

BOOK REVIEW

Ethnicity and Politics in Bangladesh

DILARA CHOUDHURY

IN December 1997, the Awami League government of Bangladesh signed a Peace Treaty with Parbothto Chottogram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) to end the decades old insurgency waged by the tribal (pahari) people of Chittagong Hill Tracts to thwart the attempts by the national leadership of Bangladesh to integrate the culturally and ethnically different tribal (pahari) people into otherwise homogenous Bangladeshi society. One may wonder why a country like Bangladesh with its linguistic and religious homogeneity and secular outlook would be confronted with ethnic violence engendering possible state disintegration. After all only 1% of the total population are ethnically different people known as the tribal or pahari population who are located in the southeastern part of the country, which, however, constitute 10% of the entire Bangladeshi land mass. Most importantly long-term precondition like centrality of the idea of self-determination that could provide the rich soil of ethnic unrest was absent in the country. Even during Pakistan period when the legitimacy of the government was in frequent question, and Karnafuli Hydro Electric Project was constructed inundating large areas and displacing thousands of tribal people, most of whom were Chakmas, there were hardly any pro-autonomy dissidents in the CHT. One may add that perhaps the seeds of discontentment were sown as evidence by the fact that leadership of autonomy movement came from the group that was affected most. But the fact is there was neither any autonomy demand nor any armed rebellion openly defying and challenging the political sovereignty of the country.

Several questions come to mind. First, why then the pahari population became dissatisfied with the central government of an independent and secular Bangladesh and resorted to armed insurgency? Second, why then the Peace Treaty between the government of Bangladesh and PCJSS signed on December 2, 2001, with much fanfare seemed to be in disarray with Jotindranath Bodhipriyo Lama alias Shantu Lama, the Chair-

The book is undoubtedly a valuable addition to the existing literature on CHT insurgency, peace process, the Peace Treaty and its future, though at times it was felt that the author could have been less descriptive. Perhaps that was needed in order to supply the nitty-gritty of much valuable information the book contains. The contribution of the author is immense. He has done a commendable job by providing the Bangladeshi scholars and students an insight of CHT insurgency, its operation, when and how the peace process was initiated and the present situation in the area in the context of the Peace Treaty from his personal experience, notes and unpublished materials.

man of the newly constituted Regional Council of CHT and leader of PCJSS, accusing the government for not living up to its Treaty bound promises, and the government of Sheikh Hasina vehemently countering such allegations? And lastly, what are the reasons for the prevalence such widespread skepticisms about the implementation of the Treaty by the tribal population and their leader?

The answer to these questions is two-fold. First, there is a need to decipher the factors that gave rise to ethnic conflict in CHT. And second, why and when peace process was initiated in the area that culminated into the signing of CHT Peace Treaty. It is in this context that the book under review entitled, "Parbothto Chottogram Shanti Prokriya and Poribesh-Paristhiti Mullayann," by Major General Ibrahim (Rtd) Bir Protik provides an wonderful opportunity for a thorough understanding of the nature of ethnicity and politics in Bangladesh by the cross sections of Bangladeshi academicians, intellectuals, policy makers, students as well as anyone who is interested in Bangladeshi politics.

All in the entire book contains twenty-four chapters. In chapters through I to VI, the author gives a detailed account of issues like the demographic constituents of CHT population, which helps to understand why the Peace Treaty may run into trouble not only due to the potential resistance of the Bengalis who form 50% of the population but also the fear of a possible majority Chakma (24%) domination by as many as eleven other minority groups, especially the Marmas, its geographical location, and the historical and primordial links of the various tribal groups of CHT

with the people of same ethnic origin across the border i.e in the northeastern provinces of India, which is rife with ethnic strife and historical as well as the socio-political and economic background of the region. The chapters, thus, helps to get an in-depth overview of the complexities of the region.

