Voices from the Hills
Teach-in on the Human Rights Situation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

On the occasion of
10th Anniversary of
Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University

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Notes of the presentation by Bablu Chakma

The story of the Indigenous peoples of CHT is all about of oppression, struggle, and resilience. CHT is situated in the Southeast part of Bangladesh. There are 13 Indigenous groups or communities¹ who have been living in their homelands from time immemorial. They include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Bawm, khumi, Lusai, Chak, Khiyang, Pangkhoa, Kuki, and so on. Each of these groups has its own distinct culture, language, customs and beliefs. They have their customary laws and institutions as well.

The 13 Indigenous groups of CHT identify themselves as Jumma. The word Jumma comes from Jum which means shifting cultivation or slash and burn cultivation. Jum cultivation is practiced in many parts of the world. Traditionally the Indigenous peoples of CHT were involved with Jum cultivation. Jum means hill as well. Even though each of these communities has its separate identity, they have a common heritage, common history of oppression, and way of life which has given them a shared identity. This identity was popularized by a political party of the Jummas named Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti—PCJSS (United People’s Party of CHT) during the early 1970s as a sign of unity among Jumma communities and as a resistance against the imposition of Bengali Nationalism by the government. Nowadays this Jum has been an inextricable part of their identity. Their lives revolve around Jum no matter whether they are involved with Jum cultivation any more or wherever they live in.

Historically Jummas of CHT were free in their homeland. The CHT was ruled by the traditional Jumma chiefs or kings. There are three kings or chiefs in CHT at present Chakma Circle Chief, Mong Circle Chief, and Bohmang Circle chief. CHT came under the rule of British Empire in 1860 while British had already occupied almost all the parts of Indian subcontinent. But still CHT remained autonomous because the British rulers declared CHT as ‘excluded area’. It means that non-indigenous peoples from outside CHT would need special permission to enter and reside in CHT. Which gave the Jummas some autonomy and helped

¹ We don’t use the word ‘tribe’ because it has a negative connotation in Bengali. The Bengali translation of it is sub-nation. The Jummas do not identify themselves as sub-nation of Bengalis.
them protect their distinct culture and way of life. It also helped them protect themselves from the exploitation of the Bengalis.

But the situation did not remain the same. In 1947, the Indian subcontinent was divided into two parts according to ‘two-nation theory’ – Pakistan and India. According to ‘two-nation theory’, CHT was supposed to become a part of India as a non-Muslim inhabited area. But due to some political reasons, CHT became a part of Pakistan. Basically, it was the beginning of the era of oppression of the Jummas. Pakistan was always hostile against the Jummas of CHT. During this period, Pakistan government struck down the ‘excluded area’ status of the CHT. As a result, CHT became open for the Bengalis and Bengali influx into was increased significantly in CHT. Another bad thing done by Pakistan is to build Kaptai dam for hydroelectric power generation. Even though it was a development project, it had a very devastating impact. As a result of this, 100,000 Jummas were dislocated from their homelands and many of who had to take shelter in India. They still live there. They did not get any compensation. About 54,000 acres of cultivable land went under water. So it was a big turning point for the lives of the Jummas.

In 1971, Bangladesh was liberated through a bloody war against. At that time Jummas became hopeful for their right to autonomy and other rights because the rulers of newborn Bangladesh had also struggled against the oppression of Pakistan. So, soon after liberation, a delegation of Jummas led by MN Larma went to meet the then Prime Minister Shaikh Mujibur Rahman with few demands which included regional autonomy of CHT and create a ban on the influx of the Bengali Muslims into the CHT.

However, Shaikh Mujib did not accept their demands. He told them that there could not be two systems in the country and advised them to be Bengali forgetting their distinct identity. So, he imposed Bengali nationalism on the Jummas. And his willingness was also reflected in the first constitution of Bangladesh which mentioned all people of Bangladesh including the Indigenous peoples as Bengalis. Jummas did not accept the imposition of this Bengali identity. As MN Larma said,

“I am a Chakma... A Chakma can never be a Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh-Bangladeshi. You are also Bangladeshi but your national identity is Bengali... they (Indigenous Peoples) can never be Bengalis.”

He added about the constitution

This Constitution does not recognize the existence of other national communities in Bangladesh... It makes no mention about the CHT. ...the framers of the Constitution have forgotten my land, my people... We have been deprived of our rights, the country has become independent, but we continue to have a cursed life...(Parliament Debates 1972, cited in Roy 2000, 15).

With this backlash, MN Larma and his fellow comrades formed PCJSS, the only political party of the Jummas in 1972. Since then, this party has been struggling
for the self-determination of the Jummas of CHT till today. Later on, they also formed an armed wing named Shanti Bahini or Peace Force. It went in action after Major General Ziaur Rahman's military government took control over Bangladesh in 1975 and militarized whole CHT region.

