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Negotiating with the Other: Centre-Periphery Perceptions, Peacemaking Policies and Pervasive Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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Abstract: Intrastate peace agreements tend to be drafted in situations of political chaos, multiple combatants and shifting allegiances within and between state and non-state actors. Despite this, such agreements continue to reflect a bilateral understanding of conflict, with the state on one side and the non-state on the other. Such an understanding was employed in the largely unsuccessful 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord in Bangladesh. This article argues that the failure of the Accord to secure a durable and lasting peace is due to the mistaken belief by the Bangladeshi government that the conflict was a ‘two sides’ war between the modern Bengali-Muslim state and its ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ periphery. Soon after the Peace Accord was signed it became apparent that the Government of Bangladesh had made a fatal error in assuming that the communities in question were a simple, homogenous and unified group. Rather, the communities of the CHT are a collection of ethnically and ideologically distinct groups. This failure has led to division and competition of local politics in the CHT today, and continued warfare within and between many CHT communities. Violent actors have been polarized by the terms of the peace agreement and jungle warfare continues at great risk and cost to communities.¹

¹ The term ‘Pahari’ is employed in this article to describe all of the Chittagong Hill Tracts communities collectively. Despite a distinct lack of unified identity in the CHT before the 20th century (van Schendel 1992), this term has gained popularity as a term of self-reference for many communities in the CHT, and roughly translates to ‘Hill People’ (Uddin 2010a). The arguably more widely employed term ‘Jumma’ is avoided in this article where possible due to its connotations with the Jumma-Nation building project by ethnic based organizations in the CHT that has been resisted by many Pahari communities and is discussed in-depth below.

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Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) constitute the three districts of Bangladesh (Bandarban, Rangamati, Khagrachari) along the south-eastern borders with Myanmar (Burma) and the Northeast Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura. The Hill Tracts and the dwellers therein are just a small part of a greater mountainous region, ‘Zomia’, extending from Indochina across the Himalayas and into Central Asia (van Schendel 2005). The region is a shatter zone of peoples, languages and cultures that have migrated at different times between larger plains states and more isolated highland settlements (Scott 2009). Historically, the communities of the CHT have been ethnically and culturally distinct from the majority Bengali population to the east, and also from each other. These groups, recognized as eleven distinct tribes today, have greatly divergent languages, religions, histories and social and political structures. These tribes are the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Bawm, Mro, Tanchangya, Chak, Pangkho, Lushai, Khyang and Khumi. The Chakma, Marma and Tripura tribes are the largest, with the Chakma making up about half of the tribal population. There are two major language groups spoken by Pahari communities in the CHT. The first, Sino-Tibetan based languages, are spoken by Chakma, Marma, Tripura and Tanchangya tribes in the form of several ethnic and village-based dialects (Uddin 2008a). The second are Tibeto-Burmese based languages of the Kuki-Chin subgroup spoken in various local dialects by Lushai, Pangkho, Bawm, Mro, Khyang and Khumi communities (Uddin 2010a: 32; Rahman 2011: 350).

Under British colonial rule until 1947, the Hill Tracts were protected from outside influences by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation (1900). The Regulation effectively sealed off the CHT from in-migration of Bengali populations.

With Independence and Partition in 1947, intervention and migration in the Hill Tracts has increased massively. This involved deliberate attempts to create a demographic shift and Bengalize the region in the 1970s and 1980s (Mohaiemen 2010). Between 1972 and 1997 a major insurgency took place in the CHT, involving warfare between the Government of Bangladesh and a number of local insurgent outfits, the largest of which being the PCJSS, which will be discussed in detail below. In 1997 the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed by Abul Hasanat Abdulla on behalf of the Government of Bangladesh, and PCJSS leader Santu Larma, on behalf of the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (UCDP 1997). Within weeks of this signing riots broke out across the Hill Tracts, civil society actors had formed a new political group opposing the Accord and its signatories, and a number of other violent groups had emerged, attacking communities and police and army outposts. At present, sporadic bush-war between insurgent groups, kidnapping, robbery, extortion, riots and communal warfare are common, and the security situation of many communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is dire.

This article employs existing literature on the CHT alongside my own observations and encounters on two field trips to the CHT in 2012. The article is divided into six sections. The first introduces a brief theoretical framework, minimalistic and with a purpose to provide some clarity to the themes that recur throughout. The second briefly discusses some of the research limitations faced in the literature and my own research. The third offers a brief and chronological review of the literature on the CHT. The fourth discusses the scope of the Otherness bias in the Government of Bangladesh's approach to the CHT. The fourth discusses how this bias affected the negotiation of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997. Finally, this article discusses the emergence of new violent actors in the post-Accord period, how this emergence is related to the exclusive and hegemonic nature of the Accord's negotiation, and the outcomes this has had for communities in the CHT. It is established that considering the CHT conflict as 'two sides' conflict was a misunderstanding of the heterogeneous nature of the conflict, and has led to the destabilized and polarized nature of the present 'violent peace' (Chakma & D'Costna 2013: 141) in the CHT today. Briefly, the limitations on the research are also discussed.

Conceptual Framework

This research concerns the interaction and confluence of two concepts in the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts: 'Otherness' and intra-state peacebuilding.

