

# **INTERVIEW: Despair among the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts**

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Since the formation of Bangladesh as a nation in 1971, the indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southwestern Bangladesh have suffered from a policy of assimilation at the hands of the national government.

Armed conflict raged in the late 1970s and 1980s until an accord was signed between the indigenous political party and the government of Bangladesh almost 26 years ago in 1997. Indigenous peoples of the CHT claim that fundamental issues such as indigenous identity, land rights and demilitarisation are yet to be resolved as the government has failed to fully implement the Accord.

Rani Yan Yan is the Queen of the Chakma Indigenous peoples and the 'Chakma Circle' which is one of the indigenous governance bodies in the CHT; and an adviser to Raja Devasish Roy, the King and the Chief of the Chakma people and the Chakma Circle. She spoke with Melbourne Asia Review's managing editor Cathy Harper.

***Would you paint a picture of what the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the indigenous communities there are like?***

Chittagong Hill Tracts is the only hilly region in Bangladesh. The rest of the country is quite flat except for some small areas in the northeast and central north of the country. There are 11 indigenous communities who have been living there for

centuries which all have distinct cultures and languages which are very different from each other and also different from Bengali language and culture. They have learned to live with nature. We have a cultivation system which is unique. It is completely nature-based and does not need irrigation or ploughing because we believe that one should not disturb the soil. There is a lot of nature-based indigenous knowledge which has not been documented that many scientific scholars now think has a scientific value. This is the knowledge that we have used to survive for so long. But in the modern state of Bangladesh this 'shifting cultivation' is regarded as something that is not good for the environment and there have been efforts to discourage our people to practice it and efforts to ban it, which would mean that our people in the rural remote areas would have little means to sustain themselves.

### ***Which community are you from?***

My mother is from the Marma community, one of the 11 communities in the CHT. My father is not from the CHT—he is from the Rakhine community, an indigenous community in the plain land. In Bangladesh we have two broad sets: indigenous communities in the plain land and in the CHT. My parents were the first ones from their respective families who ventured out of their villages and found occupation in the capital city. They wanted to provide me and my siblings with better education and job opportunities, which were scarce in the CHT.

I grew up in the capital city Dhaka and went to one of the best schools in the country. I didn't have many indigenous friends because 30 years ago there were not many indigenous families living in the big cities. During my school years, I grew up with my Bengali friends and never thought of myself as someone different. True, I looked different and I could speak in a different language. But outside of home I spoke in Bangla, our national language. My school was a Catholic missionary school and I never felt any discrimination there. There were Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist children and we were treated the same irrespective of our religion or racial background. It was only when I completed my school and college education and got myself admitted to the University that I realised that the reality was quite different

and harsh for people from different ethnicities than the reality I had always known in my earlier years. Faced with discriminatory behaviours and derogatory comments, the search for my roots and belonging began.

### ***What is the status of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the area's relationship with the rest of Bangladesh?***

In 1971 Bangladesh became an independent nation from Pakistan and when the Constitution was being formed a delegation from Chittagong Hill Tracts led by the lone MP from the CHT, Manabendra Narayan Larma, demanded that the Constitution include regional autonomy for Chittagong Hill Tracts with an imposition of a ban on the influx of non-tribal people in the CHT, as it had been the case under British colonial rule. The British colonial government did curb our independence, but gave CHT self-autonomous status in the CHT Regulation of 1900, commonly known as the CHT Manual. The CHT was declared an excluded area, which was eroded during the Pakistan era through different law enactments and amendments. MN Larma recognised that in a newly independent state, without such safeguards in place, the indigenous peoples of CHT will be further marginalised. But his demands were met with racial remarks and threats from the 'Father of the Nation' Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who said the indigenous peoples should become Bengalis and threatened to turn indigenous populations into minorities by sending Bengalis into the CHT. In response, MN Larma stood at the parliament stating 'I am a Chakma not a Bengali... They (Indigenous peoples from the CHT) can never become Bengali' and walked out of the parliament.

Eventually, the 1972 Constitution proclaimed Bangladesh as a unitary state with no pluralist systems or special status for the CHT. The Constitution stated that Bengali would be the national language, despite the existence of at least 54 indigenous languages in Bangladesh, which it did not recognise. Also, citizens of Bangladesh would be recognised as Bengali, which was a clear imposition of Bengali identity on indigenous peoples. In the same year, MN Larma formed a political party—the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS)—and later an armed wing called

Shanti Bahini was formed. As MN Larma's demands were seen as a secessionist movement, CHT underwent militarisation in early 1972, especially following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The leadership of indigenous peoples lost faith in the political process and an armed defence was initiated by the PCJSS.

