

The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland

*by Willem van Schendel, Wolfgang Mey
& Aditya Kumar Dewan*

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland is a pictorial introduction to and also a historical account of the region lying in the southeastern part of Bangladesh, which is home to about eleven different communities. Spanning over a period of more than 100 years, i.e., from 1860-1970, the book is divided into twenty thematic chapters and a conclusion with four maps and more than 400 mostly unpublished photographs. The book provides its reader with a visual and written account of a region much unknown to the outside world. Using photographs mostly taken by the colonial administrators (both British and Pakistani), tourists, anthropologists, some locals, and private collections of the elites of the region the authors have attempted to construct an alternative history of the Hills focusing on the ruled instead of the rulers, their lives, religions, economies, modes of communications and cultures.

The first three chapters set the tone of the book with the authors emphasizing and highlighting the need for and importance of writing alternative history that would weave the people and their lives into the domain of history writing. The need for injecting gender and class into this exercise is also highlighted. Photographs have been chosen as the mode of history construction to provide the reader with a visual account of the evolution and changes, which took place in the lives of the Hill people as well as perceptions of the outsiders towards the people and the region over a span of more than 100 years. The four maps dating from the sixteenth century till the 1960s lay out the political boundaries of the region from the pre colonial period well up to the Pakistan period.

Chapters four to eight dwell with the political history of the region. It may also be termed as the elite's history. The chapters essentially deal with the British annexation of the region and creation of a separate district of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in 1860. The photographs concentrate on the

local leaders, the chiefs and headmen, and also how the colonial powers constructed a local aristocracy by choosing a few. Three administrative circles were carved out and three chiefs- the Chakma, Bohmang and Mong- were given recognition by the British. This marginalized the other local chiefs. The photographs give a vivid account of this construction through changes in their attires, attitudes and display of power. It is also interesting to see how with the creation of Pakistan the clothes of the aristocracy especially of the Chakmas changed from dhotis to western trousers, the former being associated with Hindus and the latter being considered as more neutral.

The next three chapters (9-11) are an account of the lives and cultures of the Hill people as captured by the camera. The Hills and the people living in it have been depicted as innocent and full of charm. The photographs also demonstrate the sharp contrasts in cultures, the differences in the interpretations of sexuality and nudity between the Hill people and the outsiders, both British and the Pakistanis. What was natural for the Hill people became unnatural, immoral and erotic with the colonial encounters. The photographs show the covering up of the Hill women and the gradual total reinvention of their dresses. The photographs also depict the destruction of their land through invasions on jhum (slash and burn), forests and the construction of a reservoir in Kaptai, in the name of modernity, development and nation-building. Chapters twelve to fourteen talk of the religions of the people and the missionary activities therein. Religions in the Hills were of two types, community religions and universalistic religions. Many photographs were taken by the missionaries for private collections, as well for showing their constituencies in Britain in order to procure funds. The missionaries were frustrated, because only in few areas people took to Christianity, while in others some converted to Christianity but soon they quickly reverted back to their own religions. Missionaries took to social and welfare activities. They opened schools where lessons were given in Bangla. Hospitals were also opened by them.

Chapter fifteen takes the reader to the development endeavours of the Pakistan state. The state projected the Hill people as 'primitive' 'nomads' and anti-'development'. The Karnaphulli paper mill, the Kaptai project, forest

development projects in the Hills were marked by the total exclusion of the Hill people. The CHT was also projected as a tourist resort. The pictures show the in-migration of Bengalis and westerners for the implementation of the projects and the destruction of the local habitat, ecology and the adverse impact upon the local people of these endeavours. The next two chapters (16-17), provides the outsiders more specifically the tourists with useful information about the modes of communication in the Hills. It also talks of the sense of adventure, freedom and thrill that the land and its terrain provide to the visitors. This adventurism has been well recorded by the outsiders through their writings as well as camera. The two chapters quite powerfully bring this out. Chapter eighteen focuses on the lifestyles of the elites of CHT. The British continued with their own styles, though initially they had made some experiments at adoptions of local styles. The Chakma elite adopted the styles of the Bengali Hindu elite while the Marmas took the Burmese styles. The elites interacted socially through sports and games. Soccer, hunting became popular with the elites.

Chapters nineteen and twenty examine the photographs and portraits. The photographs and portraits of the common people show their uneasiness at the encounters. The camera captured the power equations between the locals and outsiders quite well. The elements of awkwardness, dejection, rejection and also anger are well reflected in their expressions. The personal portraits of the elites are, however a different story. These depict their grandeur and power. The concluding chapter highlights the limits of the state-centric 'nationalist' history of Bangladesh, which has been dominated by the contest between the "Bengali nationhood" and the "emancipation of the Muslim". This narrative effectively excludes the history of the non-Bengali non-Muslim population of Bangladesh. This perhaps would lead one to better understand the Hill peoples revolt in the 1970s and their subsequent struggle for Jumma nationhood.

The book undoubtedly is of immense importance for the students of politics, history and culture. Its most critical intervention however lies as posited by the authors themselves in de centering the nationalist history of Bangladesh. The photographic images forcefully makes one aware that Bangladesh is not a land of Bangla speaking

people alone. It also demonstrates the hegemonic and exclusivist nature of 'nation', that has denied this space and recognition to the Hill people. Also and perhaps significantly enough for the sub nationalist forces it demonstrates the inadequacy and to a large extent inappropriateness of using the category of 'nation' as a unifying factor. The photographs clearly reveal the differences and variations in the lives, cultures, religions, economies and histories among the Hill people. The Chakma elite had adopted Bengali dresses and established marriage linkages with the Bengali elites, while the Marma elite had looked towards Burma. These variations, one will expect the newly formed political bodies in the Hills to take into consideration as and when they chart their future in the Hills.

The photographs also to a certain extent demonstrate the resilience and non-passivity of the Hill people. The Mro women's reluctance to pose for nude photographs show their awareness of the differences in the interpretations of nudity between their people and the outsiders. The Hill people's resistance to change their religion is also demonstrative of the strength of their beliefs.

The weakest point of the book and perhaps this method of historiography lie in its inability to determine how representative it is of people. The photographs show the adoptions and adaptations that the local common people have made to their cultures, especially in the context of women's attires. But how far those have been done out of one's own volition remain untold in the photographs. The photographs do not speak of the common peoples aspirations, struggles and their negotiations with life. Camera, being the main tool in this mode of history construction also tells something very telling. Historiography, here will remain the tool of the rich elite and the middle class. This makes the authors position of constructing alternative history quite partial. The book remains a colonial construction of Hill people's history as was captured through the eyes of their cameras. The authors claim that some of the photographs were taken by the locals as such those are representative of the local peoples imaginations really does not make it much of a peoples history. As pointed out earlier the possession of the camera itself or the ability to take photographs in the studio, especially in the context of Hill people does bring in the class

dimension very strongly. The dominance of the Western approach to history and state construction becomes most pronounced in the chapter on mapping, where the first map dated about 1550, shows the region as having no name. The authors describe this as “ It did not have a special name then; it was simply a section of the hill country linking India and Burma (p: 21). The reader is left to wonder if this was a nameless land or did its inhabitants have a name (may be not special) for the land they inhabited!

The above notwithstanding the book is a delightful reading and is an important contribution to the literature on Bangladesh and its pluralist reality. The authors indeed deserve our congratulations for the efforts put into procuring the rather rare photographs and then putting a language into them. It sure will go a long way in igniting the imaginations of the Bangladesh people.

*Reviewed by Dr. Amena Mohsin
Professor of International Relations University of
Dhaka, Dhaka.*