Otherness, concerns the process of ascribing difference between social groups. Otherness as a process is closely related to Orientalism, which focuses on the cultural essences of societies, ascribing singular qualities to them and establishing binary oppositions to them based on such qualities (Said 1979). Through such binary oppositions, the Orient is deemed as 'Other', 'exotic', and different. Such qualities often include anachronistic determinations. Some examples are well illustrated by Scott (2009): 'modern' to 'primitive', 'civilized' to 'barbaric', 'tame' to 'wild', and 'cooked' and 'raw' (Scott 2009). Such anachronistic determinations serve to separate the Other from the viewer in temporal dimensions, usually denoting the Other as pre-historic or 'stone-aged' and the viewer as being present, modern, or having otherwise moved ahead of the Other in time. In anachronistic imaginings, the Other is thus a relic. The Other is ancient, primitive, an item of study as they are frozen in time. Although Orientalism and anachronism are often distinguished from one another by the temporal aspects of anachronism, in practice and for the purposes of this article both concepts are constitutive of each other (see Skaria 1997). Anachronistic determinations are employed as the tools of Orientalism, a phenomenon that can be seen clearly in the works of Abdus Sattar discussed below. These temporal symbols are attached to the Other as a whole, its members and histories (Khalid 2011). In the present case, I argue that such ascriptions influenced the Government of Bangladesh in its peacebuilding policies and negotiations in the CHT, and later such reliance was the undoing of the Peace Accord.

The second issue discussed is intra-state peacebuilding. The majority of conflicts fought today are within states, often between the state itself and belligerent groups within the state (Pearlman & Cunningham 2012: 3; Hartzell & Hoddie 2007: 2). In the post-Cold War era, since 1990, some 50 per cent of civil wars have terminated in peace agreements (Sisk 2004: 248). Intra-state peace agreements involve making and officialising changes to politics in their concerning territories. In negotiating and implementing peace agreements, processes of participatory politics, empowerment and democratization are formalised between negotiating parties, usually between a government and an insurgent group or representatives of that group. This often occurs through reserving seats and offices in political institutions, affirmative action policies and reparations or repatriation agreements. "Such arrangements provide a means for power sharing which gives the non-dominant/minority

population group a degree of control over its affairs and enables it to protect itself against potential abuse and discrimination by the state or the dominant group/majority within that state” (Boltjes 2007: 5). However, other groups often feel marginalized, disempowered and insecure in the politics of peace building. These groups are often those who were actively excluded from the negotiation process, and thus had less bargaining power and less of a voice in shaping their political futures and ability to participate in the post-conflict political landscape. Such agreements, as this article argues, are often influenced by these Orientalist and anachronistic imaginings of peripheries and belligerent groups.

In a broader sense than the case at hand, I argue that the tendency to create ‘Others’ at the state’s periphery involves anachronistic and Orientalist simplifications of often complex and heterogeneous groups and situations. When intra-state peacebuilding attempts approach such conceptualizations critical errors can be made regarding the nature of conflicts and the actors involved. As is discussed below in the Chittagong Hill Tracts case study, peacebuilders utilizing the Otherness bias tend to overlook critical complexities such as subcultural loyalties, multiple or overlapping identities, intra-communal competition and violence, and breakaway factions within the ‘Other’.

Research Limitations

Although this research has attempted to synthesize as much data as is available regarding the Chittagong Hill Tracts, utilizing personal fieldwork experience wherever possible, there are a number of limitations this research cannot overcome. First of all, scholarship on the CHT is relatively scarce and the scholarship that has been published is sourced from a handful of scholars, research bodies and politically active organizations. Anthropological interest in the CHT has concentrated on dichotomies between Bengali norms and a simplified conceptualization of Pahari culture (see Uddin 2010a; Mohaiemen 2010; Uddin 2008a; Adnan 2008; van Schendel 2002; Ahmed 1993; van Schendel 1992; Jahangir 1986). Relatively none of this literature is concerned with specific communities within the CHT, and less so with smaller communities - those that are not the Chakma, Marma or Tripura. None of the literature thus far has focused on how such a limited conceptualization of identities and politics in the CHT has impacted peacebuilding in the region. This research seeks to fill that gap.

Literature Review

Historical perspectives of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are rare, due to the relative isolation of the region, and risks posed to researchers in terms of violence, kidnapping, robbery and extortion, landslides, malaria, snakes and tigers. Schendel (1992) and Schendel (2002) give an in-depth history of the CHT, citing early European texts and accounts of the CHT such as Buchanan (1791, 1797, 1798), Lewin (1869, 1870), Hutchinson (1906) and Mills (1927, 1931). Schendel (1992) argues that the inhabitants of the CHT did not share a ‘traditional’ sense of unity, but were nevertheless ecologically and socio-culturally isolated from the Bengali communities in the plains to the east. In the new Bangladeshi state Pahari members were a minority and stood out ethnically, linguistically and physically. Policies of exploitation and discrimination escalated into communal warfare. Along with this resistance came a growing sense of difference and defiance of the Bengali identity, encouraging the emergence of Pahari insurgent groups, most notably the PCJSS, and the emergence of a ‘Jumma Nationhood’ amongst some of the Pahari communities, overwhelmingly amongst the Chakma members that dominated the PCJSS across all of its ranks.

