IDENTITY, POLITICS AND HEGEMONY:
The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts [CHT] Peace Accord signed between the government of Bangladesh and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Shonghoti Samity [PCJSS, The United Peoples Party of CHT] in December 1997, has once again brought to the fore the politics of hegemony inherent within the very discourse of identity construction. The construction of political identities, however, is a necessary corollary of the process of modern state building. This takes place both without and within the state. While the former is understandable the latter requires an understanding of the dynamics and politics of modern state. This process is naturally divisive as well as hegemonic. The construction of one identity denotes the separation of the group/community from the other. In the context of the modern state based as it is on the nationalist discourse that is inextricably biased towards the dominant/majority community it results in the hegemony of the dominant identity over the weaker ones. A natural consequence or continuation of the above is the formulation of rationales and development models by the state that alienates as well as marginalises the weaker communities. Consequently at a certain period the weaker communities come to adopt the rhetorics and politics of the former in the form of construction as well as assertion of new politicised identities for themselves. In this construction ‘nation’ or ‘nationalism’ is viewed as a libertarian and counter-hegemonic force; whereas in actuality it entraps human beings within the same divisive and hegemonic groove, due to the discourse’s inherent bias towards the majority/dominant community. The construction of Jumma identity and nationalism for the Hill people of Bangladesh by the PCJSS and the denial of the same by the Bangladesh state within the garb of Bengali as well as Bangladeshi nationalism is an instance of this.

The article is divided into two sections. The first examines in brief the process of identity construction within the state of Bangladesh and the consequent alienation of the Hill people; in the second section the Hill people’s response to the above and the hegemonism and divisiveness inherent within the same is discussed.
I. The Hegemony of Bengali/Bangladeshi Nationalism

The Bangladesh state was predicated on the idea of Bengali nationalism. This was later incorporated into the constitution as one of the state principles. During the constitutional debates, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh defined Bengali nationalism as encompassing Bengal’s culture, Bengal’s heritage, its land and above all the sacrifices made by the Bengalis. Article 9 of the constitution defined Bengali nationalism to be based on Bengali culture and language. The above formulation indeed was a hegemonic one. Bangladesh is home to about 45 different ethnic communities. They have their own languages; cultures, histories and more importantly many of them had participated and made sacrifices for the liberation of Bangladesh. Bengali nationalism, as defined by the Father of the nation and the constitution of Bangladesh denied the above. The state also undertook to promote the Bengali language and culture. Through Article 3 Part 1 of the constitution Bengali was adopted as the state language and Article 6 Part 1 declared that the citizens of Bangladesh were to be known as Bengalis.

The Hill people of CHT rejected this hegemonic imposition. Manobendra Narayan Larma, their representative in the national parliament refused to endorse the constitution and walked out in protest of the above. Quite categorically he pointed out in the parliament that the Hill people would never accept the imposition and they could never become Bengalis. Larma’s contentions were unacceptable to the Bengali nationalist elite. It is interesting to note here that Bengali nationalism with its emphasis on Bengali language and culture was constructed by the Bengali politicians to counter the hegemony of Pakistani nationalism. The same was now being used to impose the hegemony of the Bengalis over the non-Bengali population of the state. During his first (and last) ever visit to Rangamati in the CHT in 1973, Mujib urged upon the Hill people to become Bengalis.

The attempts at Bengalisation alienated the Hill people and Larma formed the PCJSS in 1972, a political platform that demanded autonomy for the Hill people within the state of Bangladesh. Among other things, the PCJSS also demanded constitutional recognition of the cultural distinctiveness of the Hill people. Subsequently, a military wing, the Shanti Bahini [SB] was added to the PCJSS.

Following political changes in 1975 the country moved from Bengali to Bangladeshi nationalism. The shift marked an increasing emphasis on Islam, the religion of the majority community, in the state discourse and policies. For instance,
secularism one of the state principles was dropped from the constitution and was substituted by the principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah. The ban on religious political parties was also withdrawn. Under this construction Bengali language and culture retained their primacy with religion being added. The non-Bengali population of Bangladesh many of whom are non-Muslims thereby became marginalized both in ethnic and religious terms. It also alienated the Bengali Hindu population of the state.

The above constructions have not only alienated the non-Bengali and non-Muslim population of the state, but has made the Bengali polity more polarised and more violent. It is important to point out here that this divide along Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism is in fact a contest for hegemony among mainstream political forces in Bangladesh. The Hill people, however, responded to the above hegemonic constructions through the construction of a nationalist discourse and a national identity for themselves, which again is hegemonic, divisive and alienating. The following will make this clear.

