

The Economy of the Indigenous Peoples of CHT: Some Myths and Realities

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Introduction

Geographically, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) greatly contrasts with the generally alluvial, monsoon flooded plains of Bangladesh. It is mainly a land of hills and uplands with steep slopes in many of the places. Its forest area covers about 66 percent of the total area and accounts for more than fifty percent of the total forest area of Bangladesh. The CHT is one of the regions of the country where one finds major difference (from the rest of Bangladesh) in terms of ethnic features of the people and their ways of living. More than fifty percent of the people of the CHT belong to twelve ethnic minority groups (Indigenous Peoples) and they differ from their Bengalee brethren in terms of physical features and tradition.

The geographical condition favoured the CHT to be endowed with vast natural recourses like wood, timber, bamboo, sungrass, sandstone, limestone, natural gas, petroleum, coal, uranium etc. There are indications that the mineral resources, if extracted properly, would significantly contribute to national economy. The CHT area covers about one-tenth of the total land surface area of Bangladesh and the density of population is the lowest in the country. This suggests, the per capita availability of land in the CHT should be much higher than in the rest of Bangladesh. And, if one takes the per capita availability of land (without taking other issues into account) as an indicator of economic soundness, the people of the CHT should be economically much better off than the people in the rest of Bangladesh. The statistics indicate that the per capita income of the CHT is 320 percent higher than the national average of Bangladesh.ⁱ

The above scenario, however, fail to demonstrate the true economic situation of the people, particularly of the indigenous peoples of the CHT. In this paper I shall try to analyse how the myths (the unfounded assumptions, to say moderately) differ from the realities so far as the economy of the indigenous peoples is concerned. I shall also try to focus on some major policy issues in the direction of improving economic well-being of the people of the CHT.

The problems of land

The economy of the people (particularly the indigenous peoples) is mostly based on agriculture. According to Land Revenue Administration Report of 1965-66, the total area of the CHT was 32,59,520 acres, the total cropped area was 2,23,002 acres, and the net cropped area being only 1,30,000 acres. That means, less than seven percent of the land in CHT is suitable for cultivation.ⁱⁱ The amount of land for plough cultivation is even less. The construction of Kaptai Dam (for Karnafuli hydroelectric project) in the early sixties added to the already existing land crisis in the CHT. As a result of the Dam, an artificial reservoir (popularly known as Kaptai lake) was created which submerged 54,000 acres or 40 percent of the most fertile plough lands of the CHT. The net effect is further contraction of per capita availability of agricultural land.

As in many other places of the world, one of the most common and suitable form of cultivation in the CHT is Jum cultivation (Shifting cultivation). The topography and soil condition of the CHT made the people resort to Jum cultivation as this is the most suitable form cultivation under the given circumstances. Besides the Jums, plough cultivation is also practiced by the indigenous people in the plain lands available mostly in the river valleys. Previously, Jums not only provided food sufficient enough to feed the families, but also created surplus for them.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, the people of CHT were self-sufficient in food and other daily necessities. But the situation is quite different now. With the reduction of available land for cultivation, with the pressure of population growth, and with some restrictions in Jum cultivation, the CHT, once a food surplus area, has now turned into food deficit

area.^{iv} Thus, the observation- ``Misery, undernourishment and starvation, a well-known feature in Bengal plains, did not exist in the hills.''^v- does not hold true now.

The Kaptai Dam 10,000 families of plough cultivators and about 8,000 families of Jum cultivators, most of whom belonging to indigenous population of the region. The then government undertook programmes for rehabilitation of the displaced people. But due to scarcity of land the plough cultivators received hardly one-third of the land they lost as compensation, and that too was of inferior quality, and the Jum cultivators had to be content with smaller areas for Jum cultivation. The rest had to migrate to India, as no other alternatives were open to them. Finding no other alternatives and with some assistance from the government (through the Horticulture Development Board) some indigenous people, mostly living in and around the reservoir area, took to fruits gardening as a source of their livelihood. Some even took to fishing, previously an unappreciated occupation to the indigenous people. The fruits gardeners did not fare too badly during the initial years.^{vi} But later they, could not maintain the trend due to lack of proper monitoring and supervision, deteriorating soil condition, and due mainly to lack of adequate marketing facilities.