Schendel (2002) explores concepts of nudity and moral norms in the CHT through the eyes of outsiders - Bengalis and colonial settlers. Schendel discusses how these concepts shaped an Orientalist and anachronistic attitude towards the CHT. This attitude was employed by missionaries, governments and later development specialists in approaching the Hill Tracts and the dwellers therein as ‘indigenous’, ‘primitive’, in need of protection and preservation. When employing the Orientalist and outsiders lens described in Schendel (2002), some trends in the literature are visible. The literature is shaped around Orientalist and outsiders attitudes in several evolving and overlapping stages, being stages of protection; development; political and ethnic integration and securitization; and recent expansion of literature, especially post-colonial debates, marginalization debates, and gender consideration.

Protection

Much of the literature produced between 1860 and 1947 is concerned with protecting the cultural heritage of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Some sources such as the CHT Regulation (1900) and the CHT Manual (Provisional India Act, 1935) are government policy documents specifically deeming the CHT as a protected area, where non-Pahari people could not enter or reside without permission from a District Commissioner (CHT Regulation, 1900: Rule 52).

Development

During the Pakistani and Bangladesh period, the policies and political infrastructure that had protected the CHT from in-migration and maintained a culturally distinct zone from greater Bengal and Assam were dismantled. In this period development projects took place in the CHT at great cost to Hills Tribes, documented well in Sopher, D. E. (1963). Sopher describes the massive uprooting of mostly Chakma Communities with the building of the Kaptai Dam and subsequent inundation of Rangamati town. This focus on development extended well into the early Bangladesh period, with the majority of the literature concerned with infrastructure development in the CHT (Subrahmanyam, K. 1972; anonymous, 1978; Kazi, M. 1980).

Political and Ethnic integration and Securitization

Between 1979 and 1981, the Bangladeshi state encouraged ethnic and political integration of the CHT through a massive “Bengalization” project involving settling some half-a-million Bengali plains people in the Hills (CHT Commission 2000). The literature from this period reflects such a political and ethnic integration rhetoric. Islam (1981) makes first mention of ‘integration’, detailing an integration crisis between the Bengali centre and the Pahari periphery. Islam argues that upheaval in the CHT is related to the failed attempts to ethnically integrate the CHT into Bengali society, and this failure has caused violent resistance. Ahsan et. al. (1989) and Ahmed (1993) also both concentrate on the CHT crisis as a failure of ethnic and political integration, indicating not only a continued focus on ethnic and political integration in the literature, but a continued failure of the Bangladeshi state to address these issues. Political and ethnic integration is also a focus of many reports throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Zaman, 1982; anonymous, 1987; anonymous, 1991; Islam, 1997). Literature in this period is concerned with the need to integrate and secure the CHT, and also recognition of the failure to do so and the harm caused to communities in the earlier integration attempts.

Expansion of literature

Since the 1997 Accord the literature has considerably expanded, especially following the easing of entry restrictions in 2008. Much of the literature has suggested the CHT conflict is located in a context of post-colonial state-building where ethnocide is a tool employed in building a

homogenous Bengali nation, and also an inevitability of the nation construction project (Levene, 1999; Chakma, B. 2010). Texts concerning Bengali-Pahari relations and ethnic integration continue to appear, however these texts revisit and restate earlier arguments from the 1980s literature, especially scoping conflict in cultural and ethnic difference between Bengali and Pahari people (Karim, 1998; Adnan, 2008; Chowdhury, 2008; Uddin, 2010; Rahman, 2010). Gender has also been considered in the new wave of CHT literature, Chakma, M. K. (2010) and Mohaiemen, N. (2010) both consider gendered perspectives of the CHT conflict, and employ interviews with female community members, an approach neglected in previous literature. The post-Accord scholarship has also included minority tribe perspectives, with Uddin, M. A. (2013) and Uddin, N (2008) discussing and giving voice to Khumi tribal members. The term ‘Pahari’ also appears in the post-Accord literature.

None of the literature has considered the outcomes of the Otherness bias on the CHT conflict, how Orientalism and anachronism as processes have affected approaches to peacebuilding in the CHT. This article seeks to fill that gap.

The Modern/Primitive Divide, the PCJSS and the (Un)representative Politics of Insurgency

Bangladeshi imaginings of the Chittagong Hill Tracts before and during the insurgency were dominated by concepts of the uncivilized, savage, and primitive periphery as a contrast to the modern and Islamic state. Such an ideology is demonstrated clearly in the works of Abdus Sattar, an influential writer on tribal affairs in the 1970s. Sattar describes the Hills Tribes, broadly and indiscriminately, as ‘pre-civilized’, ‘aggressive’, ‘simple’ (Sattar 1975: 4-7), and ‘man in his raw form’ (Sattar 1971: 4). Perceptions of ‘nakedness’ often constructed by ethnographers and scholars were also a common theme, even an obsession (van Schendel 1992). This stagnant and primitive conception of Pahari communities contrasted with Bengali Muslim norms and ideals of decency. A paternal attitude was adopted by Pakistani and later Bangladeshi administrations. Pahari communities are referred to as ‘our tribes’ (van Schendel 1992: 103), a reference I have heard myself while in Bandarban district in 2012.

From the perspective of the Bangladeshi state the CHT conflict was a collision of the modern, Bengali Muslim

centre with the savage, primitive and naked periphery. Anachronistic imaginings and a paternal attitude led to misplaced conceptions of local politics in the CHT; views of a unified Pahari identity in the CHT, and misguided attempts at a negotiated peace with the totem of this identity, the PCJSS. These attempts were misguided in three ways, firstly, the PCJSS did not in represent the collective communities of the CHT.

