

Adivasis

Profile

The term Adivasis (see India for etymology), is not confined to any particular geographical or political boundaries but is generally used in the Indian subcontinent to denote indigenous peoples. Like India, Bangladesh has its Adivasis, though their proportion in the population is much smaller, perhaps 1.5 per cent. The Adivasis of Bangladesh, again like those of India, represent a broad category encapsulating at least twenty-seven different indigenous peoples. Despite their many differences, Bangladeshi Adivasis share major ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic distinctions from the majority Bengalis.

Adivasis inhabit the border areas of the north-west and north-east Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Both prior to the creation of Bangladesh and afterwards, successive governments have been reluctant to take a census of the Adivasi population on the basis of language and religion. Government figures of 1981 put Adivasi numbers at 897,828, and the population is now thought to be about 2 million. In 1981 43.7 per cent of Adivasis were estimated to be Buddhist, 24.1 per cent Hindus, 13.2 per cent Christian and 19 per cent as following other religions. It is widely believed that the Bangladesh government has deliberately undercounted the Adivasi population to emphasize its marginality. Lower numbers mean that their legitimate demands can be more easily dismissed or ignored by governments and thus excluded from relief aid or development programmes. Undercounting also allows Adivasi land claims to be seen as more tenuous and their traditional ways of life as mere fragments of the past rather than as a living culture.

Almost all Bengalis, including many Adivasis, speak Bangla; and indigenous languages have assimilated many Bangla words as their own. Adivasis who have been formally educated through the school system, mostly males, are more likely to speak Bangla than illiterates, especially illiterate females. By religion the CHT inhabitants are mainly Buddhist, while Khasi and Mandi are predominantly Christian. Other indigenous peoples have retained their original animism or have affiliated with Hinduism, especially the Hajong, while Rajbansi either are Hinduized or have become Sunni Muslims.

The most populous indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are the Santal (200,000), Chakma (195,000), Marma (66,000) and Mandi (60,000). Of these the first and last are considered plains-dwelling Adivasis, with the Mandi living in north-central Bangladesh and the Santal in the north-west. In comparison with Bengalis, Adivasis are generally regarded by Bengalis themselves as more open, friendly, generous and honest. They have a strong relationship with the land and there is a deep interrelationship between their religious beliefs (animism) and their social structure.

The CHT covers 10 per cent of the total area of Bangladesh and is home to twelve or thirteen different indigenous peoples of which Chakma, Marma and Tripura total approximately 90 per cent. Sometimes known collectively as Jumma, because of their traditional shifting - jum - method of cultivation, these groups belong to the Tibeto-Burmese language group. Chakma account for more than half the indigenous population of the CHT. They and the Marma are Buddhist, while Tripura are Hindus.

Historical context

Whereas communal land ownership represents a vital element of their life pattern, the major problem for all Adivasis is so-called 'landgrabbing' by Bengalis. Although all indigenous land is theoretically considered to be communal land, it was fortunate that plains Adivasis for the most part received individual title deeds to their land under British rule. Communal land claims have proved far more difficult to sustain in law. Yet individual landholdings are also threatened in many ways. These include seizure by trickery or force and, as in the case of Hindus, illegal application of the Vested Property Act. Adivasis generally have been discriminated against and persecuted, although the position of those of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has aroused the greatest concern and gained the most international attention.

Most of the CHT peoples migrated into the area from the south between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries although the arrival of Bengali settlers forced many CHT peoples to retreat further into the hills. The British colonial period was a less disturbing time for the CHT indigenous peoples and saw the promulgation of laws granting a measure of autonomy, most prominently reflected by the promulgation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulations of 1900. These measures confirmed that in internal matters the CHT was largely self-governing within the recognized structure; and they delineated categories of land, notably khas (government) land, specifically excluding non-indigenous peoples from settling in tribal areas.

