

AN ENGROSSING PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

AUTHOR: TAMINA M. CHOWDHURY

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Indigenous Identity in South Asia: Making claims in the Colonial Chittagong Hill Tracts

ALMOST as soon as Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign independent country, a protracted armed struggle began in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), based on, in Tamina H. Chowdhury's construct, "the claim that the hill people of the Tracts were ethnically distinct from the majority 'Bengali' population of Bangladesh, and therefore needed special protection to preserve their traditions and customs."

The book, as the author Tamina Chowdhury reveals, is an extension of her PhD dissertation at Cambridge University, UK, and it is a good one. Indications of a carefully and thoroughly researched work may be found throughout the book, and, she professes with justification that, "The claim to originality for the book lies not only in its analysis, for the first time, of the social history of the Tracts under British rule, but also in locating the late twentieth-century indigeneity claims within a historical framework." Her objective is even more ambitious: "The study of indigeneity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is also potentially relevant to understanding the impact of colonialism on peripheral societies." Now that the myriad problems directly associated with societies having just come out of the shackles of colonialism have largely taken a backseat to more pressing issues coming up in the Internet Age, it would be interesting to relate Chowdhury's findings to the post-colonial peripheral societies, and, that too, would make reading her book worthwhile.

Going back to the span of her study, one cannot fail to notice that CHT in Bangladesh has not been covered in the book. However, in a quite comprehensive literature review, she has managed to take stock of the writings of several Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi authors who have expounded extensively on various issues relating to the CHT as a part of Bangladesh. Shapan Adnan, B.P. Barua, Amena Mohsin, Willem van Schendel, and James Scott are critically, if succinctly, discussed. Chowdhury chooses to concentrate on the period of rule by the British East India Company and then the British Crown in "an attempt to show how colonial rule impacted upon the region, prompting claims to indigeneity to emerge in the 1920s." The brief concession she makes to the post-British Raj CHT may be found in this concise passage: "Paharis in the Hill Tracts had long struggled to communicate their discontent to successive authorities, both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The founding of the Shanti Bahini in the mid-1970s, was a sign that political

mechanisms through which their discontent could be addressed had hardly developed in the post-1947 era. In the years leading up to 1971, the Tracts remained on the periphery of the political movements taking place in the rest of East Pakistan...."

In fact, the *Shanti Bahini* launched a persistent insurgency against the Bangladesh government in 1977 over the issues of autonomy and the rights of Buddhist and *Hindu Jumma* people, the *Chakma* population, and CHT tribes, and the intensity only simmered down following the 1997 CHT Peace Accord. Chowdhury remarks on the region's political institutions being weak in comparison to its neighbouring regions, and believes that the explanation for this situation lies in the period of British colonial influence in CHT. She begins by looking askance at the British idea of "civilization", which was influenced by the notions of evolutionism and the Enlightenment, "which saw tribes as a less evolved social type and their 'barbarism and nomadism' as a manifestation of less than human qualities." She refutes such notions as myths dished up to serve British colonial purposes. Equally, she debunks the nostalgic image of the colonial era in the Tracts as another myth created by its contemporary elites. In fact, from its very inception, the British Raj recognized very few traditional rights of the region. They, along with other British policies, had a far-reaching negative impact on the people, the region, and its relations with the bigger entities it was subsumed under.

Interestingly, the Chittagong Hill Tracts was thus named only in 1860 after its annexation by the British Crown. It used to be called *Kapas Mahal*. Territorialism was the preeminent policy that guided British expansion in CHT. "Territorialization in the Tracts," Chowdhury contends, "manifested as the spatial, economic, agricultural, as well as political expansion of the Company state in the region."