Despite the assumption that the PCJSS represented the collective communities of the CHT, during and since the insurgency many communities separated themselves from the PCJSS and many other insurgent outfits competed with and fought against the PCJSS. Smaller ethnic groups and communities had disconnected from the PCJSS cause for autonomy and a ‘Jumma nation’ from early on (Chowdhury 2008). One *karbari* (local headman) of a Khumi village states:

‘We, even, don’t have any connection with JSS [PCJSS] movement let alone SB [Shanti Bahini] activities. There are three reasons why we don’t have any relationship with the JSS activities. These are (1) the activists of the movement led by Chakma or Marma don’t come to our village to mobilise us because we live too far from the town, and it is too mountainous for them to move easily and frequently, (2) we can’t communicate with them as we can’t speak Chakma and they can’t speak Khumi language and (3) we hardly understand the politics of CHT and state.

(Quoted in Uddin 2008b: 47)

Secondly the ‘Jumma’ nation-building project pursued by the elites of the PCJSS had served only to highlight the dominance of larger tribes in the organization (Raidang 2010: 219; Aminuzzaman 2005: 18; Rashiduzzaman 1998: 661). It was these groups, the Chakmas and Marmas predominantly that led the push for a ‘Jumma Nation’ (van Schendel 1992: 121), often at the expense of smaller ethnic groups and communities. Such a unified Jumma identity in the CHT had always been resisted by many smaller ethnic groups and communities, especially the Mro, Pangkhua and Khumi communities. Rather, these groups preferred to maintain their own distinct community identities, separate to the Chakma dominated Jumma identity pushed by the PCJSS (Chowdhury 2008). Despite the lack of involvement of many smaller tribal groups and communities with the PCJSS, Bangladeshi imaginings of the PCJSS as active in such communities dominated counterinsurgency operations. Tanchangya members complained about much disruption during the insurgency due to suspicions of their involvement with the Shanti Bahini. In 1978 and 1980, several Tanchangya villages were searched by the Bangladeshi army in efforts to curb the Shanti Bahini movement ((Raidang 2010: 227).

Thirdly, a number of insurgent groups also existed before, during, and since the Accord’s negotiation that competed with and often fought against the PCJSS and Shanti Bahini. One such group, the Mro Bahini has represented the interests of the Mro tribe since the 1980s (CHT Commission 2000: 28; IWGIA 2012: 23). This group was formed to protect Mro tribal interests, which the PCJSS had sought to distance itself from due to their small numbers and the tribe’s apparent disinterest in the Jumma nationalist leanings of the PCJSS (van Schendel 2002: 370). The Mro Bahini fought an extended conflict with the Shanti Bahini throughout the 1980s, and opposed any peace accord involving the PCJSS for fear that they would be discriminated against under its hegemonic Chakma leadership (CHT Commission 2000: 28). Another Pahari insurgent group, the Jumma National Army, carried out sporadic attacks on communities in Rangamati and Khagrachari districts at the time of the Accord’s signing. This group also opposed the Accord and the PCJSS as its signatories (Rashiduzzaman 1998: 661).

Finally, even within the PCJSS itself cohesion and unity was a myth. A number of divisions and ideological disagreements that highlight the heterogeneous dynamic of the insurgency took place during the insurgency and since the signing of the Accord. The Priti group broke away from the PCJSS in 1983 under the leadership of Priti Kumar Chakma, ultimately assassinating the PCJSS leader at the time, Manobendra Larma, and surrendering in exchange for amnesty to the GoB in 1985. Since the Accord, the PCJSS has been divided several more times. Most notably, the United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF), the most vocal and the largest Pahari anti-Accord movement, was formed in December 1998 from several excluded civil society groups and disgruntled members of the PCJSS itself. Another group, the ‘JSS Reformist’ group has emerged out of the PCJSS more recently, calling for a revisit of the Accord’s terms and a hurried implementation process (Rahman 2011: 103).

It is clear from the fractured nature of the CHT political landscape, and from fracturing within the PCJSS itself, that the PCJSS was not as broadly representative of insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as the Bangladeshi Government had assumed. A number of insurgent groups existing before, during and have emerged after the signing of the Accord to attest to the heterogeneous nature of the conflict. This realisation has occurred in the post-accord period though, with the disintegration of the insurgency along ethnic and ideological lines. Discussed below, early signs of resistance to the exclusive negotiation process between the PCJSS and the GoB were a precursor to this disintegration of the insurgency, and indicated resistance

to the negotiation process during and in the immediate period after the Accord's signing.

The Negotiation

The Bangladeshi administration approached resolutions to the conflict in the CHT along two paths. The first was economic and development incentives, where conflict and insurgency in the CHT was viewed as a response to poor infrastructure, high unemployment and poor development indicators in the CHT. However, such approaches were often perceived as serving the needs of Bengali settlers and the military rather than directly approaching Pahari grievances (Anonymous 1978). In the 1980s, under the leadership of General Ershad, the CHT was declared a 'special economic zone' in 1983 with an aim to bring further development to the CHT (Chowdhury 2006: 45; Jamil & Panday 2008). Quotas for Pahari employment were drawn, and new negotiations between the government and insurgents were attempted (Chowdhury 2008).

