Abstract: The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is home to thirteen different indigenous groups in Bangladesh. An examination of the circumstances of indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts reveals that indigenes had a complicated relationship with the Bangladeshi state over the last few decades, and prior to that with the Pakistani regime that ruled them. Examining the CHT case, I show that a focus only on the national level can obscure the external factors that influence the relationship between the state and indigenous people and argue for the need to broaden our lenses to look for critical external relations. Building on this line of argument, I focus on situating the relationship between the state and indigenous people in a transnational context, in addition to considering the national features. My perspective reveals the limitations of a purely local approach, situates the roots of such conflicts in regional and global politics, and rather than simply showing the relationship between the state and indigenous people, illustrates why they act in particular ways.

Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh geographically is a part of hilly areas that branches off from the Himalayan ranges to the south through Assam and hill Tripura to Arakan and Burma, presently Myanmar. The Hill Tracts lie between 90°45' and 92°50' to the East longitude and 21°35' and 23°45' to the North latitude. It is bounded by the Indian states of Tripura on the North, Mizoram on the East, by Arakan State of Burma on the South and East, and on the west by Chittagong district of Bangladesh. The CHT covers an area of 5,093 sq. miles, which is about 10 percent of the total landmass of Bangladesh. The CHT’s vast natural resources far outweigh its demographic significance in the country (Bertocci 1989: 139). The Mughals conquered the region in 1666 and ruled it until 1760. The British ruled it from 1760 to 1947. The Chittagong Hill Tracts became a part of East Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1947 and 1971 respectively.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is composed of three districts-Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachhari. Presently, at least 13 different indigenous groups live in the Tracts. These diverse groups are culturally different from the majority Bengalis. Different groups also have variations between themselves (Mohsin 1997; Adnan 2004). The groups whose members live in the Tracts are the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Riang, Murang, Lushai, Bunjogees (Bawm), Pankhos, Kukis, Chak, Khumi, Mru, and the Kheyang. Some of these groups live in valleys close to rivers and streams, and some on hillcrests. Some small groups live in between rivers and hillcrests. All of them practice some forms of Jhum cultivation along with other economic activities. The dominant religion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is Buddhism (the Chakmas, Marmas, Tanchangya, and partially the Mru). The Tripuras are Hindu. The Lushais, Pankho, Bawm and some of the Mru are Christians. The rest maintains their indigenous beliefs. All the major religions are practiced with some indigenous elements in the Tracts.

The CHT Conflict

Historically, the Chittagong Hill Tracts had greater connections with Burma and the Indian states of Tripura and Mizorum than with the present state that accommodates it. Although following the partition of Indian sub-Continent in 1947 the CHT became a part of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh), its leaders never wanted the region to be a part of Bangladesh, and as soon as it was declared so, they organized political oppositions against the government. Since then, the Chittagong Hill Tracts have had a complicated relationship with the states that accommodated them. The situation was worsened by the involvement of regional and global powers (such as India, the U.S., and the former U.S.S.R.) (Mohsin 1997). As a response to these translocal connections,
the Bangladeshi government took numerous steps in different times to reinforce its control over the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The state’s policies varied from military strategy to socio-economic development. Indigenous groups also fought against the state’s impositions from political and armed fronts. Following several rounds of negotiations, a peace treaty was signed in 1997 between the Government of Bangladesh and the representatives of indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, sporadic fighting is still not uncommon between the state and indigenous groups, and between different indigenous groups.

In this paper, I elaborate on the roots of the conflict in regional and global politics. An examination of these external features reveals the need to analyze both the local and translocal features in explaining the crisis. Building on this line of argument, I show that a focus purely on the ‘local’, that is on the state-indigenous people’s relationship, is methodically inappropriate in explaining the relationship between the state and indigenous people and argue the need to broaden our lenses to look for critical external connections. To illustrate my argument, I discuss the external causes of the CHT conflict in the Pakistani (1947-1970) and Bangladeshi period (1971 and onwards).

The CHT and Translocal Features: The Pakistani Period

During the colonial intervention, cotton and timber tied the Chittagong Hill Tracts into a wide network of overseas trade (Schendel 1995). After the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, East Bengal (present Bangladesh) became a part of Pakistan. The East Bengal provincial government ruled East Pakistan. Surprisingly, the central government of West Pakistan ruled the CHT, although it was geographically linked to East Pakistan. Such a peculiar administration has a historical root. In the partition between India and Pakistan, Ferozpur of Punjab was to be given to Pakistan. But as Ferozpur had large Sikh communities, it was given to India in the end. This loss to Pakistan was compensated by awarding the Hill Tracts (Mey 1984). Indian leaders at the time, particularly that of the ‘Indian National Congress’, were trying to incorporate the CHT into the Indian Territory. Indigenous leaders supported Indian view. Thus, the CHT became a contested place from the very beginning of the Pakistani ruling.