The problems of population growth

Bangladesh is one of the most populous countries of the world. More than 121 million (in 1995) people are squeezed in an area of 1,47,570 sq. kilometers.^{vii} The density of population in the CHT is much lower than in the rest of Bangladesh. This may prompt someone to suggest a shift of population to CHT from the plains for even distribution of population in the country. Until in the seventies the rate of population growth in the CHT was almost similar to the one in the whole Bangladesh. But between 1974 and 1981 the growth rate became abnormally high. During this period, while the population growth rate in Bangladesh was about 18 percent, it was 47 percent in the CHT. This abnormal growth in population in the CHT has been caused mainly due to government sponsored, planned in-migration of Bengali settlers from the plains. The ratio of indigenous and Bengali population in the CHT was 91:9 in 1951 and 88:12 in 1961. But in 1981 the ratio became 59:41.^{viii} There are reports that during 1960-1987 (mostly during late seventies and early eighties) about 580,000 Bengalis were settled in the CHT under state sponsored settlement programmes.^{ix} The planned settlement of Bengalis has caused enormous harm to the already miserable economic condition of the indigenous people. The land crisis became more acute (forceful dispossession of indigenous peoples' land was a regular phenomenon) and the occupational structure of the indigenous peoples also changed. Classified into two major categories of occupation- Agriculture and Non-agriculture, it was found that in 1961 about 87 percent of the total working force in the CHT was engaged in agriculture and it came down to 59 percent in 1981.^x Historically, the indigenous peoples are basically agriculturists. The sudden change in occupation (without having enough time and facilities to pursue other occupations) made many indigenous people as `fish-out of water'. Thus, the idea of even distribution of population for balanced economic growth in a country seems to cause more harm than favour given the situation like the CHT.

The Effects of Commercialism

As said earlier, the indigenous people are agriculturists. Historical and geographical conditions made them to be less conversant with the modern culture of trade and commerce. Earlier, because of their traditional right to land and because of abundance of forest resources, the indigenous peoples had very little to depend on the market system for making livelihood. They depended on the market only in terms of purchase of a few items like salt, dry fish, agricultural appliances etc. They used to exchange these items with their surplus agricultural and other forest products from the Bengali traders.

The advent of commercialism in the CHT brought in more negative than positive impact on the economy of the indigenous peoples. Firstly, the commercial trickeries were unknown to them and even by nature they disliked these. Secondly, they were bit ignorant about the concept of private property and commercial value of land and other properties. Thirdly and most importantly, they were (and still are) victims of trickeries of the unscrupulous businessmen. As in the past, trade and commerce in the CHT is absolutely controlled by Bengali traders from the plains. They hold top business and commercial positions and most of the shops in the market and commercial places are owned by them.^{xi} They have established near monopolies in wholesale and retail trades, in credit and

in transport and other service sectors. One would hardly find one to hold top commercial and business positions from amongst the indigenous peoples. Thus, the Bengalis hold relatively higher forms of production relations in almost all the sectors of the CHT economy. Because of this advantage and because of the natural operation of the market forces, the Bengalis will continue to exploit their innocent indigenous brethren. The common concept of 'the rich becoming richer (implying the Bengalis) and the poor becoming poorer' (implying the indigenous peoples) under the market economy, seems to be inevitable in the CHT unless some remedial measures are undertaken immediately.

The Effects of Industrialization

Bangladesh is far from being developed industrially. The state of industrialization in the CHT is even low in Bangladesh standard. However, the CHT holds some key industries like Karnafuli Paper and rayon mills, Kaptai Hydro-electric Project, Wooden and Timber Factory, Boat building Industrial Corporation, Dockyards, Aziz Industries, etc. But, these Industries could bring little benefit to the indigenous peoples. Most of the employees/workers employed in these industries are imported from outside the CHT and at one stage of normal operation the Karnafuli Paper Mill employed only 14 hillmen out of the total labour force of 3290 persons.^{xii} The picture is almost same with respect to other industries. Until recently the largest hydro-electric project in Kaptai supplied electricity to Chittagong and other places of Bangladesh keeping in dark almost the entire CHT. Though the indigenous peoples are said to possess the skills of various crafts (weaving, pottery, cane works, dyeing, woodworks, etc, for example), few of them find jobs in related state-owned and other large-scale industries. It is really surprising in the sense that "Every house of the tribesmen is so to say a small factory of one variety or the other".^{xiii} The benefits of industrialization to the indigenous peoples can be stated as 'the state sponsored exploitation of natural resources (hydro-electricity, timber, natural oil, gas, etc.) without regard to the interest of local population'.^{xiv}

The Effects of Development Projects

In the name of improving the lot of the people the previous governments undertook various development initiatives in the CHT. The reality shows, the indigenous peoples could hardly enjoy the fruits of such development projects. In fact, in many cases, the development initiatives produced counter effects to the real economic well-being of the indigenous peoples. The horticulture development project in the early sixties turned out to be a flop (because of lack of adequate supervision and marketing support) as the local producers got much less than the market price from their produces. The ADB sponsored road development project, aimed at improving people's access to markets and reducing indigenous peoples' cultural and economic isolation, brought little benefit for the indigenous peoples. Instead, it benefited the Bengalis in two ways. Firstly, as marketing was monopolised by them, the benefits automatically accrued to them. Secondly, the improved road communication made it easier for the Bengali settlers to migrate into the CHT. Until recently, the top positions of the CHT Development Board were held by outsiders who were either less concerned about the nature of the indigenous peoples' problems or were less interested to solve such problems. The local people had little chance to participate in and affect the policy decisions of the Board. The forest development programme benefited the corrupt Bengali officials and the unscrupulous businessmen on the one hand, and indiscriminately destroyed the forest resources and the ecology of the CHT on the other. The recent attempt to bring more areas under reserve forest would simply go against the interest of the indigenous peoples. There are numerous examples of development projects inflicting more harm than positively contributing to the economic welfare of the indigenous peoples.^{xv}