The second path involved direct negotiations with the PCJSS. Ershad's government sought a negotiated peace with the PCJSS partially as a response to international donor pressure, and a need to establish legitimacy as a military government. In 1985 negotiations took place with a breakaway faction of the PCJSS, the 'Priti' group, named after Priti Kumar Chakma, the leader of the splinter group. Although some 300 insurgents surrendered through negotiations during the period, the large-scale insurgency continued. Peace attempts were revisited in 1992, after the fall of the Ershad regime and democratic election of the Awami League government. A ceasefire was arranged from 1992 through 1996, allowing renewed peace negotiations in 1996 under the leadership of newly elected Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Chowdhury 2006: 45). Negotiations of the Peace Accord took place from October 1996, with the establishment of the National Committee on the CHT (Jamil & Panday 2008). The first meeting between the PCJSS and the commission took place in December 1996, and negotiations concluded with signing the Peace Accord on December 2 1997 (Dictaan-Bang 2004: 8).

The negotiation of the CHT Accord throughout 1996 and 1997 was an exclusive process, and reflected the Bangladeshi state's perspective of the conflict as being between the PCJSS as a unified front and the state of Bangladesh (Mohsin 2003: 53; Khan 2001: 48). Ignorance of the multi-faceted nature of the conflict and competition within and between insurgent groups and communities

led the Bangladeshi government to negotiate solely with the PCJSS. Strangely, lessons of the fragility within the PCJSS and competition between insurgent groups were not heeded from the Priti group negotiations in 1985. Negotiations proceeded with no outsider involvement. A number of civil society groups representing Pahari interests were excluded from negotiations, including the Pahari Gono Parishad (PGP / Hill Peoples Council), the Pahari Chatra Parishad (PCP / Hill Students' Council), and Hill Women's Federation (HWF) (Chowdhury 2002: 28). At no stage during the negotiation were civil society groups consulted or included in any way (Mohsin 2003: 15). Relying on the perception that the PCJSS alone represented Pahari grievances was a fatal flaw in the Bangladeshi states drafting and negotiation of peace. As a result of this reliance on the PCJSS alone, a number of factions within the PCJSS and in the wider political landscape of the CHT were dissatisfied with the Accord and its process even before its signing.

Those excluded from negotiations have questioned the validity of these negotiations, and the validity of the Accord this negotiation process produced. Although the PCJSS had assumed the responsibilities of representing the interests of all of the CHT communities during negotiations, many of these communities were in conflict with the PCJSS and had distanced themselves from the Jumma nationalism propelled by the organization. The fact that the PCJSS was negotiating on behalf of all of the communities of the CHT was inconsistent with the preference of many Pahari groups to be self-representative and defend their own interests. Some of these groups, such as the Mro Bahini and Jumma National Army, had been at war with the PCJSS and Shanti Bahini during the insurgency. Other groups have emerged from the PCJSS itself that oppose the signatories to the Accord. Civil society groups such as the Hill Peoples Council, the Hill Students' Council, and Hill Women's Federation were also excluded from the negotiation process (Chowdhury 2002: 28). These organizations have been critical of the PCJSS as a Pahari representative group and of the Accord itself (ibid).

During the surrender of Shanti Bahini arms to the GoB on 10 February 1998, anti-Accord activists from civil society organizations – the Hill Peoples Council, Hill Students' Council and Hill Women's Federation demonstrated stern opposition to the Accord and its signatories, waving black flags, chanting slogans and displaying banners denouncing the Accord during the ceremony at Khagrachari Stadium (CHT Commission 2000: 21). Outside the ceremony, an effigy of Santu Larma, signatory of the Accord and president of the PCJSS, was burned (ibid). During a second surrender ceremony on 16 February

1998, protests reached a point where the ceremony had to shut down at risk of a riot (ibid). Members of several organizations feared a ‘selling out’ of the autonomy movement through the Accord, and many smaller ethnic groups and communities feared a hegemonic takeover of the CHT along the Chakma elite lines that dominated the PCJSS (Mohsin 2003: 53). Many of these groups united to form the United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF), the largest and most vocal anti-accordist group, which is at war with the PCJSS over this perceived ‘selling out’. Discussed below, the aftermath of the exclusive nature of negotiations, which were rooted in simplistic notions of a unified ‘Other’ at the periphery of the Bengali centre, has been a resurgence of violence in the CHT with the emergence of new violent actors who are often polarised by the terms of the Accord.

Emergence of New Violent Actors in the Post-Accord Era

Since the 1997 Accord there has been a proliferation of armed groups in the CHT. Some larger groups, such as the United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF) and Jana Sanghati Samhiti Reformist Group (JSS Reformist) have emerged as a response to the hegemonic and exclusive nature of the Accord and its political manifestations. Many others appear to have emerged as opportunistic criminal organizations and gangs in the unsure post-Accord period, some harbouring genuine or cosmetic political ideologies and aspirations, and some purely economically motivated. In response, the Bangladeshi army has maintained a visible presence in day-to-day life in the CHT. This presence has been associated with a number of human rights violations, targeting of Pahari individuals and communities and sexual violence. There have also been claims that the army works alongside a number of new violent actors and raids communities. This has had profound effects on the acceptance of and resistance to the Accord. The existence of new violent groups and army presence has perpetuated criticism of the Accord and its failure, which in turn strengthens violent actors who rally around resistance. This encourages a militarized response, which further encourages criticism of the failure of the Accord.