Pakistan maintained the legal and administrative structure established by the British. In 1956, the constitution of Pakistan retained the Chittagong Hill Tracts as an ‘excluded area’ that meant constitutional recognition of distinctiveness of the area and its people. This constitution also gave voting rights to the CHT people. Though this apparently gave more rights to Hill people, strategically, once free people, they now became citizens of a state that they never wanted to be a part of and were obligated by the state rules that were foreign to them and undermined their lifestyle (Huq 2000). The reason for this devolution of citizenship was not the state’s concern for the Hill people, but as I show, the sovereignty of the state in the face of Pakistan’s rivalry with India.

Pakistan used the CHT case to strengthen its military position against India. Although the Chittagong Hill Tracts was incorporated into the Muslim dominated Pakistan, the Hill peoples were mainly Buddhists and had greater connections with India and Burma than with Pakistan (Chaudhury 1991). In the partition of the sub-Continent, the Hilly region was divided like this: the Chittagong Hill Tracts fell to Pakistan, the Arakan Hill Tracts were incorporated into Burma, and Hill Tippera (now Tripura) and the Lushai Hills (now Mizorum) became a part of India. When the partition became imminent, the Chakma and other indigenes were mostly in favor of joining India (Mohsin 1997; Chakma, S. 1986). There have been several proposals from the Hill leaders about how the Hill Tracts can be handled in the partition. One proposal was to give each of the three main circles under three chiefs a ‘native state’ status, administratively separated from India and Pakistan, and ruled by the circle chiefs. The Marma chief, as an exception, suggested a union with Burma (Chakma, S. 1986). All these chiefs preferred some form of monarchy. However, the British ruling and the subsequent Swadeshi (of motherland) movement created new leaders even among
indigenous groups. There were two main opinions from these leaders about how the Chittagong Hill Tracts can be handled in the partition. The moderates led by Kamini Mohan Dewan wanted a constitutional monarchy. The radicals led by Sneha Kumar Chakma preferred a republican form of government (Mohsin 1997: 35). As all these became impossibilities, the three tribal chiefs formed ‘the Hillman Association’ in 1946 and proposed a princely status for the Chittagong Hill Tracts with neighboring Tripura, Cooch Bihar, and Khasi Hills, with which they also proposed a confederation to be under the administrative control of the central government of India (Mazumder 2002). None of these proposals were accepted.

As Hill leaders could not endorse this partition, on August 15, 1947 Sneha Kumar Chakma hoisted the Indian flag at Rangamati. The Marmas hoisted the Burmese flag at Bandarban. The Indian flag was lowered by the Pakistani Army on August 21 at gun point against violent protest (Mohsin 1997). However, the lowering of the flags did not lower the zeal of Hill leaders to act against the partition. Indian leaders also continued with their pre-partition sentiment. Two years after the partition, Sardar Patel, the central defense minister, appeased the East Pakistani minorities by saying that “those who are flesh and blood, those who fought by our side in the freedom struggle can not suddenly become foreigners to us because they are on the other side of a line” (Singh 2003: 508). Once the Pakistani authorities realized that India and indigenous leaders were having close relationship even after the partition, they attempted to stop this. The Pakistani authorities ordered a settlement plan in the Hill Tracts to increase the Bengali population and as such to lower the risk that the region would be annexed by India. Strategically, most Bengalis were settled as close to the bordering villages of India so they could block the CHT peoples’ day to day contact with India (www.angelfire.com/ab/jumma/settlers.html).}

At the time, Pakistan decided to support the United States to strengthen its position against India and the Soviet block (Mohsin 1997). In 1956, when the Naga National Army\(^7\) began its struggle against India, Pakistan’s ISi (Inter Services Intelligence) offered arms and sanctuary to them that operated from the CHT. Later Mizo\(^8\) guerrillas received similar supports from the ISi and operated from the remote bases at Ruma, Bolipara, Mowdak, and Thanchi in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Mohsin 1997). Later on China joined these covert operations\(^9\) (Mohsin 1997). In the 1950s, Dhaka became a centre for CIA’s struggle against communism in the sub-continent and from here the US conducted its covert operations against the Chinese authority. Pakistan got significant military aid from the US for this strategic assistance (Mey 1984).