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no denying the fact that the CHT has great potentials to significantly contribute to our national economy and, thereby, to improve the common people's economic standings. The CHT is endowed with vast natural resources, particularly, the forest and mineral resources. The soils and slopes of the region are especially suited for tea and rubber plantation, and fruits gardening. The Karnafuli reservoir provides an ideal opportunity for developing fisheries and other water-related projects. The land and vegetation in the CHT would provide an ideal pastoral ground (which is almost near to absent in the other parts of Bangladesh) for developing livestock in the country. Further, with

its magnificent landscape and natural scenic beauties, the CHT offers great opportunity for developing tourism industry in the country.

In the above discussion, an attempt has been made to depict the real economic situation of the people, particularly of the indigenous peoples, of the CHT. It has been revealed that, the assumptions, a common man might conceive, about the economic condition of the indigenous peoples, greatly contrast with the reality. The fact is that, the economic condition of the indigenous peoples is far from being satisfactory. A number of man-made crises are mainly responsible for this. With the signing of the peace accord between the government and the PCJSS leadership, an ideal opportunity has been created now to take positive measures in the direction of improving the over all economy of the CHT and the common people's lot. In order to ensure economic welfare of the common people I would suggest the following measures:

- Restoration of land rights previously enjoyed by the indigenous peoples and other permanent residents of the CHT.
- Proper rehabilitation of the returnees from India and other internally displaced people.
- Formulation of provisions for ensuring proper representation and participation of the local people in matters concerning their economic welfare.
- Creation of special provisions (both protectionist and promotional measures) for ensuring greater participation of the indigenous peoples in trade and commerce.
- Creation of more job opportunities for the indigenous peoples in the government and non-government sectors, and creation of opportunities for self-employment.
- Protection and promotion of indigenous peoples' art, crafts and establishment of more vocational schools in the CHT.
- Encouragement for formation and functioning of various trade and professional bodies and co-operatives in the CHT.
- Expansion of the existing quota system for the indigenous students in the various technical and higher educational institutions of the country.
- Establishment of a business school in the CHT for higher business education.

Notes and references:

ⁱ District Statistics: Chittagong Hill Tracts, BBS, Dhaka, 1983.

ⁱⁱ Also see Raja Devasish Roy, 'Colonization, Marginalization and disempowerment of indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill tracts, Bangladesh; Will there be a reversal of the trend?', a paper presented in a seminar on 'Bangladesh: peoples Struggles (1971-1996)', held between 18-20 October, 1996 in Montreal, Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ Khisa, A. L., Shifting cultivation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Dacca, 1963 (p. 71).

^{iv} Shelly, M. R.(ed.), The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story, CDR,B. Dhaka, December, 1992, (p. 64).

^v Mey, Wolfgang (ed), Genocide in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, Copenhagen 1984 (pp. 81-82).

^{vi} Raja Devasish Roy, 'Land rights of the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts', in the Bulletin, 1993 Year of the Indigenous People, Dhaka, December, 1993 (p. 16).

^{vii} Hossain, S.M., 'Population Growth and Structure', in Population and Development, MOHFW, GOB, Dhaka, 1996 (p. 61).

^{viii} Chakma, P.B., 'Chittagong Hill Tracts and its Development', in the Bangladesh Journal of Buddhist Studies, vol. 111, no. 1, Dhaka, May, 1986; also see Raja, op.cit.(1996).

^{ix} Barkat, A. and Huda, S. 'Politico-Economic Essence of Ethnic Conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, in the Dhaka University Studies, Part-D, December, 1988(p. 113).

^x Barkat, A.and Huda, S, op.cit.

^{xi} Dewan, A., Class and Ethnicity in the Hills of Bangladesh, McGill University, Canada, 1979.

^{xii} Ishaq, M.(ed.), Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh District Gazetteers, Dacca, 1975 (p. 139).

^{xiii} Ishaq, M.(ed.), op.cit.(p. 159).

^{xiv} Mey, Wolfgang, op.cit.(p. 31).

^{xv} For detail see, Barkat, A. and Huda, S. op.cit., and Mey, Wolfgang, op.cit.