine today leaves very little scope for empirical prescription of drugs, a method practised by most doctors, having for example no availability of a blood or urine cultures at hand. If the question is an appropriate transfer of technology and training of genuine technicians, then it is another important issue to be addressed, and a service that the general public have a right to. The third flaw is a lack of accountability of the service-provider. Finally, health delivery is a service industry, and the motto — 'service with a smile' — is something we have failed to provide. Health education institutions are points where changing attitudes need to be addressed.

Commitment to International Mandates and the Integration of Social Factors into Health Provision

Today the health rhetorics, and some practices, are very much geared to 'Health for All by the Year 2000', universal immunization of children within the EPI programme, the Cairo Declaration, the Social Summit in Copenhagen, etc. The positive aspects of such commitments are being seen in the numbers of immunized children in Bangladesh today, which have

risen to over 80 per cent in most areas, making use of antenatal care which is over 60 per cent, etc. A caveat is that some areas such as Chittagong still remain low by such statistics. The social phenomenon of health practices by area needs to be investigated, particularly in such vulnerable areas. Reproductive health has come a long way, but perhaps only in rhetoric, from the mere 'cafeteria' distribution of contraceptives to better health provision all through a girl's life span, starting from the safety, well-being and rights of the girl-child, the independent working woman, the single parent, and the aging woman, and also the inclusion of men and women in the practice of safe sex. The public health sector's inclusion of various women's groups into their policy-planning cells is an important step forward, one presumes.

A Concerted Effort to be Healthier in Body and Mind? Millions of malnourished children, abandoned single mothers, small girls having babies, mass pauperization, exodus into the polluted metropolis, hunger, starvation, beggary — is that how we visualize the state of health of our nation? What future do we see for these children who are born maimed, undergo deprivation of all varieties, and still manage to stay alive. Some glimmer of hope is seen where health, the economics of daily living, human rights, functional education and rudimentary institutional support are combining efforts. Today one may even say that the policy-makers are no longer unaware of the strengths in combining efforts, i.e., make health multi-sectoral, diverse, and part of the social development. After 25 years of struggle, this is definitely a victory of the people: One only hopes that it is directed toward a healthier nation.

In the words of a small girl of 12 who sells flowers in the streets of Dhaka, whom I spoke to yesterday — 'Apa, I want to study hard, make lots of money, and be healthy and beautiful.' — a simple demand from a child with dreams in her eyes. This beautiful country which has given us many joys is hers as much as ours, and one hopes that she has the strength to keep fighting for it.