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Intergroup relations in Bangladesh: The Marginalization of the Indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of southern Bangladesh has long been called home by thirteen ethnic groups that the state labels as "tribal". Despite their distinct linguistic, cultural, and social traditions, these communities have faced systematic marginalization and identity denial under various successive state regimes. Hence, the aim of this paper is to analyze and explore the processes of statemaking in Bangladesh which centers around territorial control, nation building, and the imposition of a single national identity- the Bengali identity. Furthermore, the paper strives to draw down the repercussions these policies have in terms of exclusion and the disenfranchisement of the tribal people of Bangladesh. Therefore, through the evaluation of historical context, policies, and inter-group dynamics this paper aims to address the research question, to what extent does the Bangladesh government politicise the inter-group dynamics between the Bengali settlers and the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts to achieve a single national identity narrative. Hence, the thesis statement is that the marginalization of the indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is a result of the state's nation-building and sovereignty-driven approach to build a unified Bengali identity and maintain control over the region, which has led to the exclusion of indigenous communities and their struggles for recognition and rights.

Literature review and Methodology

This paper is motivated by existing literature regarding the politicization of ethnic differences as a means of statemaking and Nation-Building. Hence, the paper utilises and draws

upon relevant arguments which are supported by scholars such as Anthony D Smith, Benedict Anderson, Mara Loveman, Ernest Gellner as well as scholars such as those cited in the International Crisis Group (ICG) reports on Myanmar Theory of Nation-Building. These works will provide various theories and frameworks to help ease the nuances of such an intricate issue within state making. Essentially, it will frame the marginalization of the tribes in Chittagong as part of the broader pattern of exclusionary state-making, identity politics and post colonial governance.

Smith (2013) provides theories on statemaking and nation building which displays the theoretical foundation necessary for the analysis of how states often impose homogenous national identities, marginalizing minority groups simultaneously. His work will help analyze Bangladesh's tactics and efforts to integrate the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) into the framework of a singular national identity. Benedict Andersen's concepts of nations as "imagined political communities" will also provide a parallel outlook into the mechanisms behind Bangladesh's need to construct a national identity.

Moreover, chapters from Loveman (2013) will provide a comparative analysis by drawing upon similar cases as those in Latin America. However, in this aspect i will delve into the theory that government bodies can adopt a versatile range of policies to implement a strong national identity. In this context, Loveman delves into the role of census taking in the exclusion of minority groups while aiming to create certain national identities. Similarly, on the notion of comparative analysis, scholars such as those cited in the International Crisis Group (ICG) reports on Myanmar will provide parallels to Bangladesh's treatments of the tribal people in Chittagong. Essentially, these include the exclusion of the Rohingya during the 2014 census in Myanmar, as well as Buddhist nationalism and state-driven marginalization of ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

Context

The Chittagong region mainly consists of three hill districts called Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Banderban. Within these areas live the main tribal groups known as Chakma, Marma, and Tripura. These groups have their own distinct identity in terms of linguistic, culture, race, religion, social traditions, politico administration, as well as geography. The people within these groups are also phenotypically different from the majority Bengali population in Bangladesh. They possess features similar to those of northeast India, Myanmar, and Thailand. Conclusively, because they identity as Sino-Tibetan descent originating from Mongoloid groups. Similar to being different compared to the Bengalis, the indigenous groups themselves also vary on certain spheres. For instance, The Chakmas are fluent in a language that stems from Khemer scripts. The Marmas speak the Burmese language of Arakanese. The Tripuras are fluent in their own language which holds similarity to Kachari. In the context of differences, these indigenous communities are also distinct in terms of religion. The Chakmas, Marmas, Tachangyas, Chaks, and Khayangs are Buddhists; The Pankhus, Lushais, and Banjogis are Christians; The Tripuras and the Rhiangs are Hindus. Essentially none of these groups assume the identity of being muslim, similar to the majority Bengalis in the country. Ultimately, these groups have differing social norms, daily rituals in terms of life, death, as well as marriage, along with agricultural and cultivation practices.