Major General Ibrahim's analysis of the emergence of ethnicity in CHT is to be found in the chapters through VIII-XI. It becomes crystal clear that the initial impetus of ethnonationalism in CHT was the result of the creation of a state based on the original idea of nationalism, and in our case, which was linguistic and cultural. It was ironic that Bangladesh itself being the product of discriminatory policies of the then Pakistani elite, who expected cultural and linguistic assimilation, turned on its ethnically different population with similar assimilationist approach. Sheikh Mujib's expectation that the tribal would give up their own ethnicity and a constitutional lacunae in providing the paharis to have their voice in nation and state building provided the impetus for the emergence of a pro-autonomist pahari dissidents. Bangladesh, thus, found itself at odds with a section of its own population. Since the notion of inclusive nationalism was missing in Bangladesh immediately following independence, and that every citizen needed the stamp of Bangaleeness, the paharis were in effect threatened with the loss of their ethnic identity. Subsequent development or the policies pursued by President Zia added fuel to the fire. With the influx of the Bengali settlers during 1978-83 the paharis now were at risk not only with the loss of their identity but also felt that the tentacles of the ruling

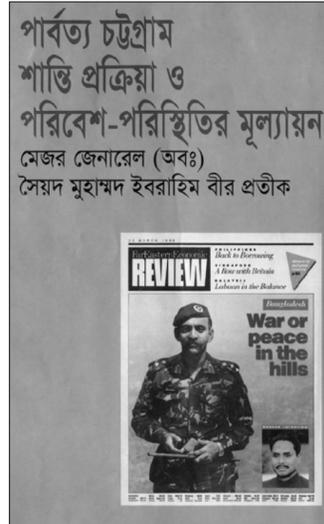
national elite were being spread to economically exploit them as well. These chapters do provide insights as to how the insurgency came into being.

Chapters XII-XVII illuminate the political dynamics within PCJSS, external linkages of the PCJSS and Shanti Bahini (PCJSS's armed wing), activities of both Shanti Bahini and Bangladesh security forces. The activities of the insurgents and Bangladesh security forces highlight the complexities of the prevailing situation. The chapters on the external linkages of PCJSS and Shanti Bahini, and external logistic support to later's strategic operational planning are especially interesting. General Ibrahim, in a very lucid manner, analyzes how the insurgency was given a driving force through the group's alliances with Bangladesh's most important neighbor India. And how India for the interest of its own gave support to PCJSS in sustaining insurgency by providing sanctuary to the tribal people who fled their homes due to the twin factors like Bangladesh army operation as well as intimidation by the Shanti Bahini, who used familiar tactics of any insurgents to draw international attention and international human rights associations, created refugees on foreign soil. The author, in this context, has done a remarkable job in providing valuable information that demonstrate how an insurgency can be sustained by another country in order to gain political dividends (pp. 100-103). He, however, does not fail to highlight the fact that it was not only the foreign connections of the insurgents, which created an untenable situation, but that Bangladeshi security forces and Bengali settlers were not less responsible for it (chapter.

XVII).

Chapter XVIII provides an insight that though the Peace Treaty was signed in 1997 the process itself has been more than a decade old. The author then gives a detailed and comprehensive account of the peace process covering chapters XXI-XXIII. In the concluding chapter, the author makes an evaluation of the Peace Treaty by quoting from various national dailies and statements of a few politicians including Shantu Lama. What is discernible from these informations is that the implementation of CHT Peace Treaty will have a rough sailing. General Ibrahim does mention the reasons for such notion of skepticism among the tribal people and its leadership. He cautions Bangladeshi leadership about the importance of CHT in terms of its geo-strategic location, economic resources and political significance, and that the country cannot afford to lose it. He, thus, emphasizes the significance of the resolution of the conflict, which, he highlights, must be dealt with in the larger context both regional and international scenario. Bangladesh, as such, must take steps that would enhance the process of a multi ethnic nation-building and consequently as multiethnic state.

The book is undoubtedly a valuable addition to the existing literature on CHT insurgency, peace process, the Peace Treaty and its future, though at times it was felt that the author could have been less descriptive. Perhaps that was needed in order to supply the nitty-gritty of much valuable information the book contains. The contribution of the author is immense. He has done a commendable job by providing the Bangladeshi scholars and students an insight of CHT insur-



Parbothto Chottogram Shanti Prokriya and Poribesh-Paristhiti Mullayann
Author: Major General Ibrahim (Rtd) Bir Protik
Publisher: Mowla Brothers, Dhaka
Pages: 377
Price: Tk. 300.00

gency, its operation, when and how the peace process was initiated and the present situation in the area in the context of the Peace Treaty from his personal experience, notes and unpublished materials. The book, therefore, is highly recommended for students, professional, policy-makers and general readers.