Following the rebellion of 1857, the British Crown took over the governance of India, and became more involved than before in the Tracts, with adverse

effects for the people. From 1860 onwards, many older rights were either curbed or scrapped altogether, the powers of the chiefs eroded, and, in 1860, the Tracts were taken over by the Crown authority. However, "the British struggled to find a balance between the traditional and 'enlightened formulations' of how best to govern these territories." From the very beginning, the government had sought to diminish the tribal chiefs' authority and influence over the people, which led to growing tension between the chiefs and the colonial officials. As Chowdhury emphasizes, "At the heart of British rule in the Tracts, the idea of territoriality had a major influence on how its administrators imagined and designed their structures of control." She comes down heavily on a draconian British policy pursued in the Tracts following a famine in the region in the wake of a bad harvest and cyclone in 1876. She summarizes the outcomes of British policy: "...we must not lose sight of the fact that those most affected by the Raj's political and economic policies were lay inhabitants of the Tracts, who, as each year passed, were taxed more heavily even as they lost access to forest produce and areas in which to *jhum*."

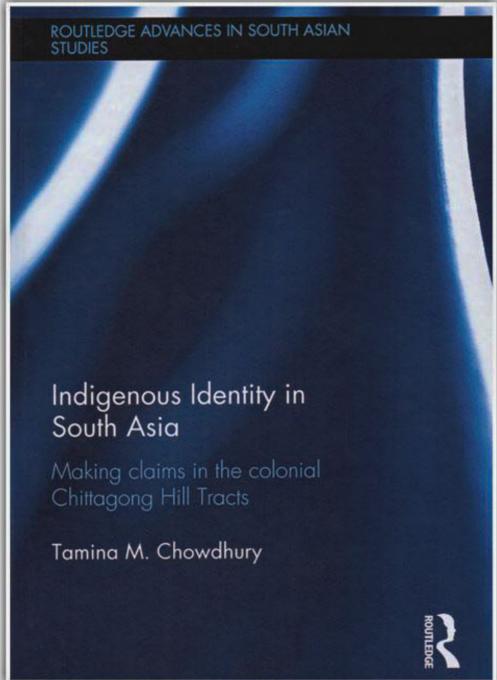
On the overall British policy and its impact, the author is harsh in her assessment: "Yet a hundred years after its first entrance into the Hill Tracts, it was clear that British economic and political institutions were not only unpopular among ordinary *paharis*, but that they were increasingly impoverished. Their voices of discontent, along with that of the chiefs and other local elites, went unheeded, with profound consequences for the future of the region." One of the quirks of the British rule (or is it misrule?) in the region, and one that resonates to this day, is its officials' perception of the Bengalis who resided there. "On the one hand, they stereotyped and commended the Bengalis as possessing good entrepreneurial skills and as being assets to the Hill economy, unlike the 'lazy' *paharis*; while on the other hand, they were wary of, and at times sought to keep in check, too

much 'Bengali influence' over the 'simple-minded *paharis*."

By 1929, the chiefs were reduced to titular positions only, and, the author speculates, this could have had an influence on the Indian National Congress' stand on CHT as 1947 loomed. The Government of India Act, 1935, while being instrumental in bringing the politics of the Bengal countryside into the political mainstream, it hardly had any impact on CHT. The Congress in Bengal spoke for only some of Bengal's minorities who had been awarded reserved seats under the Communal Award, a political expediency, but did not reach out to the tribes, while neither the Muslim League nor A K Fazlul Huq's *Krishak Proja* Party made any effort to mobilize the hill people. "Hence the Chittagong Hill Tracts did not experience the political winds of change that were blowing through the rest of Bengal at this time, and went unrepresented by all the major parties that dominated Bengal politics." The British were equally to blame. Even in 1942, when the Cripps Mission was in India to mediate a smooth transfer of power, and met a variety of stakeholders in the process, no opinions were solicited from the CHT spokespersons.

After 1947, "the Hill Tracts remained isolated from the mainstream politics of both Pakistan and Bangladesh, partly because it was seen as an eccentric addition to otherwise largely homogeneous nation-states. This isolation meant that political institutions in the Tracts, already relatively underdeveloped, did not grow at the same pace as they did in the plains.... It appears that contemporary claims to indigeneity also have links to this historical institutional deficiency, and cannot be understood in narrowly political, ethnic, or economic terms." Tamina Chowdhury set out to "shed some historical light on how and why this 'institutional inadequacy' emerged in the Hill Tracts." She has done a good job in doing just that.

The reviewer is an Actor, and Professor and Head, Department of Media and Communication, IUB.



