

All in all, this book is a most useful contribution to the literature on Laos.

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***The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story.* Edited by Mizanur Rahman Shelley. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Centre for Development Research, 1992. 200 pp.**

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, as the British colonial rulers named the hilly terrain in the southeastern corner of Bangladesh, home for twelve tribes, ethnically different from the majority Bengalis, is another “trouble-spot” in turbulent South Asia. The majority of the tribesmen, mainly the Chakmas and Marmas (slightly less than a million), have been fighting a guerrilla war against the Bangladeshi authorities since early 1973. Their main politico-military front, the Shanti Bahini, has been fighting for self-rule and against the Bangladesh government policy of settling the Bengali Muslims in the Hill Tracts. Unfortunately for the tribals, mostly Buddhist and racially akin to the Mongoloid and the neighbouring people of Myanmar, they have been fighting a losing battle against the majority community which is adamant to bring the Hill Tracts (almost 10 per cent of the nation’s land of mostly hills and forest) under its control. Since the tribals constitute less than one per cent of the total population of Bangladesh, for the Bengalis, the real issue in the region is not one of ethnic identity and autonomy of the tribals but of living space and arable land in this land-scarce, predominantly agrarian country.

Consequently, with the growing assertion by the majority Bengalis of “Bengaliness” as the sole identity of all the inhabitants of Bangladesh in 1972, the movement for a separate homeland for the tribals began. Initially, the tribes asked politely for autonomy to protect themselves from the influx of Bengali settlers and to preserve their culture and identity, as they had been enjoying this special status during the British period and to some extent, during the Pakistani period

(1947–71) as well. However, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the “father of the nation”, rejected their desire for autonomy within Bangladesh with his chauvinistic exposition: “Forget your ethnic identity; be Bengalis”.

What happened afterwards in the region from 1973 onwards is more or less known to international observers, such as Amnesty International and others concerned with the violation of human rights in South Asia. Since then, volumes of reports and scores of papers have been written by people concerned with the plight of the minorities and the violation of fundamental rights in the Hill Tracts. The successive civil, military and quasi-military governments of Bangladesh not only turned a deaf ear to such criticisms by international organizations and individuals, but from time to time, they also publicized their views highlighting the tribals’ atrocities committed against Bengali civilians and members of the armed forces, who “incidentally” were (are) there in the Hill Tracts to “maintain law and order”.

Bangladeshi government reports, and most Bengali non-government observations of the situation in the Hill Tracts only highlight how the tribals, backed by some “enemies of Bangladesh”, are involved in the killing of innocent Bengali settlers and how “flimsy” the tribals’ claim of separate identity is. They are also portrayed as “enemies of Bangladesh” and as “collaborators” of the Pakistani regime during the Bangladeshi war of liberation in 1971. Nowhere in these reports is there any reference to the acts of killing, arson, rape and expropriation committed by Bangladeshi troops and civilians against the hapless tribals. These reports even fail to make innuendoes about such barbaric acts of attrition and gross violation of human rights.

The volume under review is yet another addition to this genre of apologetic writing. This work has been edited by a former civil servant and a minister of the discredited, corrupt military government of General Ershad. Among the contributors are one historian and two journalists from Bangladesh. The book, with a catchy subtitle, “The Untold Story”, is divided into eight chapters, including the Introduction and Conclusion. The chapters dealing with the history, geography and culture of the tribal region are useful. However, the core chapters, supposed to be the raconteurs of “the untold story” about the Hill Tracts, are the most damaging sections of the book as they are hardly based on facts, which otherwise are quite well-known to local and foreign observers. Consequently, the work is nothing short of intellectual perfidy.

From the very outset, the book justifies national solidarity by rejecting the irredentist claims of ethnic groups and their demand for autonomy. The editor criticizes human rights groups as agents of “expansionism and intervention” in a “unipolar world”.

To buttress this argument, he cites one relatively unknown Indian scholar who holds similar views with regard to the criticism of human rights groups.

In sum, what we get as the summary of “the untold story” of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is not how the ethnic minorities in the region have been expropriated, humiliated and coerced into submission to the Bengalis by Bangladeshi authorities and Bengali settlers in the region, but an oversimplified assertion that ethnic troubles are common in many countries, including Britain, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and many African countries and that there is no reason to be alarmed by what has been happening in the Hill Tracts. To him, the subjection of the tribals in Bangladesh is very similar to what happened to the indigenous people in India and America after the coming of the Aryans, Greeks, Turko-Afghans and Europeans, respectively. On top of that, he denies the notion of “the original inhabitants” with regard to the Hill Tracts. According to his findings, the tribals came to this region only in the fifteenth century and later. He does not believe in the spontaneity of the tribal insurgency. He rejects the guerrilla movement and organization of the tribals against the Bangladesh government as a mere “artificial creation” of some foreign countries, especially India.

In view of the above, the book has no academic value at all other than placing it as an example of another chauvinistic piece of propaganda literature propounding the motto of Machiavelli: “The end justifies the means”. However, this genre of writing justifying everything in the name of Bengali (Bangladeshi) nationalism is not uncommon in Bangladesh. The tribals of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are not the only people to be expropriated and persecuted by the majority Bengali Muslims in the country. The “untold stories” of the persecution of Bengali Hindus and “Biharis” (non-Bengali Muslim migrants from India) in Bangladesh are not very dissimilar from the stories of the persecution of the tribals in the Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

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