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Protecting small hands in exploitative labour market

The west sees child labourers as passive and helpless victims. International Labour Organization has adopted Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention in 1999 aiming at putting total embargo on forced labour, child slavery, debt bondage, child trafficking, sex-slavery. Any civilized society cannot but endorse the Convention, but the socio-economic realities and lack of alternative options for survival often stand on the way to the state's capacity to implement the provisions of Conventions. It is no wonder that Bangladesh is yet to ratify the 1999 Convention.

ANDALIB RASHIDIE

GS Bhargava writes on the Indian socio-economic and political perspective that the country is doomed to live with child labour as it has been living for centuries with the curse of untouchability. Lack of other societal reforms essential to attack the class-based apartheid mocks the constitutional prohibition of untouchability. Apartheid in the form of sharp social segregation is more of a social and attitudinal question than an economic one. Given the present economic foundation, change may be brought about to minimise the extent of apartheid, but child labour in case of India, Bangladesh and many other developing countries is an unavoidable necessity for survival of both the child and his/her family. As for Bangladesh whatever is written in scriptures, constitutions and law books poverty comes first to rationalise child labour, no matter how inhuman and unethical it is.

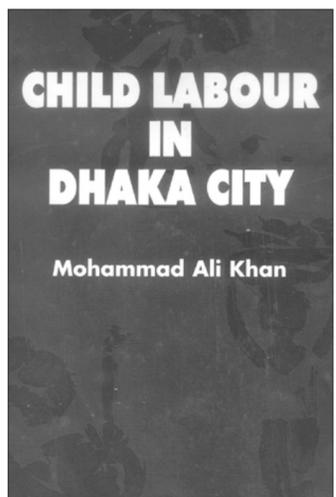
Clean Cloth Campaign that has its roots in Europe and gets a good nurture by human right activists and other anti-child labour campaigners posed a threat to garments industry in Bangladesh like countries by forcing withdrawal of child labourers. The effort would be a welcome move if it had contributed to the welfare of children. Paradoxically the apparently innocent move that was meant to benefit the children threatened their survival. Withdrawal of child labourers without provisions for income supplement did not really work. Studies undertaken on the impact of Harkin's Bill maintain that in many cases the law contributed further to the misery of the children rather than liberating them from the exploitative labour market. The threat of snapping trade relations with sectors employing children as labourers got the essential legal basis through Harkin's Bill. While the text and geographical coverage of the new law can be well appreciated from ethical grounds, it was painstakingly observed that the law overlooked the root causes of child labour in developing countries.

Mohammad Ali Khan, the author of the book is a social scientist by instinct and training and a civil servant by profession (civil servants in developing countries are often found to turn into evil for people and servant for the devil! Let Khan be an exception.) He takes keen interest on the socio-economic aspects of Bangladesh labour sector which has been viewed as an overly exploited sector. He studied the doubly exploited labour force child labourers in the backdrop of serious lack of access to resources. Lower demand and overflowing supply of child labour brings the market to the absolute advantage of employers.

Brainstorming on the elimination of child labour in Bangladesh and beyond finally leads all discussion to the old conclusion that poverty and lack of resources and access to income remain at the core child labour. A 2000 survey reveals that 6.3 million children are employed in Bangladesh in 400 different sub-sectors of employment with 25 per cent of them falling in the high-risk category of employment. Globally more than 250 million children in 5 to 14 years age group is in the labour market with half of them being in full time labour. The consequence of missing out education draws children again to the vicious circle of poverty.

Intending to study the situation the researcher

chose garments sector that gives an overall view of exploitation of child labour. One may also take the example of tanneries. Children between 10 to 15 years of age account for 22 per cent of total tannery labourers while Factory Act of 1965 put a bar on employing under 14 children in such jobs. Hazaribagh is a concentration of tanneries that accommodates most of the tannery sub-sector child labourers. The localized factories in Hazaribagh release no less than 2,500 gallons of chemical wastes a day exposing children to cancerous skin diseases, cough, asthma, fever, rheumatic fever, tuberculosis, chest pain, jaundice, kidney disorder and various other complications with different combinations of diseases. Interested researchers may undertake study on the mortality and morbidity of child labourers in



Child Labour in Dhaka City
Mohammad Ali Khan
Hakkani Publishers, Dhaka
First Publication: January 2001
Price: Taka 220.00

tanneries.

