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The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord and After: Gendered Dimensions of Peace

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Introduction

In most societies conflicts are a common feature of everyday life. They range from conflicts arising over the allocation of resources, to conflict based on rivalry between different ethnic, linguistic and/or religious groups as well as class conflict. Such conflicts may not always create great disturbances or upheaval in the way that society functions. Indeed sometimes conflict is sometimes perceived as taking a society to a higher plane. This is the case with class struggle, with democratic challenges to despotism, and with women's challenges to patriarchy and fundamentalism. But it is also fair to say that certain low intensity conflict can result in economic and social stagnation, which in turn can intensify and aggravate the inherent tension.

It is when the elements of violence dominates and overwhelms such situations, often manifesting itself in armed conflict, that the normal day-to-day functioning of a society is threatened. The nature of armed conflict has features which greatly affect processes of democratization, the formation of civil society, the conduct of good governance, and ethnic and gender relations embedded in a society. This is precisely why it has become imperative to look at conflict situations in a broader social context.

Situations of armed conflict, whether internal or between states, interfere with or destroy altogether the normal conduct of statecraft or governance. This is precisely why protracted armed conflict can cause great damage and harm to individual psyches and/or to institutions and practices of democracy and civil society. This is especially true in cases where war is waged against a particular ethnic or religious group or segment of the population. Socio-cultural values such as tolerance and justice are undermined, resulting in the general undermining of democratic norms

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This process has a gendered dimension. The mobilization of young men and their conscription into armies fuel the mechanisms of a militarised society. Women during wartime are often left behind to tend the day-to-day affairs of the family and state. In this sense they form the last vestiges of civil society. Their peculiar position in times of armed conflict has had a dual effect on the perception of their role in conflict situations. On the one hand they are made targets of the opposition forces. Rape or even the threat of rape is used as an instrument of war – an attempt to dismantle even peoples last attempt to survive with dignity. At the same time however, women in conflict situations may possess immunity as 'political innocents'. This enables them to move more freely in the marketplace and gives them greater access to officials and more scope for taking care of their children and family. This last feature has often placed women in a privileged position from which they can negotiate peace between conflicting parties or even develop alliances across social and political boundaries. The potential of this position is usually not recognized by official peace-makers, perhaps because often what a woman reads into peace-building has to do with how she herself experiences oppression and discrimination at home and in public life. This particular angle often puts women's perception of a just peace at loggerheads with official views of reconciliation and diplomacy.

The cessation of hostilities negotiated through a peace accord is thus merely the first step towards normalizing the situation and restoring governance and democratic

practices to war-torn regions. Much will depend on how trauma and inter-factional rivalry are dealt with, how local development needs are addressed, and on how institutional capacity-building takes place in the post-conflict situation.

It has been seen therefore that peace accords reached between belligerents often evade or fail to address the issues that have been at the core of the conflict, for example disputes over distribution of land and other resources, or policies of ethnic or religious discrimination. But if issues are bypassed, the roots of the conflict will continue to fester beneath the surface, thus endangering any peace-building process. (RAWOO, 2000)

A framework for the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding

The literature on women in peace-building evolves around several theoretical propositions about women and war. Some of these theoretical propositions take the following form:

a. men make war-women make peace
a. victimization vs. women's agency
c. causes not consequences

Much of the current literature on peace studies has focused on the gendered nature of war. These studies have unearthed the largely androcentric structure and male-dominated culture in the practices of soldiering and military conscription. This has led to the common assumption made by many scholars that men make war while women make peace. Many peacemakers have similarly claimed that while men are soldiers, women were the mothers. It was construed that women's social and biological roles as nurturers have generally made them adept at building relationships that bridge ethnic, religious and cultural divide. Feminist theorists however have ferociously challenged this notion. They claim that it essentializes notions of both masculinity and femininity and poses the latter as superior to the former. It has been noticed in different conflicts that women are not only victims of war but also active participants. Women can be involved not only as nurses, mothers of disappeared, keepers on the home front in times of war, but also in the role of those who commit serious atrocities and abuses. In Sri Lanka, some male fighters perceived women Tamil paramilitaries to be more violent than their male colleagues (de Silva, in press). But beyond the critique of this dichotomy, the usefulness of this assumption is made apparent in its focus on the socialization process. Thus roles may not be biologically determined but the different socialization processes, which men and women undergo in their life processes, may certainly influence them. These studies are therefore useful to the extent that they throw a light on these socialization processes.