Therefore the hill tracts and its people have been their own distinct entity for years now. In fact, during the British colonial rule in the 1900s, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, also formally known as the Hill Tracts Manual labelled the region as a “completely excluded zone”. The area was administered independent from the areas of East Bengal and Assam. Therefore, such a classification essentially restricted any form of non-indigenous settlement and promoted the idea of preserving local autonomy. Hence, it provided the outlook and narrative that the colonial administration viewed Chittagong and its people as politically and culturally distinct from the whole of Bengal.

However, as the partition of the subcontinent, India took place in 1947, Chittagong was included within Pakistan despite its structure as a predominantly non-Muslim population. Under the Pakistani rule, the indigenous people harbored great resentment against the said government. Within this administration, devastating impacts were made upon the cultures and livelihoods of the indigenous communities of the hill tracts. For instance, in the 1950s, the Kaptai Dam was established. The construction and placement of this dam displaced over 100,000 indigenous people. Predominantly, the Chakmas were displaced. In fact, over 50% of Chakmas lost what they had previously called home. To make matters worse, after the construction the government had no urgency or want to rehabilitate or provide any form of compensation to those displaced. As a result, a large proportion of the people in hopes of rebuilding their lives immigrated to India's state of Arunachal Pradesh. However, till date they are labeled as stateless because they are unable to obtain Indian citizenship. On the home front, this acted as an awakening for the Indigenous and indicated toward the insecurity that came with being the minority. Hence, in response the Indigenous students of Chittagong in the late 1960s established themselves as the Pahari Chattra Samity or otherwise known as the Hill Students Society to voice their demands and concerns. The then government of Pakistan viewed this as a security threat stemming from communist ideologies.

Soon after this incident, the war in East Pakistan broke out and Bangladesh was eventually created in 1971. After the birth of Bangladesh, the marginalisation of the ethnic groups of Chittagong only worsened, and transformed into a complete ethnocide. The new government disregarded the colonial enacted protective efforts for Chittagong. An era of intensified marginalization broke out. So much so that from that time frame till today the government adopted an exclusionary nationalist framework which defines all citizens of the country as "Bengali" in the constitution. Therefore, in legal terms the legal framework within the foundations of the country does not include the identities of the indigenous groups. Hence, from this stage forward the state's nation-building efforts prioritized the integration of the indigenous into a singular Bengali national identity and set up the platform for decades of violence, exclusion, and conflict.

Findings and Analysis

The state making process in Bangladesh, in accordance with the indigenous identity was done through a series of selective government policies. These policies ranged from concepts of nation building and identity imposition to militarization and governance. On the attempt at identity imposition, the government as previously mentioned has deliberately exempted indigenous identity from the formal definition of citizens codified in the constitution of 1972. Specifically it was coded within Article 6, Part 1. On similar grounds, Article 3, Part 1 of the 1972 constitution also declared Bengali/Bangla as the official state language of the nation. Therefore, Both these articles aimed to, if not successfully then at least attempted to, create a homogenous society which established the ethnically Bengali people and Bangla-speaking people as the first class citizens of the nation. Moreover, this also aligns with Anthony D Smith's argument that the modern state often seeks to "force a common cultural identity by erasing differences" to legitimize its sovereignty (Smith 2013).

Similarly, on grounds to erase cultural and linguistic differences, policies framed around land and resources also play a major role. The government encouraged and orchestrated a strategy which aimed to migrate Bengalis within Chittagong Hill Tracts. This was essentially a policy structured at the gradual eradication of indigenous communities via demographic changes. In fact, in reality post independence, when the indigenous were demanding regional autonomy, the then prime minister, Sheikh Mujib Rahman threatened their existence by settling thousands of Bengalis in Chittagong. Hence, from an initial standpoint, the leaders of the country have had a hostile and fearful reaction towards the existence of a non-Bengali identity in the nation. This threat eventually materialised and the post-mujib governments pursued this plan of settlements strenuously. To make this initiative as successful as possible, the government also offered

incentives to Bengali families in return for moving to Chittagong. These incentives revolved around generous amounts of hilly lands, paddy lands, as well as mixed lands. Therefore, the ethnic makeup of this area has changed to a great extent in recent times.