The 1997 Accord immediately divided ranks amongst Pahari autonomy groups. The Hill People’s Council (HPC), the Hill Students’ Council (HSC) and Hill Women’s Federation (HWF) split along pro-Accordist and anti-Accordist lines. One faction supporting the PCJSS and the Accord, and the other declaring the Accord inadequate

and announcing their continued fight for ‘full autonomy’ (CHT Commission 2000: 20). These activists formed the United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF) on 26 December 1998 during a two-day conference jointly organized by the HPC, HSC and HWF (ibid). The UPDF today is the largest and most outspoken critic of the Peace Accord. The numbers within its ranks are unclear, and the degree of control it holds over its cadres is also not known, however the organization has coordinated large-scale operations throughout the CHT in recent years. Multiple roadblocks arranged by the UPDF have shut down many towns and larger cities in the CHT (Daily Star 2011). The organization is known for regular violent skirmishes with police, the army and the PCJSS, and is suspected of targeting PCJSS members for kidnapping and assassination. The UPDF also maintains a website promoting its anti-Accord stance. Overall, the UPDF views the Accord as a ‘sell out’ of the autonomy movement, and is vocally critical of the dominance of the PCJSS in negotiations and in the post-Accord politics of the three Hill Districts (CHT Commission 2000).

A number of smaller groups have also emerged in the post-Accord era often claiming to be anti-Accordist, pro-Accordist or in some way representative of the interests of Pahari communities. Some of these newly emergent groups include the JSS Reformist group – a splinter group from the PCJSS, as well as smaller movements including the Jum National Army, the ‘Borkha Party’ in Khagrachari, and various unidentified criminal groups active in Rangamati and Bandarban districts (Mohsin 2003; Rashiduzzaman 1998). In 2004 and 2005, reports of the Burmese group Rohingya Solidarity Organization conducting training and trading drugs and arms in Bandarban also emerged (IWGIA 2012: 26). The UPDF and JSS Reformist groups have also been active in bringing arms into the CHT from neighbouring Mizoram (CHT News Service 2013). There has also been a proliferation of organized violent Bengali groups such as the *Somo Adikhar Andolon* (Movement for Equal Rights), a group formed in 2001 representing Bengali interests, described as ‘a conglomerate of extreme communal forces’ (Chowdhury 2010: 68). A number of these groups are exclusively criminal profiteers with little involvement in the autonomy movement, or who employ cosmetic autonomy support to justify and maintain violent activities and power. A number of groups, especially the *Somo Adikhar Andolon*, are communal vigilantes (Mohaiemen 2010).

The emergence of new violent actors in the post-Accord era has had serious consequences on human security for a number of communities in the CHT. Extortion has become a pervasive issue for travellers and communities in the

region affecting business and trade, access to services, and the necessities of day-to-day life. A CHT Development Board Report stated that between 2006 and 2009, just under 25% of Pahari households had faced extortion, compared to 8% of Bengali households (CHTDF 2009: 163). Extortion is not new to the CHT, however, it appears from statements made by smaller ethnic and community members that extortion of these communities is on the rise and has taken on new dynamics. Interviews with Pangkhua community members, a small ethnic group residing in Rangamati and Bandarban Hill Districts, is telling of this recent phenomenon. Pangkhua members claim that the security situation in their community had become worse since the Accord (Raidang 2010: 228). Members said that before the Accord they paid tax only to one group, the PCJSS, and were able to negotiate the terms of payment. However, in the post-Accord period new groups have emerged and the Pangkhua are taxed by several of these groups concurrently (ibid). As ‘Solaiman’ described in one interview:

‘Now there is no Shanti Bahini, but there are many groups now. Some come and ask for money on a weekly or monthly basis; no fixed amount; it can be 40, 50, 100, even 500 Taka. Others are pure robbers. They will stop your boat and snatch everything. The Pahari call them Gundus. Even they are afraid of the Gundus. I was going to Maizchari last week for selling some papaya. They stopped me on the way and looted the money and most of the fruits. Then there are some who favour of the Peace Accord and there are others who hate it. Before there was just one Shanti Bahini, now there are so many other Bahinis [forces]. How can you live, earn a livelihood and conduct business, if you can not [sic] move freely, talk to people openly and deal with other business people? [If there is] no safety, then no business, no progress. (Khan 2001: 42)

Throughout the CHT conflict extortion of small communities was commonplace, as the Shanti Bahini utilized illegal taxes and intimidation to maintain its income and control over the region (Khan 2001: 42; Raidang 2010: 228). However, since the Accord’s signing in 1997 extortion and violent intimidation of small and isolated communities has changed. Previously, small communities almost exclusively paid taxes and tribute to the Shanti Bahini. Today single villages are often targeted by a number of different groups, extorting money, kidnapping wealthier individuals and community leaders, and taxing travellers on isolated transport routes (Khan 2001; Raidang 2010). This is an outcome of the decentralization of violence in the post-Accord CHT. The oligopoly of violence held by the Shanti Bahini and Bangladeshi army has been replaced by a number of competing violent criminal groups who tax and exploit travellers and isolated communities

concurrently (Rahman 2011: 103-104). These groups include the UPDF and the JSS Reformist group, as well as smaller movements including the Jum National Army, the Borkha Party, and various unidentified criminal groups active in Rangamati and Bandarban districts (Mohsin 2003; Rashiduzzaman 1998). In the post-Accord era, extortion and intimidation by these groups from several directions has become a significant form of insecurity (Khan 2004: 42; Raidang 2010: 228).

