

Analysis

Horace in the hills

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KHAGRACHARI, Bangladesh, October 1, 2005—The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh is a troubled place. A great deal of international attention has lately been lavished on the region. The issue is one of the violation of the rights of the indigenous people—there are 11 tribes which are non-Muslim and mostly Mongoloid and largely Buddhist.

At the heart of the problem lies nationalism. In 1971, Bangladesh was born after a bloody civil war as a Bengali nation. Bengali nationalism was largely a spurious one—the majority of the people of Bangladesh are totally unaware of any Bengali identity. The creation of Bangladesh was purely an elite phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the Chakma leaders of the Hill Tracts took fright at our nationalism—understandably so. One nationalism begets another (one is reminded of how French nationalism begot German nationalism). They wanted autonomy, which they were denied.

They resorted to armed insurrection, aided and abetted by India. In 1980, General Zia press-ganged Bengalis from the streets of the cities and settled them in the Hill Tracts. Each "settler" was given 5 acres of khas—government—land. Now, the indigenous people had been using these lands for slash-and-burn cultivation for generations. However, they have no title deeds, so the areas were deemed to be 'government land.'

Both sides committed appalling atrocities (the atrocities of the army and Bengali settlers are heavily documented, that of the indigenous people's army—the Shanti Bahini—hardly receives mention.) Despite military protection, the Shanti Bahini killed 1,054 settlers; reprisals followed.

A peace treaty was finally signed between the JSS (the political arm of the Bahini) and the Awami League government in 1997. It was hailed by the League, the JSS and the international donor community. As one western observer commented: "The accord, by and large, has been accepted by the peoples of the region and by the donor community as well."

Certainly, the peace accord—or treaty, as it is called—has been accepted with enthusiasm by the donors. The people of the Hill Tracts have no illusions about the fact that a gigantic hoax has been played on them. I was there in June, and spoke with the hill people.

The Shanti Bahini has split into two factions. The other faction—the United People's Democratic Front—rejects the peace treaty and both sides are involved in killing and kidnapping each other's members. Things are so bad that the Chakma people I spoke to are terrified of going into new territory in their own hills!

They are also aware that neither the UPDF nor the JSS care for the fate of the hill people whom they claim to represent. Both sides are involved in money-making activity: extortion, kidnapping for ransom. . .

For instance, the road from Khagrachari to Panchari is 24 kilometers long. The first 15 kilometers are smooth—then the potholes and ruts begin. Why? When the road-building project was undertaken by the contractor, it was agreed with the UPDF and JSS that they would get 600,000 takas (around \$10,000) from him as protection money. Work began. Then the two sides came round demanding double the original figure. Work stopped.

Income per capita is declining at Khagrachari, one of the three hill districts and still the most volatile. Extortion is discouraging big businessmen from investing in the region, so there's less money to go around.

The UPDF and the JSS are now little more than criminal organizations. The JSS is part of the government, so receives money from local and foreign sources. My sources claim that the JSS commands very little loyalty—what following it has, has been bought with cash. On the other hand, the UPDF—this may sound bizarre—receives assistance from the national army and the present government! Openly, it claims to be against the government and against the peace treaty. It is, however, very popular, and receives plenty of cash from local hill people. (Their leader, however, prefers to live in the relative safety of the national capital!)

That the UPDF is in cahoots is obvious from the fact that their graffiti is to be found all over Khagrachari—while there are no graffiti of the JSS. But it's the location of the graffiti that's a dead giveaway. These words are painted in red on the wall of the stadium: GIVE US BACK OUR LANDS/STOP VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHT. Inflammatory slogans, but for the fact that the stadium is right next to the Bangladesh Rifles Headquarters' entrance which is heavily guarded 24 hours a day!

The donors seem blissfully oblivious of the fact that they have helped trigger a near-civil-war in the region. It was they who pushed for the treaty, and the Awami League gained kudos for signing it.

What the three groups of actors appear to have had in mind was a peace-that-is-no-peace, to use George Orwell's expression. They calculated that the average hill man and hill woman would go along with whatever arrangements were made. What they didn't reckon on was the emergence of the UPDF and the civil-war-like situation. Five-hundred members of both groups have been murdered since the signing of the peace treaty in 1997.