At the time of the partition of India in 1947 the award of the CHT to East Bengal, despite the fact that it contained almost no Muslim population, raised considerable opposition among the peoples of the CHT. Soon after, the Pakistan government allowed Bengali Muslims to move into the CHT, causing resentment among the indigenous peoples. The pace of Bengali settlement increased once the special status of the CHT was abolished in 1964. The years 1979-83 witnessed large-scale government-sponsored programmes of Bengali settlement in the Hill Tracts.² Successive governments have actively pursued this policy, with the aim of forcibly assimilating the indigenous peoples of the CHT as well as depriving them of their lands.

Prior to the creation of Bangladesh, the Kaptai hydroelectric project had a devastating effect on many indigenous peoples. Built in the 1960s, the huge Kaptai dam flooded large tracts of cultivable land. More than 100,000 people - a quarter of the population of the CHT - were displaced. It is estimated that 40,000 environmental refugees fled to India, where many of them are currently living in the north-east state of Arunachal Pradesh, citizens neither of India, which has refused to grant them citizenship, nor of Bangladesh, and having no rights in either.

The civil war of the Bengali people against the West Pakistan military and politicians and its ultimate success, with the overt support of Indian forces, gave renewed hope to the hill peoples of a realization of their right to self-determination. A delegation representing Adivasis petitioned the new government for a restoration of autonomy for the CHT, but it received an unsympathetic response. The government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman considered the request to be secessionist, and the government launched raids into the CHT in 1972. As a reaction to this the Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS) United People's Party, and its military wing, the Shanti Bahini (peace force), were formed to resist government forces. Numbering up to 15,000, the Shanti Bahini was staffed mainly by Chakma, but also contained Marma and Tripura, and it has since conducted a guerrilla war against the state, with brief interludes at the negotiating table.

During its discussions with the government between October 1987 and February 1988, the JSS put forward a number of demands, contending that this was the only way of protecting Adivasi interests. These demands included: withdrawal of Bengali settlers and the prohibition of future settlements by non-indigenous peoples; withdrawal of all Bangladesh military forces from the CHT; retention of the

CHT Regulations of 1900; a specified degree of autonomy within the CHT; guarantees that these provisions could not be changed without a plebiscite within the CHT; economic development to benefit Adivasis; dismantling of the model villages and release of JSS prisoners; and the involvement of international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the implementation of such an agreement. Successive governments have failed to accept such terms, particularly where the issue of autonomy is concerned.

Although an apparent cease-fire was in operation and the government began negotiations with the JSS in November 1992, massive human rights abuses continued to take place in the CHT. Various non-governmental organizations, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, Survival International and Anti-Slavery International, gathered first-hand accounts of ill-treatment and torture, threats and killings, along with army destruction of houses and temples. The attitude of Bengalis towards Adivasis in general is based on culturally inherited stereotypes of Adivasis as primitive or 'jungly' and uncivilized. Many instances of overt discrimination against Adivasis, both by the public as well as by governmental officials, have been recorded, and the most serious threat to the peoples of the CHT remains the policy of depriving them of their lands. A major breakthrough in the enduring conflict came through the signing of the Peace Accord on 2 December 1997 between the Government of Bangladesh and Jana Sangati Samiti. The accord provides a number of rights to indigenous peoples including limited autonomy. A Land Disputes Commission was to be established to deal with land-related issues, with the Commission also expected to provide quick inexpensive and easy remedies for cases of land dispossession taking into account local customs and usage with regard to land right and land claims. A majority of the members of the Commission were intended to be from indigenous communities with the added advantage of the knowledge and experience of land issues.

Current issues

Notwithstanding the provisions of the Peace Accord, the Indigenous peoples of CHT continue to suffer from violence, discrimination and exclusion. In November 2005, a British High Commission mission to Bangladesh visited the region and concluded that the Land Disputes Resolution Commission, that was set up to facilitate the effective implementation of the Peace Accord was failing in its operations.

The military retains a huge presence which has strained the fragile peace and led to violations of Accord. On 12 July 2006, the army tortured and brutalised a shopkeeper in Mahalchari. Similarly there are reports of assaults and rape of indigenous women by the settlers or by the army men. A woman from Marma tribe was gang-raped on 30 June 2006. The issues relating to land rights of the CHT peoples remains unresolved and indigenous people continue to face further land-grabbing by the settler-population.