There is a larger debate in the literature regarding women's agency versus victimhood. Women are more readily conceived of as victims of war. A consequence of this has been the tendency to limit women's agency in the peace-building process. As a counter to this trend, a body of literature has grown in which women's agencies have been made the focus of attention (Manchanda, 2001). As an alternative to this binary thinking Roberta Juliana have advocated a somewhat different approach (1997) using the concept of the victimized self to argue that by taking action against victimization, women actually diminish it.

Most of the literature on conflict deals with the consequences of conflict, for example what happens to women men, people, societies, nations as a result of conflict. But feminist scholarship on women and security has been among the first to foreground structures of patriarchy, capital and militarization as a cause of conflict rather than a consequence. Scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1993) have demonstrated how gendered structures influence military establishments and practices.

For our purpose here, which is to look at peace-building as a gendered process, it is more useful to take into account Cynthia Cockburns view that peace is a woman's issue because of reasons of justice. She maintains that "if women have a distinctive angle in peace it is not due to women being nurturing. It seems more to do with knowing oppression when we see it." Knowing what it is to be excluded and inferiorized as women, gives them special insights into the structure of unequal relations at the root of conflict. Women therefore are more likely to see a continuum of violence because they experience the connected forms of domestic and political violence that stretches from the home to the street to the battlefield.

The argument above has also relevance for the nature of peace-building process that we are talking about. If awareness of one's oppression is one way of gaining insight for a just peace, then very obviously processes of peace-building begin *during* conflict and not necessarily *after* the cessation of hostilities, which more often than not is marked by a formal accord.

We shall therefore examine the gendered dimensions of peace-building in the following ways:

(i) As a formal process where women's roles, presence and perspectives are often excluded or remain neglected

(ii) As a process whereby women bring into play their own perspectives and realizations about themselves and their community and mobilize and organize on the basis of such realizations during conflict and after a formal accord has been reached

Such a perspective will therefore lead us to examine processes of peace-building not only after a formal accord has been concluded but to look at processes both prior to and after the accord. We will thus look at the gendered dimension of peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts context in three phases pre-accord, at the nature and conditions of the accord itself and post accord situation. But before that we discuss a bit of the background of the conflict and the accord reached.

Background to the Conflict in the CHT

The southeastern part of Bangladesh, commonly known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) occupies a physical area of 5093 square miles, or 13,295 square kilometres constituting ten per cent of Bangladesh's total land area. It shares borders with India and Myanmar and is inhabited by about 13 (according to some estimates 10) ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas, Marmas and Tripuras constitute the majority. Non-indigenous hill people, i.e. Bengalis who are predominantly Muslims also live in the CHT.

According to the 1991 Census, the total population is 974,465 out of which 501,145 (51 per cent) belong to groups of different ethnic origins. About 49 per cent are

Bengalis. It is to be noted that about 70,000 refugees who were in the Indian state of Tripura from 1986 to 1988 are not included in the Census report. Out of the total land of the CHT, only about 3.1 per cent is suitable for agricultural cultivation, 18.7 per cent for horticulture and the remaining 72 per cent for forestry.

Over the last quarter century, the indigenous people of the Hill Tracts have been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state. The main roots of the crisis on the CHT centred on the land issue, the transfer of population from plain districts and the control of administration by non-inhabitants. Besides, discrimination, deprivation and exploitation in social, cultural, economic and political fields and the programme of assimilation of the indigenous hill people into the majority Bengali population were other bones of contention. (Tripura, 1992, Ahmed, 1992, Mohsin, 1997a)

It was in 1997 that the Parbottyo Chattagram Jan Samhati Samiti (PCJSS or JSS), the armed wing of the struggle for Jummaland reached a peace accord with the Government of Bangladesh. The accord came in for considerable criticism by people of different political persuasions. The mainstream political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party BNP (then in the opposition), thought it was a sell out on the part of the government to the rebels. The 'civilian wing' of the struggle, the Proshit group, through it was a sell out on the part of the Shantibahini (as the armed wing was popularly called). The split within the struggle resulted in the formation of two parties of which one, the JSS, because it had signed the accord, now became the official party to form the Regional Council, and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). The result was the polarization of the politics of the Hill Tracts and the division of the people into two – and as a consequence their bargaining power has been reduced. More than five years have passed since the Accord and signs of implementation have been slow, and the JSS is now threatening civil disobedience if the government does not act.