Gradually there were so many military deployed in CHT that it turned into a big military camp. The researches show that there were more than 115,000 army personnel at the end of 1991 which is equal to one soldier for five to six Jummas (Levene 354). There were more than 500 military camps in CHT. Still there are nearly 400 military camps. The exact figure cannot be known at the present due to the government’s policy. But still it is considered as one of the most militarized places in the world. Military controls almost everything about CHT. There is civil administration, but the ultimate decision comes from the military.

At the same time, military government also implemented its policy of demographic engineering. From 1976-1985 the military regimes evicted the Jummas from their homeland and resettled 400,000 Muslim Bengalis from other parts of Bangladesh. It was done basically to use those Bengali settlers as human shield against the Shanti Bahini and to outnumber the Jummas in their homeland. As a result, while Bengalis were 9.09% in 1951, they became 48.57% of the overall population of CHT at the end of 1980s.

Then the saddest part of CHT begins. The military and Bengali settlers jointly perpetrated their policy of ethnic cleansing in CHT. They jointly perpetrated numerous killing, rape, arbitrary arrest, abduction, torture, arson attack, communal attack, land grabbing etc. There were more than a dozen massacres where thousands of Jummas were killed. One of the most horrendous massacres was Logang massacre, where 1200 Jummas were killed in just in a day. Most of them were literally burnt alive and gunned down. Some international organizations including Amnesty recorded those horrendous incidents. As a result over 70,000 Jummas had to flee to India and take refuge. Ironically, however, the perpetrators always enjoy impunity. Any incidents cannot be known where the perpetrators have been punished. These things go one till today. Even there was a massive communal attack in Rangamati, CHT last year. The situation is such that no one can guarantee that there will not be a communal attack at any moment.

In these atrocities, perhaps, the most vulnerable groups are girls and women. A research shows that

Since the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971 till 1994:

- A total of 6000 hill people were killed. A good number of them were women.
- A total of 2500 indigenous women were raped. A good number of them were under 18.

And a recent statistics documented by Kapaeeng Foundation shows that the situation is turning worse again after a break. In the last few years, most of the victims were minor girls, some of them were as young as 8 years old.
While the Jumma women are the victims of human rights violation, they contribute to the Jumma society significantly, in many cases more than men. They take care of the family. They have great contribution in the economy. For example, they grow as well as market agricultural produce. And it's the Jumma women mainly who are upholding the culture and heritage of the Jummas. And of course, they have also contribution in the movement. They have great contribution for the movement as well. Some Jumma women even took guerilla training under Shanti Bahini. And even though the wives of the Shanti Bahini are never celebrated, they were the ones who took all the burden of the family and other responsibilities in the absence of their husbands. Amongst all, the most remarkable one in the recent history of the Jummas is Kalpana Chakma. She was the organizing secretary of hill women's federation when she was abducted by military on 12 June 1996. She never came back. But her courage and contribution for the movement of the self-determination of the Jummas still inspires the Jumma men as well women and will be inspiring in future.

In order to resolve the CHT problem and bring peace in CHT a peace accord named CHT accord signed between PCJSS and Bangladesh government in 1997. Jummas became hopeful for the peace in the CHT and for the establishment of the rights in CHT. Because the accord enshrined some basic human rights which are necessary for the protection and promotion the distinct language, culture, and identity of the Jummas. Among others, this accord included:

1. Resolution of land problem
2. Demilitarization of CHT
3. Declaration of CHT as a Jumma inhabited area
4. A form of autonomy under CHT Regional Council and three Hill District Councils

However, even after 15 years, Bangladesh government has not the major parts of the Accord yet and peace remained illusive in CHT.

Another big issue of the Jummas is recognition as Indigenous peoples. Even though the Jummas and other Indigenous peoples of Bangladesh have been struggling for their right to be recognized as Indigenous for decades, government has been reluctant to do so. Even the present constitution of Bangladesh does not recognize the Jummas and other indigenous peoples as Indigenous. Present AL government was an advocate of rights of the Indigenous peoples, but now it is completely denying the existence of the Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh.

So, struggle of the Jummas continues. They are struggling for their constitutional recognition, self-determination, CHT Accord and other basic rights within the country. When possible they are raising their voices at home and when possible abroad as well. But it is hard for the Jummas alone to succeed in the movement against government like Bangladesh which is not sensible towards its people. So, Jummas need friendship and solidarity of people from other parts of the world as well. So, Jummas urge the international community for the friendship and solidarity for their movement. They believe that a concerted effort can help them achieve their rights and make this world better for every human being.