

UNREST IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Communal violence and the politics of misrepresentation

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in south-eastern Bangladesh has once again been the site of communal violence, with reports of attacks in Rangamati and Dighinala, Khagrachhari. As Bangladeshi academics based in Australia, we reflect on these developments with concern for both the Bangalee and Indigenous communities. Our enduring ties to the country deepen our unease over escalating tensions and misinformation, which distort the realities of the violence and its underlying causes.

The political instability in Bangladesh, driven by a decade of

and causes of the unrest, portraying Indigenous people as aggressors instead of victims of long-standing systemic oppression.

Two widespread spates of communal violence rocked the CHT recently. According to media reports, many Indigenous homes and businesses were burned and looted, many Indigenous families were forced to leave their homes fearing attack and at least four Indigenous individuals were killed with several injured in clashes between Bangalee and Indigenous communities. Though major news outlets have documented these incidents, conflicting narratives on social media often depicted the Indigenous peoples as separatists, exacerbating tensions and promoting misinformation.

The CHT certainly has a complex history of Indigenous struggles for autonomy and recognition. Since the 1970s, Indigenous communities have sought justice for land rights and self-governance, but partly due to a conspicuous vacuum on this issue in the school curriculum, the



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

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repression, has spurred nationwide unrest. Social media, long controlled by the previous regime, became a crucial tool for public mobilisation, leading to Hasina government's downfall. However, this digital space has since devolved into a platform rife with factionalism, prejudice, and misinformation. This shift has affected the dormant narrative around the CHT violence, where social media has distorted the nature

Bangalee population often overlooks this history. The CHT Peace Accord, signed in 1997, was intended to resolve decades of insurgency and land disputes. Yet, over 25 years later, it remains largely unimplemented. Systemic and widespread land grabbing by some Bangalees, often supported by the state, continue to marginalise Indigenous communities. Personal reflections from one of the authors, an Indigenous Chakma from

Khagrachhari, attest to the lived experiences of such oppression.

The rate of Indigenous communities' land dispossession in the CHT, due to past government policies and alleged intimidation by some settlers with support from local administration, symbolises the erosion of Indigenous identity and livelihood—narratives that are frequently ignored in Bangladesh's mainstream discourse. Many Bangalees remain unaware of the term “settlers” as it applies to those living in the CHT, revealing a broader lack of understanding about the region's history.

Moreover, the problematic terminology used to describe Indigenous communities in Bangladesh further compounds this ignorance. Terms such as “Adivasi” (original inhabitants), “Upajati” (sub-tribe), and “Khhudro Nrigosthi” (small ethnic groups) are often employed without consideration of the unique histories and struggles of groups like the Chakma. These

terms are reductive and paternalistic, undermining the political legitimacy of Indigenous people's claims to land and cultural recognition.

In contrast, Australia has developed more inclusive and respectful language when referring to its Indigenous populations; “First Nations” or “Indigenous Australians” are used to acknowledge their historical and sovereign rights. While far from perfect, Australia's evolving language around Indigenous issues reflects an important recognition of their place in the nation's history. Bangladesh, however, has yet to adopt such an inclusive lexicon, which continues to marginalise its Indigenous communities.

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A troubling trend has emerged on social media, where some users engage in debates about who the “true” Indigenous people of the CHT are, based on arrival timelines. This reductive argument oversimplifies the region's complex history and ignores broader ethnic and political struggles. In contrast, countries like Nepal and India have recognised their Indigenous populations through constitutional protections. Bangladesh must similarly acknowledge its Indigenous communities and move beyond simplistic narratives about ethnic identity.

As educators, we believe the misinformation and bias surrounding the CHT conflict are partly the result of a long-standing gap in the national curriculum. The chronology of Bangalee settlement in the CHT,

which intensified following the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s and escalated during the military regime of the 1980s, is seldom discussed. Consequently, many Bangalees view the Indigenous struggle for land and rights as a threat to national unity, rather than a legitimate pursuit of rights and justice.

For the diaspora, the distance from our homeland intensifies our helplessness during any conflict. Social media, which could serve as a bridge between the diaspora and Bangladesh, instead amplifies the dominant divisive narrative, often drowning out the voices of Indigenous people. Often social media posts about conflicts in the CHT contain false or misleading information. These posts, which include doctored images and inflammatory rhetoric, exacerbate tensions and incite hatred.

Addressing the crisis in the CHT requires more than just an end to violence—it demands a shift in how the conflict is understood and discussed. Education is crucial. The history and struggles of CHT's Indigenous peoples must be integrated into the national curriculum. Until people are educated about the colonial legacy and state-sanctioned land grabs that have shaped the current crisis, many will continue to misinterpret the Indigenous struggle as illegitimate.

Moreover, social media platforms must be held accountable for the disinformation they propagate. Algorithms that prioritise sensationalism over truth need recalibration, and fact-checking mechanisms must be strengthened to prevent the spread of false narratives that incite violence.

The unrest in the CHT reflects broader societal failures to address the rights of minority communities, including religious minorities. As members of the Bangladeshi diaspora, we urge our fellow citizens to critically engage with the narratives they encounter and work towards a future where all communities—Bangalee and Indigenous—can coexist with respect and dignity.