The accord and the responses

The CHT Accord, concluded by the official wing of the Parbotto Chottogram Jana Sanghati Samiti and the Government of Bangladesh in 1997, consists of four sections: (Roy, 2003)

- The first section, recognizing the CHT as a 'tribal inhabited area', deals with commitments to pass legislation and sets out details of the composition of a Committee to oversee the implementation of the Accord (but does not set out any time frame for implementation).
- The second section, entitled "Hill District Local Government Councils/Hill Districts' Councils", details proposed legal amendments to strengthen the District Councils' existing powers and to extend their jurisdiction to include new subjects.
- The third section, entitled "Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council" lays down the composition of a new unit of regional authority to be constituted and styled as a "Regional" Council incorporating the three hill provinces or "districts". In the case of both the Regional and the District councils, the chairpersonship and two-thirds of the seats are to be reserved for indigenous or "tribal" people.

- The fourth section, entitled 'Rehabilitation, General Amnesty and Other Matters' addresses a wide range of issues, including the rehabilitation of international refugees, internally displaced persons and indigenous fighters, and the grant of amnesty to the guerillas and other people involved in the armed struggle.

Whatever the disputes regarding the contents of the accord, one of its prime limitations was the lack of a time frame for its implementation. According to the PCJSS, which has been protesting against the non-implementation of the CHT Accord, the following major unimplemented provisions were considered to be crucial:

a. the non-withdrawal of (all except a few) non-permanent military camps;
b. the non-transfer of land and law and order matters to the District Councils;
c. the passage of the CHT Land Commission Act of 2001, in violation of provisions of the Accord (reducing the geographical jurisdiction of the commission and providing too much power to its non-indigenous chairperson);
d. the non-commencement of the work of the Land Commission;
e. the appointment of non-indigenous persons to the post of (cabinet rank) Minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Chairperson of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board.

The PCJSS have also criticized other aspects of the situation following the Accord, including:

f. the inclusion of non-permanent residents of the region as voters in the recent parliamentary elections (which were participated in by the UPDF and boycotted by the JSS)); and
g. the inclusion of non-indigenous people within the list of the "internally displaced."

It may be mentioned that the UPDF were the dissenters who thought that the Accord was a 'sell out' on the part of PCJSS as it compromised the prime objective of the struggle i.e. regional autonomy. The Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) who was in the opposition at the time of signing the Accord also critiques it but as a "sell out" on the part of the Awami League (AL), since it compromised the Constitution and national integrity of the country. Even since it came to power in the 2001 elections, it has been trying to undermine the demands of the PCJSS and threatening to scrap the agreement altogether.

The gendered dimension of peace building

a. pre-accord

It has been mentioned before that processes of peace-building not only make themselves evident after a formal accord has been concluded but that they occur both prior to and after the accord. In examining the more informal processes of peace-building in the Hill Tracts, where women's contribution has been significant, we come across their political awareness; in the literature they wrote, the songs they sung, how they confronted the day to day realities of war both at home and in public, how they mobilized and organized themselves.

i. Political Awareness of Hill Women

Women in the Hill Tracts have been highly politicized through their struggle against state oppression, especially with regard to ethnic and national identity. Earlier it was explained how the term Jumma, a source of collective identity has been used as marker to offer the hill people a new sense of being. Women too have internalized this in many ways. One of the indicators of this is evident in many of the protest songs and poetry written during this period and sung by activists. Kabita Chakma a young activist poet's famous poem is called Joli No Udhim Kittei. (Why Shall I not Resist! __ originally written in Chakma and Bengali)

Why shall I not resist!
Can they do as they please -
Turn settlements into barren land
Dense forests to deserts
Mornings into evening
Fruition to barrenness.

Why shall I not resist
Can they do as they please -
Estrange us from the land of our birth
Enslave our women
Blind our vision
Put an end to creation.

Neglect and humiliation causes anger
the blood surges through my veins
breaking barriers at every stroke,
the fury of youth pierces the sea of consciousness.

___ I become my own whole self
Why shall I not resist!
(Chakma, 1992.7)

She also writes of the day when the struggle will end. Here she does not talk of revenge but of love.

Someday
Someday my heartland
will light up in the sun