This preamble to *Indigenous Identity in South Asia: Making claims in the Colonial Chittagong Hill Tracts* is followed by an extensive discussion over five Chapters and a Conclusion on the progression of the complexity of the Hill Tracts situation from 1760 to 1947. The time span covers the sunrise to the sunset of British colonialism in India, and the book's subtitle makes the point quite clear.

Romance, togetherness and parting

AUTHOR: SHAMIM AHMED

REVIEWED BY SHAHNOOR WAHID

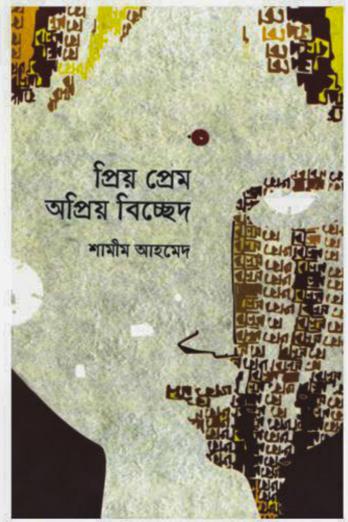
Publisher: Chaitanya 2017

SHAMIM Ahmed's previously published books of poems are *Ek Fota Brishti Hotey Jodi* (Shuddhashar), *Je Prohor Kuashar Kachhe Rini* (Shuddhashar) and *Nimisheti Nishiddho Tumi* (Chaitanya). One can get these books by placing order with Rokomari.com).

It did not take long for the readers of the country to discover the flair and the finesse of the poet that poured out of his every line. Shamim's poems in those three books exuded in abundance various shades of emotion needed to make a book of poems stand out among many in the market where there is intense competition. It did not come to me as a surprise that his poems soon found their way into the hearts of the readers. Last year, in the Ekushey Boi Mela, his publishers had to supply more books to the stalls seeing the rush of buyers there. The five copies that he had given this reviewer were all gone in two days – taken by the same lady to distribute among her friends. She was all praise for the young poet. I guess that speaks a lot about the standard of Shamim's work.

This year Shamim Ahmed has brought his book of poems to the Ekushey Mela titled: *Prio Prem Opro Bichched*, published by Chaitanya publishers. Most of his 30 plus poems in the book have the same kind of flamboyance tinged with perceptive frivolity to entice the poetry lovers to delve deeper and deeper. There is youthful exuberance no doubt and it is understandably aimed at a younger crowd. Shamim's poems are of acceptable length, lucidly pieced together, and I believe the entrenched thoughts will transport the readers to a world where human relationship, love, romance, desire, sensuality, frustration and parting are but ostensible. These emotions and much more overflow the lines of the poems in this book. Poems like *Prohelika*, *Ghune Dhora Shopno*, *Cholo Ishwar*, *Thote, Ekti Porokiaprobno Chader Golpo*, *Torongo*, *Shombhrom*, *Duratta* and *Prio Prem Opro Bichched* will consciously intrigue his readers.

Shamin Ahmed weaves his lines with carefully selected words with the deftness of a seasoned writer. And his intermittent use of metaphors will amaze his readers. It is expected that *Prio Prem Opro Bichched* will be discovered by readers in stalls of Ekushey Mela sooner than one may guess because Shamim Ahmed is now a well known name among the young writers and poets.



Journey on the trail of love

AUTHOR: TAZRIAN YUSUF CHOWDHURY

REVIEWED BY SHAHNOOR WAHID

Published by Morning Dew

TAZRIAN is a young writer endowed with the gift of imagination. She has revealed her creativity and adeptness in writing short stories that surely will make readers discern her distinctive style. She offers 8 interesting stories of varied topics and taste in her first publication titled *Never Say Goodbye*.

