

IDPs to refugees to IDPs: the trauma of Bangladesh's Chakmas

by Rajesh S Kharat

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), located in south-eastern Bangladesh between India and Burma, are comprised of jungles inhabited by non-Bengali ethnic minorities known collectively as Jummas. Formerly a part of East Pakistan, it became a part of Bangladesh in 1971.

The CHT, which is the single largest forest-clad area of Bangladesh, owes much of its economic value to the role given by the British to the Chakmas, the largest group of Jummas, in commercial forestry.

The first displacement of Chakmas, and tensions between the Buddhist local population and Muslim incomers, occurred when the newly-established East Pakistan Government dammed the Karnafuli river to generate hydro-electric power. Despite government efforts to provide arable land to the 100,000 people displaced, many Chakmas were unable to main-

tain traditional livelihoods. Chakmas lost political influence after their traditional leader supported Pakistan in Bangladesh's war of independence. The new constitution of Bangladesh made no provision for Jumma demands for autonomous rule. By recognising the rights of all Bangladeshis to free movement and settlement within all parts of the country's boundary, it encouraged migration to the CHT of Bengali-speaking Muslims from the country's overpopulated plains.

By the early 1980s migrants comprised almost half the CHT population. In response, the increasingly alienated tribals formed a rebel organisation to protect their interests. Indian media highlighting of the plight of Chakma families facing the 'atrocities' of the Bangladesh army and support given by Bangladesh to rebel tribal groups in north-east India added to tension. In 1977 the first exodus of displaced Chakma across the border into the Indian state of Tripura took place. As the plight of the Chakmas became internationally known in the 1980s, and the Chakma exiles assimilated to the cultures of the peoples of Tripura, they faced the predicament of whether to define themselves as Indians or as refugees.

In the early nineties India and Bangladesh began discussing repatriation of the Chakma refugees. Despite the goodwill and cooperation of both governments the process of repatriation was slow moving. The 1996 election victory of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League inaugurated a new era in India-Bangladesh relations and led to the signing of the CHT peace accord in December 1997. It was agreed that refugees could return and that devolution would give new



powers to the indigenous residents of CHT.

This has not happened. Bangladesh's failure to honour the accord has dashed hopes of an end to the trauma of the Chakmas. Forcibly repatriated to Bangladesh, the Chakmas found themselves unable to reclaim houses and farms taken over by Bengali Muslims enjoying army and government protection. Bangladesh has unilaterally imposed its own definition and enumeration of IDPs. The army has failed to honour commitments to withdraw from tribal areas. A commission set up to investigate land expropriation grievances has become moribund as unfavourable top-down adjudication of land disputes in favour of the powerful remains the norm.

Three decades after their first displacement, more than 60,000 Chakmas and other Jummas are still IDPs. Low-intensity conflict characterised by terrorist attacks continues in the CHT. People of goodwill need to come together, supported by the international community, to end abuses of human rights and displacement in this strategic area of the Indian sub-continent on which the peace and security of other South Asian states and peoples depend.

Rajesh Kharat is a Reader in Politics at the University of Mumbai, India.
Email: rkharat@hotmail.com