Pakistan declared the CHT as a tax free zone to accelerate its development, but in practice it only helped to create a bourgeoisie of a few privileged families from the West Pakistan (Huq 2000). The establishments set up for development of the CHT further alienated the indigenous peoples’ livelihood. The Kaptai Hydro-electric project was commissioned in 1961 to help industrializing the region with electricity which ultimately became the worst project ever in the region. The project inundated 303 sq. miles of land, including the best 40% of the cultivable lands in the area. Ninety-thousand to 110,000 people became homeless. The project also inundated 90 miles of roads and 10 sq. miles of reserve forests (Huq 2000). It is worth mentioning that the United States funded this project.

In 1962, Pakistan adopted a new constitution which relaxed the status of the CHT from an ‘Excluded area’ to a ‘Tribal area’, and in 1963-64 even its tribal status was stripped off (Adnan 2004). Ultimately, in 1964 Pakistan lifted the ban on entry, settlement, and acquisition of land by outsiders in the Hill Tracts. The region subsequently was inundated by the Bengalis. Thus, a process of Bengalization of both the inhabitants and the administration was initiated (Mohsin 1997). These policies were taken mainly to secure the area from getting annexed by India.
These facts show the complex interplay of local and translocal factors that influenced different body's behaviour in the CHT. Pakistan used the Chittagong Hill Tracts case to strengthen its position against India and the Soviet block. At local level the CHT was more tightly ruled as well. The Chittagong Hill Tracts case in the Pakistani era is marked by national and transnational inter-play of events.

The CHT and Translocal Features: The Bangladeshi Period

Independent Bangladesh adopted its first constitution on November 4, 1972. The constitution did not pay any particular attention to the Hill districts. Irrespective of ethnic and cultural variations, a Bengali nationalism was imposed on all citizens of Bangladesh in the constitution (Mohsin 1998: 108). One reason for taking such a policy was some Hill people’s collaboration with the occupying Pakistani force in the liberation war (Mohsin 1997: 59). Another reason was the Hill Tracts’ vast natural resources, such as oil and gas, and most importantly forests. The Chittagong Hills also constituted the ‘hinterland’ of the Chittagong port, the biggest port that connected Bangladesh with the rest of the world (Adnan 2004: 26). Thus, keeping a hard grip over the CHT was considered very important for the state and it was reflected in the policies pursued by the government. As a reaction to the new constitution, Manbendra Larma founded the *Parbatya Chattagram Janasamhiti Samittee* (The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peoples’ Solidarity Association) (PCJSS) on March 7, 1972. As an organization for protecting Hill identities, the PCJSS organized themselves both through political and military means. With foreign help, they became an opposing and threatening force for the new state within a short period of time.

On the other hand, after the liberation war, the Bangladeshi regime was becoming more influenced by India which had direct consequences for the Army. The Bangladesh Army was against India primarily because of the formation of the ‘National Defense Force’ by the Bangladeshi government, which was a brain child of India. The debate over Indian Army’s taking control over the left over Pakistani goods as booty was another reason. National Defense Force ignored the superior position of the Bangladesh Army over other national defense forces. A section of the Military ultimately killed the president in 1975 who, in their words, was a pro-Indian. India, at the time started to support the PCJSS because of the anti-Indian attitude of the next Bangladeshi regime that came after the assassination of the president (Mohsin 1997). Given these developments, the new Bangladesh initiated a policy of Bengali in-migration into the CHT- a continuation of the Bengalization policy.