This attitude towards the indigenous has also led to heavy militarization in certain areas of Chittagong. The primary intention of this action was to subdue resistance movements militarily. Parallely, this also established an iron clad control over the area. In fact, the presence of the military ensured that policy pursuits similar to the force settlement act were enacted successfully. In the course of the country, military presence was particularly strong during the military regimes of Hossain M. Ershad from 1982 to 1990, as well as the Ziaur Rahman regime from 1971 to 1975 (International 2021). In those time periods about 115,000 military personnels were present in the region (Levene, 1999). In fact, analyst D.P. Barua characterised the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a ‘vast military camp’ (Barua, 2001). Military presence was not only on the streets but present within developments and civil administrations. However, the government to a lot of extent, portrayed such schemes as beneficial to the hill tracts on an external viewpoint. For instance, the military regime of Ziaur Rahman inaugurated and established the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDP). This, as the name suggests, was an initiative meant to uplift the socio-economic status of the region. However, this was established simultaneously why military presence was enhanced. Therefore, essentially it was a facade meant to distract the outside world from what was actually happening. This board in reality acted as a source of funding for the armed forces to carry out anti-insurgency measures. In the era of Ershad this only worsened into illegal and unlawful acts of torture, rape, detention, killings, and disappearances.

Comparative Analysis

The marginalization of the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts contributes to the broader patterns observed within other post-colonial states. These are states were nation building efforts have similarly marginalized certain groups in the name of a unified and singular national identity. For instance, examples from contemporary Latin America and Myanmar reveal similar shared strategies pertaining to exclusion. These strategies include the use of census taking, cultural erasure as well as land policies. In her chapter Mara Loveman writes that "Census-making played a critical role in shaping the imagined boundaries of the national community" while also excluding indigenous and Afro-descent communities from the imagined identity. Bangladesh had also similarly refused to formally identify and recognise the indigenous identities under the formal state definition of citizens which exclusively states a Bengali-Muslim framework. Therefore, even though the tactic was different the end goal is the same.

Likewise, Myanmar's treatment towards the Rohingya minorities also provided a similar and almost stark parallel. According to the 2014 ICG report, the Myanmar census also acted as a demographic tool meant to weaponize differences for a "necessary exclusion"(Yangon 2014). In fact, in the case of Myanmar it was discernible because the state explicitly refused the Rohingya population the right to self identity. Instead, they were labelled as "illegal Bengali immigrants" rather than citizens. According to the ICG report this "inflamed ethnic divisions, as well as tensions and deepened the sense of statelessness among the Rohingya population"(Yangon 2014). This approach was similar to the approach adopted in Bangladesh which included the settlement of Bengali migrants. Both demographic strategies in Myanmar and Bangladesh reflect the intentional and calculated attempt to consolidate state power and control by marginalizing those who are perceived as incompatible with the national identity.

Militarization on certain land masses is another commonality between Bangladesh and Myanmar. According to the ICG, the military in Myanmar has utilized force to suppress resistance from ethnic minorities as well as gain desired census results in contested areas. To such an extent that it is characterised by carious international bodies as ethnic genocide. Even though the level of severity is not comparable to that of Myanmar, the Bangladesh military also played an imperative role as an instrument of state power to enforce settler policies and suppress indigenous communities. This to a lot of extent also reflects the unlikeliness of ceasefire agreements in Myanmar, where peace processes have been undermined by the state's unwillingness to grant valuable autonomy to ethnic groups.