It has been claimed that 27,000 children were withdrawn from member concerns of Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association in recent years. Children intake as labourers has dropped from 43 per cent in 1995 to 5 per cent in 2000. Question remains whether the income of the families of the withdrawn children had been supplemented and the excluded children from the garment sector found their ways to education.

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way to the state's capacity to implement the provisions of Conventions. It is no wonder that Bangladesh is yet to ratify the 1999 Convention.

Jill Smolowe writes in 'The Grim Facts About Child Labour' about a boy who was promised a high paying job in Iraq along with free food and accommodation in exchange of three months' free service in a factory near New Delhi. While working in the factory and counting days for the overseas trip the 14 year old boy got his right leg crushed as a piece of factory equipment fell on him. The factory did not have any need for a crippled boy. Later on, himself turned into burden to the poor family he wished it had been better if he had died of starvation instead of dreaming a fortune in Iraq. Jill Smolowe sums up that million of children labour under high risk hazardous conditions, dealing frequently with poisonous chemicals, inhaling noxious fume and carrying heavily excessive weights. Overworked, underpaid, if paid at all, children in the inhuman labour force grin at human rights and child rights charters. The children do not know that studies on their poverty and unfortunate situation provides higher degrees and highly paid jobs.

Bangladesh has attempted to phase out child labour and put the children in the track of education, both formal and non-formal. ILO-BGMEA-UNICEF collaboration in question of schooling children is an appreciable effort. A good number of children are struggling in the street. A Canadian sociologist Venessa Alam finds that their problems are mostly socially based instead of the generally focused economic problems. She focused on torture by police, mastans and elderly people. Despite being no less productive than many well-sheltered boys and girls of their ages they are victims of pay discrimination with lessened access to services.

'Child Labour in Dhaka City' has come out a research for a post graduate degree at Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Mohammad Ali Khan undertakes limited empirical study to add to his analysis of secondary sources. Wherever he had worked he made people felt his presence by delving deep into historical and social aspects of the region and its population. He wrote on Labour Welfare, and Industrial Relations and Labour Movement, History of District of Kishoreganj, Baldah Garden and Jaminder Narayandra Narayan Roy Chowdhury.

In this publication the author also attempted to explore legal interventions and assessed their impact. The book demands another round of editing and incorporation of findings of other broad-based studies. It is hoped that in the second edition the author will contribute more labour in restructuring the work to blot the marks of a MPhil dissertation away.

Carol Bellamy writes, 'A century that began with children having virtually no rights and ended with children having the most powerful legal instrument that not only recognizes but protects their human rights.' Cautiously optimistic Khan also hopes that child labour would be phased out provided alternative options for survival are expanded. When social and economic tools join legal tools in the elimination of child labour Dhaka may rush to ratify all conventions not yet signed. Let the small hands of children be guarded against child labour in general worst form of child labour in particular.

A poet to watch out for

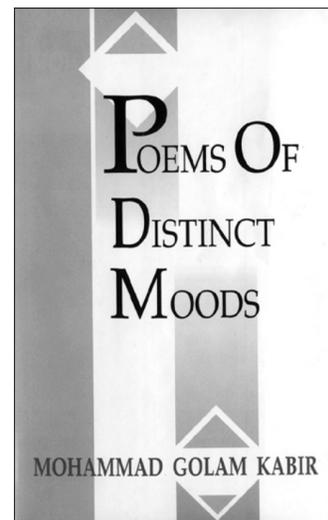
K REZAUR RAHMAN

BANGLADESH is a land of poetry. The country's greenery, enchanting natural landscape, its fauna and flora have always been a source of inspiration for our poets. Our poets have readily responded to these beauties of nature with their emotional intensity and produced poems of kaleidoscopic variety which have enriched the poetic tradition of our country. Books of English poems are very few and in this respect Mohammad Golam Kabir's collection of poems written in English deserves special attention. Golam Kabir is a young lecturer in English at Dhaka City College and at this young age his maiden venture in the realm of literature is quite encouraging.

Poems of Distinct Moods contains 48 poems on different themes. What is most striking in this collection is that these poems mark a departure from the conventional romantic trend and characterised by a sharp sense of realism and social awareness. These poems are short lyrics and the stylistic pattern shows the influence of William Blake. 'Life on this Earth' is an outstanding poem in this collection which reveals the struggle of life, its aspiration and failures.