After the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman (in office after 1975) became more connected with the U.S. and reacted against India and the Soviet block, which made him unpopular in the Indian power center. The ‘Joy Bangla’ (Long live Bengal) slogan which was akin to Indian ‘Joy Hind’ (Long live Hindustan [the place for Hindus]) was replaced by ‘Bangladesh Zindabad’ (Long live Bangladesh). At the time, the former Soviet Union began its South East Security Plan, under which the Chittagong Hill Tracts was to be liberated (because Bangladesh was aligning more with the US). India was the main ally of the U.S.S.R. in the sub-Continent. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of Indian intelligence established a ‘clandestine’ radio station and trained thirty Chakma youths with radio electronic training. With the help of several training centers, India provided Hill guerrillas with arms and ammunitions (Moudud 2001). Between 1975 -1977, a number of Shanti Bahini-the guerrilla wing of the PCJSS- batches were trained in India. Hill guerrillas also received consignments of arms and ammunitions in November 1975 and March 1977 (Mohsin 1997). India allowed Shanti Bahini to set up their bases in the Indian state of Tripura and Mizorum. To facilitate such activities, ninety-four border security forces had been set up by India in Tripura and Mizorum, close to Bangladesh border (Balo 1996). From the mid-1976, Shanti Bahini got enough strength to undertake guerrilla operations against the Bangladesh Army in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
Bangladesh at the time was worried about some of the Hill leaders’ growing connection with India and their potential threat of taking control over the Hill Tracts. Bangladesh claims that the Shanti Bahini has links with the Indian government. Manbendra Larma crossed over to India couple of times to organize actions in the Hill tracts and also established connections with other guerrilla organizations in India. As mentioned earlier, as a result of the Indian support, Shanti Bahini got enough strength to undertake operation against military in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the mid-1976. At the time, the Bangladeshi authorities thought it was impossible for the police to tackle these kinds of attacks and it was necessary to deploy military as a counter-insurgency force to the CHT ‘rebels’ (Adnan 2004). The Bangladeshi government took a multi-level approach to the problem. These were military intervention, socio-demographic intervention, and socio-cultural development efforts (discussed later in the paper) (Adnan 2004). In 1997, Shanti Bahini had a force of 15,000 fighters and 50,000 trained youths into different militia units within their six major territorial sectors of operation (Adnan 2004: 24). Following such guerrilla and political advancement, the Hill Tracts had been turned into an army camp by the government with nineteen infantry battalions, eleven BDR battalions, three artillery battalions, one engineer battalion, eighteen Ansar battalions, and four armed police battalions (Adnan 2004: 25). Numerically there have been 230 army camps, 100 BDR camps and 80 police camps which make a ratio of one security force member for every fifteen indigenous persons (Arens 1997: 46).

This situation led to an armed conflict between the Bangladesh Army and the Pahari (Hill people) guerillas which continued at least for a decade. Here I am not concentrating on the conflict but showing another twist the conflict took after 1983. India, at the time, settled the Tripura and Mizo problems, and following this took a more soft approach to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Indian government had to convince the Bangladeshi government to take back the CHT refugees who had been settled in India. It was necessary that India make a political compromise with Bangladesh. At the time, RAW did not give any explicit major support to these groups even though Hill leaders had a few requests (Bhaumik 1997). Bangladeshi authorities also took a moderate approach toward the problem from the mid-1990s. The continuing expense of the military operation and its failure to stop violence and international criticism were the main reasons for such a move. Following these developments, the first refugee repatriation was carried out in 1987. Thereafter, the PCJSS was forced to negotiate with the Bangladeshi government partially by India. India, however, occasionally gave minor military supports to the indigenous leadership (Bhaumik 1997). At the time, the major concern for Bangladesh was maintaining its territorial integrity. India sent a special envoy to Bangladesh confirming India’s intent in settling the problem within a framework of an integrated Bangladesh. The appointment of a fairly young man as the chief of Agartala.

Following these developments, in 1983 the Bangladeshi government declared the CHT as a special economic area targeted for promoting trade and commerce, employment and overall agro-economic development. The announcement offered tax holidays, low interest loans, and administrative favours to allocate 10% of development projects to be handed over to tribal contractors. The government also reserved 5% of all the state jobs for ‘tribal’ persons and set up special quotas for ‘tribal’ students in all higher education institutions in Bangladesh. The government announced ‘Military Civic Action’ which was an attempt to integrate the military more with the local communities and development projects by providing cash and kind incentives for aggrieved tribals and non-tribals (Shelly 1992). The programme contained compensation for damages done by military action, and medical facilities for the locals by the military in collaboration with the civil administration. In wake of these circumstances, the PCJSS unilaterally declared a cease-fire in the CHT in 1992 and expressed willingness for a political settlement. The Bangladeshi government also accepted it against increasing national and international criticisms (Arens: 1997). These developments gave a way out for the PCJSS to set out a number of political demands for the autonomy of the Hill people. Briefly, these were:
(I) the constitution shall recognize regional autonomy of the CHT as a special administrative unit and the land shall be renamed Jummaland. (II) It should be administered by autonomous Jummaland regional Council (JRC). (III) All land in the CHT, except some important state land, shall be placed under the jurisdiction of JRC. PCJSS also calls for ban on Bengali settlement in the CHT and out posting of Bengalis who settled there after August 17, 1947. (IV) Special indigenous quotas in the state service, relaxed service rule and setting up of a bank for the CHT development. (V) Parliament seat of the CHT constituency shall be reserved for Hill people. (VI) Solely an autonomous indigenous Hill police force will provide security of the region with BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) in the border. (VII) Constitutional recognition of small nationalities and setting up of a radio station. (VIII) Rehabilitation of the internal and international Jumma refugees and Shanti Bahini members.