‘Relationship with a sovereign state must be based on equity’

The India-Bangladesh relationship experienced some strains in the aftermath of the Awami League's fall and Sheikh Hasina being sheltered in India. Prof Sreeradha Datta, a South Asian expert who teaches international affairs at the Haryana-based OP Jindal Global University, shared her views on the future of Bangladesh-India relations with The Daily Star's Diplomatic Correspondent Porimol Palma.

How is India looking at Bangladesh after Bangladesh's recent political change?

Historically, we have supported the Awami League (AL). We perceive that there is a possibility of an Islamist party takeover in Bangladesh if the AL is not in power. However, that is not the current reality in Bangladesh. It is true that India has worked extensively with the AL, which has increased bilateral trade volume and has also benefited Bangladesh. However, India does not have any policy that would prevent it from collaborating with any other government in Bangladesh.

The relationship with a sovereign state must be based on equity. This principle has been repeatedly emphasised by the current leadership in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, claims that India was responsible for the recent floods in Bangladesh's southeastern region are unfounded. Additionally, some senior Indian leaders have made remarks that were unnecessary and did not benefit either side.

What should be the immediate steps to improve the relations?

I believe Dhaka and New Delhi are already in contact. I propose that both countries hold formal dialogue at the earliest opportunity to resolve any outstanding issues. India needs a clear assurance that there will be no anti-Indian activities originating from within Bangladesh. The core problem is that India believes only the AL can address its security concerns, which I consider a misguided perception. If Dhaka assures Delhi that it will address India's security concerns, this could serve as the foundation for a strong relationship. At the same time, the interim government can also communicate to India which issues it should urgently address regarding Bangladesh.

The interim government has not said anything that can create such a perceived threat for India. So, why is India worried about it?

There have been attacks on Hindus in



Sreeradha Datta

Bangladesh recently, and we understand the reasons behind these incidents. However, many other events are occurring that are not receiving adequate attention. What we are observing is that the BNP seems to be becoming quite vocal. Although the BNP is separate from the interim government, it appears that the party is gaining strength. The interim government should have the authority to manage any aggressive rhetoric, as it conveys the wrong message. Some experts argue that religious fundamentalism is not a big factor in Bangladesh, and I share this belief.

Dhaka said the Indian media has exaggerated the events of attacks on minorities. What is Delhi's understanding?

I agree that there is a lot of disinformation.

However, a perception has developed in India that Hindus in Bangladesh are coming under attack because Hasina is not in power. While we know that such incidents are not as prevalent as portrayed in the media, the general public has developed a negative perception. On August 15, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about the persecution of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, but he failed to mention that others were also killed. He could have addressed that point. It's important to understand that this matter is related to our domestic politics. What I'm saying is that a negative perception is being cultivated. Therefore, the leaderships should meet and issue a joint statement affirming that the

relationship will be as it should be between two sovereign states.

Border killings and water issues have been thorns in the relationship. How do you see it?

Border killings can be stopped if the two countries work together. Even if the number of killings is low, they should not occur between two friendly nations. In 2010, we stated that we would establish an agreement for the basin-wide management of our transboundary rivers and address the problems of other rivers, if not the Teesta. Why has this not been implemented? India must resolve the water issue. Just as security is important for India, water is equally important for Bangladesh. Even if there had been an interim arrangement for water sharing, the typical anti-India sentiment would not be as strong as it is now. Given that the water-sharing issue has always been an emotional one for Bangladesh, India must do the right thing.

There is a perception that India benefited more from the agreements or MoUs signed during the AL regime. There is a discussion those may be reviewed.

It may not look good to India, but Bangladesh can certainly review those agreements. I know that many MoUs may not have been discussed in parliament. I believe that the connectivity projects implemented thus far benefit both countries. However, if Bangladesh wants to review any deal, such as the one concerning transit, it is entitled to do so. India has not acted in a non-transparent manner. In fact, I think it would be beneficial for the MoUs to be revisited. Doing so will clarify whether the MoUs are useful or not.

Work of some projects under the Line of Credit remains suspended as Indian contractors are yet to restart working. Why?

I believe it is due to a lingering sense of fear.

While we are not certain yet, the information we are receiving is somewhat unnerving. If the Bangladeshi authorities assure India that they have no security concerns, then things will proceed.

The interim government said it may take steps to bring back Sheikh Hasina for legal reasons. Will it create any friction in the relationship?

I believe there are various aspects to consider—both from legal and technical perspectives. Bangladesh needs to take these into account. Sheikh Hasina will not be extradited simply because Bangladesh wishes it. We cannot disregard India's relationship with the AL or Sheikh Hasina. Nevertheless, we would like to work with Bangladesh.

Our foreign adviser said India's relationship needs to be with the people of Bangladesh, not only with AL. What are your thoughts?

I agree 100 percent. India should work with whichever government is in office in Bangladesh. The problem arose with the government that was in power from 2001 to 2006, which soured relations. Later, we found that the AL was friendly towards India. In a multiparty system, any government can be elected to office. Why should India not work with it?

Sadly, it was the BNP that fostered anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh from 2001 to 2006. During the BNP Jamaat regime, a large quantity of arms and ammunition, reportedly meant for the Indian separatist organisation ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), was seized in Chattogram in 2004.

The interim government wants to revitalise SAARC. What's your view?

SAARC is important for cooperation in South Asia, but Pakistan needs to change its behaviour. We have always said we are willing to work with Pakistan if it does so, but it hasn't.