'The Boy' is a reminiscent poem of Blake's 'The Little Black Boy' in which Golam Kabir has faithfully drawn the picture of a helpless boy moving aimlessly on the street and rootless like a hyacinth, floating on the water. Here the imagery 'hyacinth' seems to be quite appropriate in describing the rootlessness of the boy. Similarly 'A Neglected Child', a four-line poem, conveys the same sense of realism in the tradition of Blake.

'A Sunset', 'Spring', 'Twinkle Star', 'O River', 'A Flock of Cranes', are nature poems. All these poems provide a sensuous description of nature and natural phenomena. 'Spring' is



Poems of Distinct Moods
by Mohammad Golam Kabir
Published by
Md Abdul Mannan
24/D, Nilkhet, Dhaka University Staff Quarters,
Dhaka.
Price: Tk 100.00
USA\$ 5.95, UK £3.99

written in a regular rhyme pattern. 'A Flock of Cranes', not only describes the beauty of the birds but also suggests a sense of loneliness which is the most distinguishing feature of this poem: 'A little bit of hurry to reach

them/Gradually they left me alone/And made me forlorn'. The last line reminds us of Keats: 'Forlorn the very word is like a bell...'. 'A Moonlit Night' conveys spiritual ecstasy generated in the mind of the young poet by the beauty of God's creation. 'The moon spread silvery light/The night was the gift of the world's Maker'.

'The Lost Days of University' expresses a feeling of nostalgia for the vanished glory of student life with its joy and sorrow. Golam Kabir has paid glowing tribute to Shakespeare and Keats in this collection. Although much has been written on Shakespeare in the form of homage to this great poet. Golam Kabir's attempt to evaluate Shakespeare from his own perspective deserves credit.

'Historic Helen' and 'To a Fair Maiden' are love poems in this collection. As has been pointed out earlier the love poems are not conventional with the overlay of emotion and romantic sentimentalism. One is about the enigmatic beauty of Helen and the other is about the response of the soul in love: 'And her blush/Beautifies her rosy cheeks./In Return/Her soul desires a soul near'.

'To the Freedom Fighters' is a significant poem written in the memory of the freedom fighters who fought selflessly for the liberation of our country. Golam Kabir pays tribute to the freedom fighters whose names will be written in golden letters in the history of the country's freedom.

Poems of Distinct Moods is Golam Kabir's first book of poems. Kabir's love of poetry has inspired him to bring out this slim volume. The book has an attractive cover design and it is expected that the book will be well-received and appreciated by the readers.

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POEM

The Fight

PARISHA KHAN

As I lay on the floor, I move my hand towards my head,
I can feel the open wound. I can feel where it bled.
My eyes flicker against the afternoon sun
I look to the sky wondering what I have become.
My body aches against the dusty road,
The pain in my head in nothing compared to the pain my soul.
All around me I hear screams of pain and of anger.
I have come to my end; my fight is nearly over,
A I lay, I watch my friends shot and beaten to the ground,
I can hear their cries of pain as they keep on fighting.
Their bodies lay upon each other, they have all come to the end,
They no longer have to suffer.
I close my eyes, the sun is too bright.
I may not be alive much longer but what I have done for my country
Was to fight.
I fought for language recognition,
I fought for may language to the free,
I fought for my identity, I fought for me.
We are here today, the 21st February,
So in the future people around the world can look within their

souls
And learn not to be suppressed.
We will fight today; tomorrow someone else will fight for the rest.
This is my time, my life
And I will fight; we will all fight for what is right, for what is true.
Bangla is my language, it is here for me, and it is here for you.
Everybody around the world can stand and see
That the 21st February was the day that I gave my life for what I believe
For this is the moment, this is the time,
When we stand together and defy the people who dare to suppress.
We will not stop; we will not go away,
Because we are about to change the world today.
Your language defines you, it is you, and it becomes you.
It is you rights to expression, it is you freedom.
As the blood starts to flow down my face
And my body starts to close down slowly,
My eyes shut out the world as I prepare to leave this earth,
I know I go as a person who fought for their right.
My work here is done; it is up to the rest of the world for now
and for the future to continue the fight.