The Peace Accord

Following these developments, a ‘Peace Accord’ was signed between the Bangladeshi government and the Hill peoples’ representatives on December 02, 1997. Under the treaty, Hill fighters agreed to surrender and de-commission their arms for general amnesty, enactment and amendment of laws concerned with indigenous life, and for the rehabilitation programmes offered by the government (Adnan 2004: 33). Apart from setting a Ministry of the CHT Affairs headed by a Hill leader, the government also agreed to repatriate the CHT refugees in India, resolve land disputes, and cancel illegal leases to non-Paharis and non-residents (Adnan 2004: 33). The treaty also created a new body called the ‘Regional Council’ to look after the entire region. Thus, the treaty endorsed a partial release of power to the indigenous authority. The treaty modified anomalies between the CHT Regulation Act of 1900 and the Local Government Council Act of 1989. However, it failed to stop the violence in its entirety and scattered fighting is not uncommon even nowadays. To date, the government implemented only a limited number of provisions such as the amendment of laws for the Hill District Councils (Hill District Local Government Councils were proposed to be renamed as Hill Districts Councils in the treaty), and enactment of laws for the new Regional Council. Hill leadership expressed their frustration with the implementation of the treaty (Adnan 2004: 34).

Conclusion

After the British departed from the sub-Continent, the India-Pakistan relationship played a pivotal role in determining the future of the region. The Hill Tracts being a part of Pakistan, suffered the consequences of India-Pakistan rivalry, and East Vs. West Pakistan antagonism. These tensions influenced the creation of an administrative framework for the region. The involvement of global powers, such as the U.S. and the former U.S.S.R. further complicated the problem during the Pakistani era. As a response to these transnational connections, Pakistan ruled the place with iron hand. However, it also had to propitiate the demands of local Bengalis and open up the region for them. The Bangladeshi period is marked by an augmentation of Bengalee-indigenous people confrontation. This ultimately led to a constitutional rejection of any nationalities in Bangladesh other than the Bengalis. India’s relationship with its Northeastern tribal communities, and the CHT’s link with the rebelling Indian guerrillas, encouraged India to get involved in the Hill Tracts affairs. After Hill leaders started to get support from India, Bangladesh protected the place with an ever increasing vigilance. However, ever since both Bangladesh and India wanted to resolve the problem, the international dynamics of the problem became less influential, and the state, consequently, reached an agreement with the indigenous leadership.

In a nutshell, Bangladesh’s relationship with indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts can not be explained without considering its transnational dimensions, and can be argued as born out of the changing context and position of the state in regional and global politics. The Chittagong Hill Tracts, on the one hand, reflects tangled regional politics and the involvement of global powers, on the other hand, shows consequent strict local regulation of the region.
Notes

1. The ‘Chittagong Hill Tracts’ is considered as a single area or region in popular academic practice in Bangladesh. My use of the term ‘Chittagong Hill Tracts’ follows this singular tone, even though it is the standard practice in English to consider ‘Tracts’ as plural.

2. In the face of mass protests to their ruling, the British authorities divided India between India and Pakistan and handed over the region’s ruling authority to the newly created nation-states.

3. I discuss these features later in the paper.

4. I discuss them later in the paper.

5. The British rulers earlier enacted the CHT Regulation Act in 1900. Thereafter, in order to stop the Bengali influence, they declared the region a ‘totally excluded area’ and later on an ‘excluded area’.

6. This movement was led by Mahatma Gandhi against the British colonial rulers, which ultimately forced the British out of the sub-Continent. This movement encouraged people to boycott British goods and use indigenous products.

7. An indigenous guerrilla organization in Nagaland, India, which had a struggling relationship with the Indian state.

8. An indigenous group in India opposed to the Indian state.

9. China was worried that India would become her competitor in the regional political dominance.

10. India supported the CHT guerrillas accusing the Bangladeshi authorities of supporting Mizo guerrillas in the Northeastern part of India. Once the Mizo and the Tripura problems were negotiated, India partially stopped their support to the CHT guerrillas.

11. Because of the CHT conflict around 70,000 Chakmas took refuge in India.

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17. Because of the CHT conflict around 70,000 Chakmas took refuge in India.

18. A place in India close to Bangladesh border. It was the place where India was conducting its operation on the CHT from.
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