The emergence of these new violent actors has impacted livelihoods, as told by Solaiman, as individuals cannot move freely, talk openly and conduct business. Related to this, 46% of Pahari and 38% of Bengali households have reported they do not feel safe travelling outside their own communities (CHTDF 2009: 163). The safety of individuals, their rights and their lives are threatened by the existence of these new violent groups.

Curiously, these violent actors tend to target smaller and isolated ethnic groups and communities more than larger groups or larger towns. Post-Accord organized crime and violent attacks almost exclusively take place in and target smaller and isolated communities (Rahman 2011: 105; Raidang 2010; 216). Research by UNPO has identified several violent attacks, kidnappings and acts of extortion taking place in Khagrachari and Rangamati Districts of the CHT in January 2013. Of 11 incidents reported, all incidents took place in small and isolated communities, with none in major towns or cities (UNPO 2013). Over half of the incidents involved minority or smaller ethnic groups, in particular Tripura communities in Khagrachari district. This pattern correlates with reports of toll collection by unidentified armed groups on isolated roads in Rangamati reported by Mohsin (2003: 67). These groups have also been rumoured to be working with Burmese rebel groups in Bandarban Hill District to collect illegal tolls and taxes (ibid; IWGIA 2012: 24). Though the cases were restricted to reports from Khagrachari and Rangamati hill districts, they correlate with a pattern of criminal activities in and around smaller ethnic groups and communities, whether that is directly within their villages and townships, or on isolated transport routes nearby.

Alongside the emergence and expansion of violent actors, drug use and abuse in the CHT has also expanded in the post-Accord era, especially among Pahari youths (Mohsin 2003: 68). Hill Women’s Federation activists have reported that drug use before the Accord was limited to a few paramilitary groups with ties to the Bangladeshi army, referred to as ‘Mukosh Bahini’ (CHT Commission 2000: 26). A proposed reason for this is that during the insurgency Pahari youths had some sense of direction stemming from

membership to a larger Pahari cause, however with the failure of the Accord, at least from the Pahari perspective, these youths have found empowerment and refuge in drugs and small arms, contributing to crime throughout the region (Mohsin 2003: 68). For smaller communities, the growth in drug use in the CHT not only presents a risk to human security itself, but also provides a profitable market for the violent criminal gangs who threaten and extort travellers and communities. The drug problem appears to be both an outcome of unstable post-Accord political situation, and a contributing factor to it as it provides gangs with an income and with new, young members.

Military Presence

The proliferation of decentralized insurgency and organized crime in the CHT has warranted a continued military presence, despite agreement in the Peace Accord to dismantle and remove most of the military bases in the region. Some scholars and activists have gone so far as to claim that much of the crime and insurgency in the CHT is encouraged by the military to justify this continued presence (PCJSS 2013; IWGIA 2012: 14; Mohsin 2003). This military presence has been a source of insecurity for many Pahari groups, especially those smaller ethnic groups and communities who are less able to defend their interests and rights in the present CHT political landscape. The presence of army personnel in the CHT has been associated with high rates of sexual violence and harassment, accusations of imprisonment without charge and detainment, and accusations of torture. A meta-analysis by the IWGIA in 2012 found that between 2004 and 2012 a total of 1487 human rights violations were committed by the army in the CHT. Of these, there were fourteen deaths, two reported instances of rape, sixteen attempted rapes, eighty-five instances of harassment and 374 instances of torture, as well as a large number of looting, beating, desecration and eviction claims (IWGIA 2012: 15). The army has also been accused of having ties to local violent criminal gangs, including the '*Borkha Party*', a group involved in extortion and violent attacks on local schools and Pahari communities in the isolated Laxmachari Para area of Khagrachari Hill District (ibid: 24).

Military personnel have been directly and indirectly involved in sexual assaults and incidents of rape of Pahari women (Chakma 2010: 80; Halim 2010: 183; Uddin 2008a). In several attacks on Pahari communities by Bengali settlers, claims have been made that the

army sat idle and even encouraged sexual assaults of Pahari women (IWGIA 2012). In one particular case, the 'Mahalchari Incident' on August 26 2003, witnesses claimed that the army actively took part in attacks on Pahari civilians throughout the south of the Khagrachari Hill District. Bangladeshi soldiers are accused of standing idle and taking part while a dozen instances of rape occurred and 350 Pahari houses were burned during the attack (UNPO 2003; IWGIA 2012: 25-26). In another incident in Bandarban district, after a serious sexual assault involving a murder by Bangladeshi soldiers, villagers could not seek assistance because the village is isolated and lacks means to access legal and political assistance and representation (Raidang 2010: 236). Other similar incidents have also occurred at Baghaichari and Ramgarh (IWGIA 2012). Interviews by Raidang (2010) indicate that 43% of interviewed participants believe that since the Accord, cases of violence against women have increased, and 29% strongly believe the situation for women has become worse (Raidang 2010: 236).