II. The Hegemony of Jumma Nationalism

By the mid-70s the PCJSS started an armed insurgency in the CHT and since the mid-80s the party has been referring to the Hill people as the ‘Jumma nation’. The PCJSS maintained that Jumma nationalism could satisfy the aspirations of self-identity and autonomy of the Hill people within the state of Bangladesh. The above position is disputed here by examining the contours of Jumma nationalism and its problematics at the thematic level.

a. Contours of Jumma Nationalism

(i) The word Jumma has its origins in jhum, which has been the traditional mode of cultivation of the Hill people. It was used pejoratively by Bengalis to denote the Hill people as primitive and backward farmers. The state (British as well as Pakistan) also had made repeated attempts to put a stop to jhum cultivation as it was considered to be backward, primitive and non-profitable. But for the Hill people jhum constituted not only a mode of cultivation, but also a way of life. It was integral to their religious, social and cultural ethos. The PCJSS therefore invoked this particular nomenclature to infuse the Hill people with a sense of pride in their past, their traditional system and values, which have been the objects of repeated onslaughts by outsiders. It was also a means for the PCJSS to recreate images among the Hill people of their simple and harmonious past, which according to them has been shattered due to exploitations by
outsiders. This nostalgia for the past, on the one hand creates images of 'outsiders' and 'insiders' among the Hill people (thereby *nationalising* people), and on the other provides them with a sense of continuity and unity.

(ii) Jhum also denotes the special relationship of the Hill people to their land. It introduces a territorial dimension in this construction, which assumes that the Hill Tracts had traditionally been the land of the Jummas or the Hill people and needs to be protected from non-Jummas or outsiders. The possession of this homeland became a core element in this construction of a shared identity.⁵

(iii) An important element of Jumma nationalism is its emphasis on the separateness or distinctiveness of the Hill people from Bengalis. In this context, according to the PCJSS jhum denotes the economic separateness of the Hill people from the plainland Bengalis. Since 90 per cent of the land in the Hill Tracts constitutes of hilly land, so jhum is still the dominant mode of cultivation among the Hill people. This mode is not only completely different from plough cultivation, which is practiced in the plains, but is also totally absent in the latter parts. This the PCJSS holds not only sets the Hill people apart from Bengalis, but also creates among the former a common attitude towards life and its values.⁶

(iv) In this construction they also emphasise upon and highlight their cultural separateness from Bengalis. In linguistic terms they emphasise the fact that Bengali is not their mother tongue. In religious terms they stress that Islam is not their religion. In this endeavour, the PCJSS made extensive use of the negative stereotype images of Bengalis prevalent among the Hill people. Its circulations on the one hand depicted the Bengalis as rapists, killers, torturers and land-grabbers; and on the other emphasised upon the unity and harmonious relations prevalent among the Hill people in the past.⁷ Apart from this one also observes the emergence of a fiery pattern of literature among a certain section of the Hill people. The following poem by Kabita Chakma, a young local poet, is an instance:

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Why shall I not resist!
Can they do whatever they please...
Turn settlements into barren land
dense forests into deserts
mornings into evening
turn fertile into barren.
Why shall I not resist!
Can they do whatever they please...
Estrange us from the land of our birth
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enslave our women,
blind our vision
put an end to creation.
Neglect and humiliation cause anger
the blood surges through my veins
breaking barriers at every stroke,
the fury of youth pierces the sea of consciousness.
-------- I become my whole self ... why shall I not resist.\(^8\)

The call to become one's whole self and to resist the oppressor is clearly indicative of the fiery counter-hegemonic thrust of the Jumma nationalist discourse.

In April 1996 the Jumma Peoples Resource Center in Australia (a Hill students network) started a magazine in the Chakma language - *Jumpada* - to revive among the Hill people their own culture in their own written language which most of them today do not know. The Hill people have also constructed martyrdoms at different places in the Hill Tracts to commemorate the killings of the Hill people by Bengalis.\(^9\) These constructions draw the lines between Bengalis and the Hill people where the former emerges as the oppressor and exploiter and the latter as the victim.

(v) Above everything else, the PCJSS maintained that the shared experiences of deprivation and exploitation and the struggle of the Hill people against Bengalis have created an awareness among the Hill people that they share a unique historical past. This has instilled in them a common bondage and feeling of oneness.

The above factors according to the PCJSS justified its claim for a separate Jumma national identity for the Hill people, as their distinctiveness and identity were threatened by Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism. The assertion about the threat to Hill peoples separate identity is indeed true, but problems exist with the adequacy or ability of the idea of Jumma nationhood itself to satisfy the identity quest of the Hill people. The following will make it clear.