It was a big challenge for the military to subdue indigenous peoples. You can't just go in with tanks and mortars in the hilly inaccessible terrain which indigenous peoples know so well and had upper hand in a guerrilla war. So one of the strategies the military employed was to make us minorities in our own land by demographic engineering, by bringing in and settling large numbers of destitute Bengali people from the plains. These settlers were both used as human shields and as weapons to carry out atrocities against the indigenous peoples of CHT by the military.

Many atrocities were committed against indigenous peoples such as burning villages and killing and torturing innocent civilians, as well as sexual violence against indigenous women and girls. Some of these incidents were well-documented but some were not.

This low intensity armed conflict went on until 1997 when the CHT Accord was signed between PCJSS and the ruling Awami League government led by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She even received UNESCO Peace Prize for ending this decades long conflict. However, under her rule and rule of successive governments up until today, militarisation has continued in the CHT and marginalisation of the indigenous peoples has continued.

Extra judicial killings, imprisonment and torture of civilians under the custody of security forces, trumped up charges against indigenous political leaders, intimidation and harassment of those involved in the Indigenous People Human Rights Defenders Network and violence against indigenous women and girls are still a reality. We have had several incidents of mass communal attack on indigenous peoples backed by security forces, after signing of the Accord. None of the

instigators and perpetrators of these crimes have yet been brought to justice.

### ***Was what the military did genocide?***

There is a definition of genocide in the United Nations convention on genocide, but also there is debate regarding what constitutes genocide and when the term can be applied. It's difficult to ascertain whether the atrocities carried out by the military and the settlers against indigenous peoples of the CHT constitute genocide, but without a doubt what went on is an ethnocide. Having said that, Bangladesh has been trying to have atrocities committed by the Pakistani army against civilians during the liberation war as genocide. If genocide is distinguishable from other crimes of humanity by the motivation behind it and it is not measured by the number of deaths, then the Pakistani army committed genocide against Bangladeshi people and so too the military of Bangladesh against indigenous peoples of the CHT.

### ***Can you tell me a bit more about the continued dispossession of land?***

It has been 25 years since the Accord was signed, but the major provisions have not yet been fully implemented. The government continuously claims that 70-80 percent of the Accord has been implemented, but our position is while some of the provisions have been implemented, the major ones haven't been, such as the land disputes resolution, demilitarisation of the CHT and rehabilitation of the internally displaced persons. The main issue of contestation is our land rights. When we refer to land rights we don't just mean individual land rights, we want our collective land rights too.

Most of our land was dispossessed in the pre-Accord era. Our land was allocated to hundreds of thousands of settler Bengalis that I have mentioned earlier. Thousands of acres of our land was leased to companies and businesses owned and operated by non-residents. The military acquired our land to build and expand cantonments, firing ranges, army camps and other security facilities.

In the post-Accord times, more and more land is being dispossessed in the name of development and tourism. Roads have been constructed without the consent of the residents or paying any compensation to the owners of the land, several tourist resorts and spots have been built by the military after forcibly or illegally acquiring indigenous land dislocating many adjacent villages in those areas.

***What is the focus of your work on the rights of indigenous communities?***

We have our own indigenous traditional governance system in the CHT consisting of three administrative boundaries which are called 'Circles'. As the advisor of one of those Circles, my duties involve advising the Chief of the Circle and traditional leaders regarding any political or development issues that need to be addressed, strategising courses of action and facilitating capacity enhancement of our traditional leaders.

In my capacity as an Indigenous peoples' human rights defender, my work involves bringing national and international attention to rights violation cases, including violence against women; raising awareness on indigenous rights, non-violent movement building, enhancing the capacity of the youth human rights defenders, alliance and network-building between local, and national and international rights and development organisations, among others. I strongly advocate for indigenous peoples right to self-determination. Nothing about us, without us.

***Where would you say the indigenous communities of CHT are currently in terms of reaching your goal of being autonomous?***

We demand that our government fully implement the CHT Accord. We believe that this would be the starting point for protecting indigenous rights in the CHT. As a signatory party of the Accord, it is government's responsibility to fulfil its commitment. Unfortunately, with the passing of each year since 1997, it is becoming apparent that the government lacks the will to implement the Accord. In the meanwhile, under the military occupation in the CHT since the Accord was signed,

application of a divide-and-rule strategy has resulted in the major indigenous people's political party breaking into several factions, so one of the most difficult challenges for indigenous peoples is a unified position on our rights. And while the government has been dragging its feet not to implement the Accord for past 25 years, the percentage of indigenous peoples in the population has come down to only about half in the CHT, where once we constituted above 90 percent. The future looks grim and there is despair among the indigenous population. If the government continues to be reluctant to solve this political problem with political means and instead continues to use military tactics, it is not unlikely that people will resort to violence to defend and protect their rights. I, along with my fellow human rights defenders, still have the hope that this political conflict can still be resolved in a non-violent way, if the government is committed to do the same.

*Image: Sejak Valley, Chittagong Hill Tracts. Credit: Taufiq Ahmed/Flickr.*