Cultural erasure is another tactic often taken advantage of in such situations. In Myanmar, the state has promoted a dominant Buddhist identity narrative that sidelines all non-Burman practices. The ICG notes that, "the state uses education and media to propagate a singular national narrative, further marginalizing ethnic minorities"(Yangon 2014). In a similar context, pertaining to Latin America, Mara Loveman also mentions in her chapter that a singular national identity is imposed through education and census classifications, which essentially "worked to erase indigenous languages and traditions from public life"(Loveman 2013). In Bangladesh the dominance of Bengali culture and language within schools and media propagate an exact hidden agenda. Hence, indigenous languages, traditions, and cultures are actively being subdued and suppressed.

Last but not least, Myanmar and Latin America have showcased the limitations of peace agreements and reforms within this particular issue pertaining statemaking. In Myanmar the ICG notes that "ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed groups have often failed to address underlying grievances, leading to cycles of renewed conflict"(Yangon 2014). Similarly, Loveman

also observes that reforms in Latin America have continuously "failed to dismantle the structural inequalities embedded in state institutions"(Loveman 2013). These draw similarities to the 1997 Peace Accord in Chittagong (International 2021). This accord was criticised for its failure to address the origin of the issue, as well as the lack of overall implementation. Therefore, such instances demand the need and necessity of addressing structural inequalities that have been prevalent for decades. Moreover, It underscores the importance of involving minorities within governance in order to attain valuable reconciliation.

Why in Bangladesh?

Marginalization of ethnic minorities in colonized countries of the Global South occurs due to a combination of historical, socio-political and structural factors. Factors that are similarly rooted within the legacy of colonialism, as well as the hardships of post-colonial nation building. These dynamics are often exacerbated by global power structures and global inequalities that direct and construct the trajectories of these nations.

Colonialism has always strived and prospered on the legacies of divide and rule policies. Therefore, colonial administrations have almost often if not always fostered deliberate ethnic divisions to efficiently rule. It is a popular trend seen within history where the colonizer categorizes populations based on ethnicity, race and/or religion. Hence, they institutionalize hierarchies that benefit certain groups over the other. For instance, in the case of South Asia the British excluded and/or included certain designated areas for indigenous and tribal people, such as the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Therefore, the colonial legacy creates a foundation where Chittagong is viewed as a peripheral and contested space. Hence, this in itself

divides populations that are not meant to be divided and henceforth leaves an everlasting crack within post-colonial states.

Moreover post-colonialism is also a time frame where newly formed states experience a lick of power and influence that comes with possessing an independent nation. It is a time where there is a power vacuum. All groups and ethnicities alike yearn to consolidate power for themselves. Hence, within such an instance, the majority group always succeeds by subduing all demands of autonomy, resistance and insurgency from minority groups. Furthermore, post colonial states often inherit governance structures that are rather weak. At a time as such, the state is unable to address pre-existing ethnic inequalities that have plagued the state for decades.

Implications of Marginalization and Exclusion

The marginalization and exclusion of certain groups have profound implications on political stability, social cohesion, and economic equity. In the long run, systematic disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities also undermines trust in state institutions. This essentially motivates resistance and constant cycles of conflict. Ultimately, this also destabilizes the region and does the opposite of efficient statemaking. Moreover, from an economic standpoint exclusion also to a great extent contributes to entrenched poverty and a reduced economic status. This is because less people will have that bond in terms of nation state linkage. In accordance with the chapter on Narratives of civic duty by Hur Aram certain groups will have national stories that are rather exclusive. Hence, the state will seem more threatening to the nation's interests. Therefore, ultimately people from marginalised groups like the Marmas, Chakmas, and Tripuras of the Chittagong Hill Tracts will have weak attachments to the state.

To conclude, the marginalization of Chittagong Hill Tracts is a direct result of the exclusionary statemaking methods Bangladesh's government has chosen to adopt and implement since the liberation almost 60 years ago. It is a process which prioritizes homogenous national identity over the recognition of cultural diversity. Moreover, this paper also established ultimately that marginalization is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather it is a rhetoric of an even broader pattern which has been prevalent in numerous post colonial countries of the Global South.

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