**b. Problematics of Jumma Nationalism**

It is posited here that the perceived hegemony of the ‘Bengali’ state appears to be the main strength of Jumma nationalism, but is also paradoxically its major weakness. This is for two reasons. To begin with, the Hill people do not constitute a homogenous community; instead they are divided into thirteen different ethnic groups.\(^10\) As such they lack the common cultural denominators viz., common language, religion, culture, history and so on that may mark them off as a single cultural entity as claimed by the
The Hill people however have shared a common administration since the British colonial period. But in this context one can point out that Bengalis have also experienced British colonialism, though the form of administration varied in their respective cases. However both the Bengalis and the Hill people were part of the Pakistani administrative system. In this light even the factor of a common administration looses much of its salience as a contributing element towards their claim for single nationhood. Thus in view of the absence of any internal cohesive factor among the Hill people one may question the viability and capability of the above construction to keep the Hill people united once Bengali rule was removed. The divisions among the Hill people are becoming louder in the post-accord situation with politics being polarized in the Hills between the pro-accord and anti-accord groups.

At another level one may even raise the more fundamental question i.e., in view of the existence of thirteen different ethnic groups in the Hill Tracts, how far does the idea of a Jumma nation indeed do away with the threat and fear of hegemony? It is true that the overwhelming majority of the Hill people supported the PCJSS’s demand for autonomy in the Hill Tracts. But this agreement ended when it came to the issue of identifying themselves as one Jumma nation. Members of the different groups, more specifically the Marmas and Tripuras argued that Jumma is a Chakma word and since the PCJSS is overwhelmingly a Chakma dominated institution, so there existed the very real fear of Chakma hegemony in this construction itself. They therefore, preferred to identify themselves with their own generic names like Marma or Tripura, instead of being identified as a group. However in the eventuality of such a need they preferred to be called Paharees (Hill people) or Upajatis (Tribal) instead of Jumma. It is important to note here that both Paharee and Upajati are Bengali words commonly used by the Bengalis to denote their separateness from the Hill population of the state. The preference of the Hill groups for Bengali nomenclatures to a Chakma one is indicative of the internal divisions prevalent among the Hill people. It also suggests that for the smaller groups of the Hill Tracts little difference exists between the ideas of Bengali/Bangladeshi nation and Jumma nation, as from their perspective both are hegemonic constructions, one of the Bengalis and the latter of the Chakmas. More importantly, it reveals that the Hill people do not perceive themselves as constituting a single nation.

There is also lack of consensus among the educated section of the Hill people, including the Chakmas themselves about the appropriateness and suitability of the term Jumma itself to describe the Hill people. They pointed out that Bengalis gave the above appellation to them. It was a calling name used pejoratively to denote them as backward
and primitive farmers. According to them jhum is an occupational category which could not form the basis of identity of a people. They further maintained that the term was more accusatory than descriptive. It conjures up images of primitivism and nomadism about the Hill people in the minds of outsiders. Such conjurations they believe is harmful for them, more so for they have long been categorised as a backward and primitive people by outsiders.

Apart from the above, one may also point out that the emphasis of the PCJSS upon the unity and harmonious relations of the different Hill groups in the past is a fictitious one. Mackenzie's and Lewin's accounts tell us of the warfare prevalent among the different Hill groups. Lewin informs us that:

None of the hill tribes appear to have any general term for all the hill dwellers.13

Proshanta Tripura an eminent anthropologist from among the Hill people has described this as following:

Earlier, each of the 'hill tribes' had their own way of designating ethnic boundaries. For example, the Tripuras used the expression "Wanjwi Shikam" which literally means "Bengalis and Kukis", to mean "other People". From this it may be concluded that the Tripuras in the past felt no closer affinity to the "Kukis" than they did to the Bengalis.14

A review of the Hill people's literature also suggests that divisions and contradictions exist among the Hill people. The literature of the PCJSS and its front organisations bore the message of anger and revolt against oppression. While the general literature emphasises upon the principles of humanism, peace, tolerance and harmony in the present context15 It is also important to point out here that Jumpada is being written in the Chakma language. This not only draws the lines between the Bengalis and the Hill people, but also among the Hill people themselves, i.e., between the Chakmas and the non-Chakmas, thereby giving credibility to the allegation that Jumma nationalism is essentially biased towards the Chakmas - the majority/dominant group - in the HTs.

The above reveals the problems of this construction at the conceptual or thematic level.