The continued presence of the army in the CHT brings with it significant risks to human security. The military presence has been associated with pervasive threats to rights, safety and lives of individuals and small communities. The army has tortured, harassed, evicted and been involved in the deaths of many Pahari community members. The army has also been accused of allowing gross human rights violations and violence to occur, in incidents including but not limited to Mahalchari, Baghaichari and Ramgarh (IWGIA 2012: 25-30). Women and girls are especially at risk, due to high rates of sexual violence, assault and rape associated with this presence. With little representation in the CHT institutions such as the HDCs and Regional Councils, these groups have fewer mechanisms to voice the insecurities brought by the military presence. With the marginalization of women from smaller ethnic groups and communities in the Regional Council, as discussed in Chapter Two, insecurities faced by women in small ethnic groups and communities, such as the threat of sexual assault, rarely reach regional or even district level political recognition (Dewan 2010: 190).

Criticism of the Accord

Criticism of the Accord from the Pahari perspective takes two popular forms. The first is its lack of implementation. The PCJSS, in the seventeen years since the signing has become the largest and loudest critic of the lack of implementation (Panday 2009: 1064). Insecurity in the

CHT is considered by the PCJSS and its supporters to be an outcome of this non-implementation (PCJSS 2013: 6). The PCJSS has gone so far as to claim that the GoB has sabotaged the implementation process and formed the UPDF to continue oppression of Pahari communities and lawlessness, to justify the continued military operations in the CHT (PCJSS 2013: 7). These operations include ‘Operation Uttaran’, which has been described as a ‘violent peace’ (Chakma & D’Costa 2013: 141).

The second popular criticism is of the Accord itself. The JSS reformist group and the UPDF both loudly oppose the Accord. Members of the UPDF call the agreement a ‘surrender’ and claim that the PCJSS leadership is not representative of the ‘downtrodden masses’ (UPDF Manifesto; CHT Commission 2000: 21). The JSS Reformist is critical of both the unimplemented status of the Accord and recognize the emergence of new organizations as platforms for Pahari grievances (Rahman 2011: 103). With instability associated with the unimplemented Accord, the UPDF and the JSS Reformist groups have gained much popularity in recent years (*ibid*).

Whether opposed to its lacklustre implementation, or opposed to negotiations with the GoB altogether, criticism of the Accord is a focal point of the resurgence of violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Accord has become a polarizing issue in local politics, with violent clashes between pro-Accord and anti-Accord groups giving rise to a small-scale arms race groups threatening to destabilize the region. There is associated crime attached to these new violent actors and other small-scale criminal groups that have emerged as protectors, vigilantes, and opportunists in the instability. The military, through Operation Uttaran, aims to bring some sort of stability to the region, whether that be overall or just for the protection of Bengali settlers is a matter of opinion. This confluence of criticism of the Accord, new violent actors and the continued presence of the Bangladeshi army is discussed below.

Confluence of Factors: The Violent Peace in the CHT Today

The emergence of new violent actors in the post-Accord era, as well as the continued presence of the Bangladeshi army in the Hill Tracts as a response has encouraged skepticism of the Accord and suspicion of its intentions. The civil society actors who so vehemently opposed the Accord since its drafting have witnessed the region become more unstable since its signing. As crime and violence escalate between anti-Accordist and pro-Accordist groups, between the army and new and old

insurgent outfits, and between and within communities, the Accord is seen as less and less effective. Alongside criticism of its lack of effectiveness and inability to bring a durable peace and stability to the region, criticism of the lack of implementation of much of the Accord justifies perceptions that the Government of Bangladesh has no intentions of seeing the clauses of the Accord realized.

The emergence of new violent actors, the continued presence of the Bangladeshi army, and continued criticism of the Accord from civil society has had a self-perpetuating effect on the post-Accord political landscape. On the one hand, criticism of the Accord has encouraged and popularized new violent actors such as the UPDF and JSS Reformist, who employ dissatisfaction with the Accord as a rallying tool for new and idealistic cadres. The emergence of such new violent actors has also encouraged the continued presence of the army as a response. On the other, the proliferation of these new violent groups, the resulting crime and extortion and the continued presence of the Bangladeshi army as a response has led to continued criticism of the Accord as a failure to bring peace and stability to the region. In this manner, criticism of the Accord justifies violence and continued insurgency, and this continued violence and insurgency justifies criticism of the Accord.

Conclusion

The tendency to create ‘Others’ at the state’s periphery involves anachronistic and Orientalist simplifications of often complex and heterogeneous groups and situations. When peacebuilding attempts approach such conceptualizations critical errors can be made regarding the nature of conflicts and the actors involved. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, one non-state actor in particular, the PCJSS, was considered to be a representative and unified player in a decades long struggle for autonomy. To its detriment, the Government of Bangladesh relied on its own theories of the CHT as a simple conflict, a unified front and a case of the modern Islamic Bangladeshi state contesting and taming a primitive and savage periphery. The outcomes of this error have been serious for peace in the CHT and for the control the Government of Bangladesh is attempting to maintain along its porous eastern border. What was once seen as a unified push for Pahari autonomy has only been revealed to be fractured, factioned and unstable in its subsequent disintegration. New violent actors have emerged, the military continues to be visibly present and involved in the day-to-day lives of communities and individuals,

and for many the Accord is considered as corrupted and failed. For the ‘Others’ of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the eighteen years since the Accord’s signing have proven to be anything but simple, homogenous or tame.

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Bionotes

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