The parties to the peace treaty knew all along that the treaty could never be implemented, both on legal as well as practical grounds. The treaty calls for a Land Commission which will be the highest court for land disputes in the hill districts. This runs counter to the constitutional provision that the highest court in the land is the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court—to which every citizen has right of access. To take away the right is to unleash corruption and intimidation on the part of the ruling elite among the hill people who will try to acquire land illegally—in addition to being a violation of fundamental rights. Further, the provision that requires the army to be withdrawn will never be accepted by the army for the simple reason that if the army left, the settlers would be killed en masse.

The only possible solution is for the majority—that is, our elite—to renounce nationalism, which is a piece of fiction anyway. The Chakma people I spoke to are happy with the description that "we are all Bangladeshis" and reject the formulation "we are all Bengalis"—which started the trouble in the first place.

However, the genesis of Chakma nationalism—I hesitate to call it Jumma nationalism (Jumma is the collective term for the hill people)—is quite irrational. The Chakmas are the only tribal people in Bangladesh to have felt threatened by Bengali nationalism. There are other indigenous people in other parts of the country—the Santals and Garos, for instance—who have had no nationalist aspirations or fears of the majority. The obvious answer seems to be the fact that the Chakmas are highly educated—more so than the average Bengali. The idea of nationalism was an infection caught by an educated elite, fearful of what majority rule might mean in a democracy. (Under military rule, when Bangladesh was East Pakistan, there was no trouble in the Hill Tracts.) It is interesting to note that similar fears led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

Moreover, the language of the Chakmas is a variant of Bengali—in fact, it is a Bengali dialect closely related to the dialect used by Bengalis in the nearby city of Chittagong. So, when Sheikh Mujib, the first prime minister, told them "We are all Bengalis now," he wasn't completely wrong as far as the Chakmas were concerned. In addition, the 11 tribes are mutually incomprehensible to each other. The majority are Buddhists, but there are Hindus, Christians and animists.

Again, the country has a Buddhist minority spread throughout who have never felt threatened by Bengali nationalism—on the contrary, they even welcomed it, for the original Buddhists are Barua—or Bengali—Buddhists.

The Buddhists who fled from Burma in the late 18th and early 19th centuries settled in the hill tracts—they are the Jumma people—and the southeast of the country. In the latter region, the Rakhine community have shown no tendency towards autonomy.

Also, the Jumma people are very fond of the original settlers—those who came before 1980. In fact, according to my Chakma sources, when the Kaptai Dam was built in Rangamati, more Bengali settlers were displaced than tribal people. The two groups have forged fraternal bonds—and are equally intimidated by the army. (Westerners think that only tribal people were displaced—this is a misguided attempt to locate victim-hood where it doesn't belong.)

It is, therefore, futile to look for "rational" reasons behind the two nationalisms. Nationalism is inherently irrational. For instance, the very education that the Chakmas received—there are quotas for all tribes in every government institution, including the cadet colleges and the army—made them more self-aware. That's ironic.

Again, the hill people refuse to take their grievances over land to the Supreme Court—where they are bound to win. Appealing to the Supreme Court, no doubt, would violate their sense of collective identity, for it would be a recognition of the sovereignty of the Court (they want the Land Commission to be the last authority, remember?). They have, instead, chosen the path of violence.

Furthermore, there is no 'land problem.' The population density of the hill tracts is one-tenth that of the rest of Bangladesh. I saw tin-roofed houses on hills separated by hundreds of yards of forest. There is enough land for everyone, and more. Several kilometers from Panchari lies an impressive Buddhist khyang (monastery). The tallest statue of Buddha is situated there. The grounds of the monastery cover an incredible 50 acres. The fictitious land problem is a convenient garb for nationalism.

Khagrachari is also a place of breathtaking beauty. From my hotel verandah, I have a view of the hills to the west and the plains to the east—and between them the shallow silver of the Chengi river curves, recedes and curves again past the hotel and under the steel bridge. You can see the tough Tripura girls at work under the blistering sun; then taking a bath in the Chengi river dressed in their bright *thabin* and *angi*. You couldn't imagine a more peaceful place—or a less peaceful place. When reading Horace on the verandah, I came across the lines 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' ("It is sweet and glorious to die for one's country") and realized once again the awful truth of Wilfred Owen's observation that it was "the old lie".

What has nationalism—that Franco-German curse—done to these simple people?