At this point one may also point out that by invoking the notion of 'nation' itself to liberate the Hill people from Bengali hegemony and colonialism the PCJSS itself took recourse to a form of colonialism and hegemonism. It is posited here that the invocation
of this particular concept reinforces the colonial constructions and segregations of human societies into 'tribes' and 'nations' as representing lower and higher stages of human evolution. It also demonstrates the inability or the total colonisation of human mind that has made it impossible for it to think independently in terms of categories other than nations.\textsuperscript{16}

Here one also has to be mindful that the notion of 'nation', as invoked by the PCJSS was quite alien to the ordinary Hill people. There does not appear to be an equivalent term for the word in their vocabularies, so it essentially remained a borrowed and alien concept.

Conclusion

The CHT Peace Accord did not recognize the Hill people as Jumma nation, rather the CHT has been recognised as a \textit{tribal inhabited area}. It is important to note here that the land not the people have gained more salience here. While it is true that with this recognition the Hill people have gained limited autonomy, but one has to keep in perspective that there are tribal people in the plains as well who live along with the Bengalis; hence none of the plain land may be categorized as tribal inhabited area, so the government cannot be compelled to bestow the same recognition to any other area. Though the plain land ethnic communities are also marginalized. Thus the hegemony of \textit{nation} over \textit{tribes} has been reasserted. But this is not the end of the story. The polarization and violence associated with this politics of hegemony continues to take its toll on the common people. While the Bengalis remain divided and violently polarized along Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism; the Hill people too have become divided and violently polarized between the pro and anti-accord groups. The anti-accord group has vowed to carry on the movement of the \textit{Jumma nation}.

Indeed it is time for us to ponder over the artificiality and destructiveness of these constructions and move towards a humane society. As early as in 1916 Rabindranath Tagore had pointed out how the ‘Nation of the West’ is different from India’s experience:

Through all the fights and intrigues and deceptions of her earlier history India had remained aloof. Because her homes, her fields, her temples of worship, her schools … her village self-government … all these truly belonged to her. But her thrones were not her concern. They passed over her head like clouds, now tinged with purple gorgeousness, now black with the heart of thunder. Often they brought devastations in their
wake, but they were like catastrophes of nature whose traces are soon forgotten. But this time it was different … This time it was the Nation of the West driving its tentacles of machinery deep down into the soil … We had known the hordes of Mughals and Pathans who invaded India, but we had known them as human races, with their own religions and customs, likes and dislikes … we had never known them as a nation. We loved and hated them as occasions arose; we fought for them and against them, talked with them in a language which was theirs as well as our own, and guided the destiny of the Empire in which we had our active share. But this time we had to deal, not with kings, not with human races, but with a nation … we, who are no nation ourselves. Now let us from own experience answer the question, what is this nation?

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose.17

The problem therefore lies with the way a population is being organized within the state. The idea of nation being the hallmark of this organization has robbed the life and soul out of this state. It has turned into an instrument of hegemony and dominance. It is therefore imperative to reconstitute and reconstruct a society that would nurture and respect diversity instead of homogeneity. It is time that states seek allegiance on the basis of citizenship not nationalism or nationhood. Within this formulation the different ethnic communities within a state would retain their cultural distinctiveness and this would be constitutionally recognized as well. At the same time they would remain citizens of the same state. This reformulation, it is submitted here would open up the space for an open, tolerant and non-hegemonic society.

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Notes & References:


2 *Parliament Debates* 1972, Govt. of Bangladesh. p. 20.

3 *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh*, 1972, Govt. of Bangladesh. p.5.


7 See writings of the Hill people in JSS published magazines like *Keokradang, Boi Sabi, Radar, and Satellite* etc.


10 These groups are: Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuras, Mros, Tanchangya, Riangs, Bawms, Pangkhoas, Chaks, Kheyangs, Khumis, Kukis, Lushais.

11 The local inhabitants commonly expressed the above apprehension to the author during her visits to the HT in 1993 and again in 1994. It is also important to note that in the 1996 elections the Swami League candidates had won from all the three constituencies in the CHT. This despite the fact that the PCJSS had put up independent candidates for the elections. The party however maintained (interview with the author) that the Awami League had promised a political solution to the issue, that is why the people wanted to give them a chance, as it was evident that it was going to form the government.


15 This observation is based on my personal review of Hill people’s literature for over a period of four years. For this, I had chosen three magazines representing the JSS views viz, *Keokradang, Radar and Satellite*. I had chosen two magazines, the *Kheyang* and *Giri Nirjhor*, which publish
writings of the general people. Shugata Chakma, a prominent poet of the HT had suggested to
the author (17.9.93) that it is time for the authors to preach humanism instead of nationalism.

16 Ashis Nandy. 1989. “Shamans, Savages and the Wilderness: On the Audibility of Dissent and

17 Shwatendra Roy (ed). 1988. Rabindranather Chintajagat: Shwdeshchinta (Thoughts of