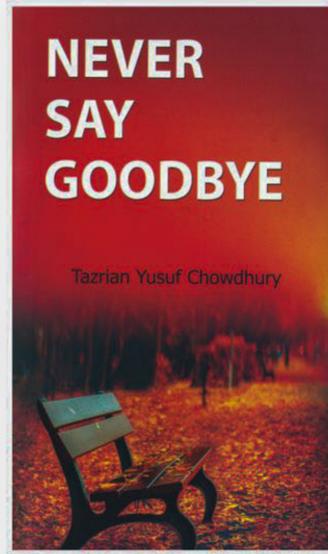
Her ability to keep the readers engrossed in the stories till the last chapter reminded this reviewer of the world class short stories of the famous writers, especially of the last two centuries. What is refreshing is her stories are not crammed with too many characters with plots and sub-plots and not overflowing with drama and melodrama. Rather each character she created has a strong role to play to take the story to its conclusiveness. She has a unique style of story-telling and she takes her readers through the stories with veritable ease and poise.

Readers would be pleasantly surprised by many of her stories. *Mission Possible* is unique in premise and style, a very original in concept. Perhaps never before birth of a human baby has been presented in this unique fashion. Then again the pathos that the writer paints with her pen in *The Umbilical Cord* would make many readers reflect on life that exists on the other side of the fence – away from what we know as normal. Based on the theme of poverty and adoption, and the quest for finding the original family, Tazrian constructs this story to its unique finality.

Tazrian gives her very best in *Never Say Goodbye*. It is the supernatural yet poignant tale of bonding between the dead and the living. There is the hint of an apparition and yet there is nothing uncanny about it. Innocent and chaste love of two individuals living in two different realms has been depicted brilliantly in measured sentences by the writer.

Tazrian has a free flow of imagination which has been well supplemented by her passion for reading and travelling across the globe. She has observed life and lifestyle of people from various social strata at home and abroad. Her language is lucid and unpretentious and she knows when to bring the climax. She definitely has the required aptitude and finesse to make a great writer one day.

Never Say Goodbye is available at: Bhorer Shishir, Stall No 133, Ekushey Boi Mela. Online order: Mac_c61@hotmail.com

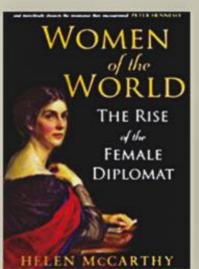


OMNI BOOKS

Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat

by Helen McCarthy (Author)

Women of the World tells this story of personal and professional struggle against the dramatic backdrop of war, super-power rivalry and global transformation over the last century and a half. From London to Washington, Geneva to Tehran and in the deserts of Arabia, the souks of Damascus and the hospitals of Sarajevo, resolute women undaunted by intransigent officials and hostile foreign governments proved their worth.

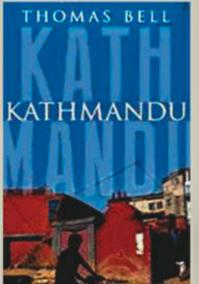


Kathmandu

by Thomas Bell (Author)

One of the greatest cities of the Himalaya, Kathmandu, Nepal, is a unique blend of thousand-year-old cultural practices and accelerated urban development. In this book, Thomas Bell recounts his experiences from his many years in the city—exploring in the process the rich history of Kathmandu and its many instances of self-reinvention.

Closed to the outside world until 1951 and trapped in a medieval time warp, Kathmandu is, as Bell argues, a jewel of the art world, a carnival of sexual license, a hotbed of communist revolution, a paradigm of failed democracy, a case study in bungled western intervention, and an environmental catastrophe. The layered development of the city can be seen in the successive generations of its gods and goddesses; its comfort in the caste system and ethos of aristocracy and kingship; and the recent destabilizing effects of consumerist approaches and the push for egalitarianism and democracy. In important ways, Kathmandu's rapid modernization can be seen as an extreme version of what is happening in other traditional societies. Bell also discusses the



AVAILABLE AT ALL OMNI BOOKS CENTRES

NEW BOOK

Author: Sajeeb Shahriar

Publisher: Sabda Sailee, February 2017

Avimani Tomar Daknam is a book of poetry written by Sajeeb Shahriar and published by Sabda Sailee. It is available now at this Ekushe Book Fair-2017 (Sabda Sailee, Stall No-357,358,359). The poet introduces different feelings of love like strong infatuation, break-up and reunion among lovers. Almost all the poems are about desperate search for love.

