

# Ethnicity and democracy: The case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh<sup>1/ 2/</sup>

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The south-eastern part of Bangladesh divides into a western half, the Chittagong plains, and an eastern half, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In the north, these Hill Tracts border on the Indian state of Tripura, in the north-east on the Indian state of Mizoram, in the south-east and south on the Burmese provinces of Arakan and Arakan Hill Tracts. This multiplicity of political borders is a postcolonial artefact. Geographically we might contend ourselves in distinguishing the western plains from the eastern hills and mountains, and this geographical division is in nearly perfect congruence with the dividing features of the inhabitants of the two areas.

The western plains are inhabited by people of the Mediterranean (Indian) type, speaking Indo-European languages. Since centuries they were organised in centralised states, based on wet-rice (plow) cultivation and trade, with Islam (besides Hinduism) the dominant religion. The eastern hills on the contrary are inhabited by people of the Mongolian (Southeast Asian) type, speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, politically organised in small chieftainships or lacking any centralised institutions, their subsistence based on highly self-sufficient slash-and-burn (hoe) cultivation. In Bengali this type of cultivation is called "jhum" and the people practising it "jhumia," locally pronounced "jumma." If there was anything unquestionably common to all the "hill people" or "tribals" up to the end of colonial times it was their characterisation as "jumma."

Their languages, though belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, were divergent enough to be mutually unintelligible. Their political organisation was varied too. The "valley dwellers" like the Tippera in the north, the Chakma in the centre and the Marma in the south had their own Rajas, who, however, in olden times had no say over mountain sections of their people speaking the same language but claiming a different tribal identity. Other mountain tribes speaking languages of their own (Mru, Khumi, Khyang) acknowledged no central authority. There were, however, also

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<sup>1/</sup> **Quotation:** Löffler, Lorenz G. 2002. In *Aussaaten, Ethnologische Schriften*, 411–22. Zürich, Switzerland: Argonaut-Verlag. **Comment:** See the list of publications for details. This paper and the list of publications are available as pdf files on this webpage: [www.supras.biz/literature/loeffler.html](http://www.supras.biz/literature/loeffler.html).

<sup>2/</sup> Paper presented at the XVIth World Congress of the International Political Science Association (Panel on "Ethnicity and democracy: Congruence, confluence or contradiction?"), Berlin 1994. My political colleagues found some flaws in my argument. I preferred not to revise it. However, statements implying the year of their formulation (like "ten years ago") have been changed.

mountain tribes in the east with chiefs of their own and a socially stratified system (as with the Bawm, Lakher and Lushai).

Religiously, the Marma and Chakma profess Buddhism, the Tippera Hinduism, the eastern hill tribes were converted to Christianity, others like Mru and Khumi in large parts still follow their own creed. In acknowledgement of their professing Hinduism, the Tippera got their own state within the borders of India (quite a few of them, however, live in the CRT). The eastern Christian tribes, dominated by the Lushai, were united in the Indian state of Mizoram, while the equally Christian Bawm and Pangkhua, speaking languages which might be called dialects of Lushai, live in the CHT. The Buddhist Marma speak practically the same language as the Arakanese and by their ethnonym identify themselves as Burmese (Marma, Burma, Myanmar are nothing but variants of the original designation "Mran-ma"), but unlike in the case of Tripura, there was no question of allotting their territory to the Burmese Union.

The largest ethnic group of CHT are the Chakma. Physically, they look similar to the other "hill tribes." Buddhism has become their dominant creed (but traces of Hinduism do exist). Their own script is akin to that of the Burmese, but their language is a dialect of (Muslim) Bangla. While Marma women defend their rights against their husbands, Chakma women come closer to Bengali women in submitting to male predominance. Bengali men do marry Chakma girls. Still, if anyone in the CHT insists on belonging to the Jumma Nation and not to the Bengali, this is the Chakma. It is actually their elite, trained in Bengali high schools and universities, who invented the term "Jumma Nation" for all indigenous people of the CHT, whatever their tribal identity.

There has been much discussion in the scientific community about the artificiality of ethnicity. For the traditional tribals of the CHT ethnic identity was nothing to be disputed, they had enough cultural characteristics of their own for every man and every woman to tell which tribe he or she belonged to, and they preserve and insist on these characteristics until today. To be sure, there were ways and means for individuals and small groups (more exactly: for their descendants) to change their ethnic affiliation, but to do so the persons involved would have to change language, creed, types of clothing and housing, ways of calculating kinship, and a lot of other everyday cultural practices. Whatever small amount of passing ethnic borderlines there was, it never called into question the fact of different tribal identities. A mere proclamation of the "Jumma Nation" cannot overcome these identities. All that the people of the Jumma Nation have in common is that their forefathers were "slash-and-burn" cultivators, real "jummas," quite distinct from any Bengali peasant. This

commonness, though apparent to any visitor who leaves the plains for the hills, is, however, no guarantee for a feeling of identity beyond the traditional (ethnic or tribal) boundary.

These different identities are held up despite the fact that the tribes had and have no distinct territories of their own. Slash-and-burn cultivators, in distinction to wet-rice farmers in the plains, never acquired private ownership of the land they worked. To be sure, village communities knew their territory, but friends and strangers were admitted and, at least in former times, there were places in between, claimed by nobody, where groups of settlers might try to install themselves. Thus, although the tribes are concentrated in certain areas, today you may find villages of Chakma, Manna or Tippera in nearly every area of the CHT. Finding villages of different tribal affiliation side by side, one might expect mutual enmity (for competing for the same resource, scarce land) or collaboration (for having to face common problems in the same region). In reality there is neither conflict nor co-operation with regard to villages, and both with regard to individuals. Tribal identity provokes no common interest against another tribe. The members of one tribe may not hold those of another tribe in high esteem (why should they, they do not follow the same customs), but this is definitely no reason to rally against them as a unit.

This is valid also on a higher level: all indigenous people of the CHT loath the Bengali plains people, but this is no reason to unite as "jumma" against them. If Mr. X has his trouble with some Bengali, no wonder, I have mine too. How could it be otherwise? Allowing for a few clever persons, we all are suffering. That's it – really, that's it. The assumption that common fate should create common action to alleviate it, is as a rule misleading.

The CHT were a product of British colonial policy. The administration of the Mogul empire did not control the CHT, but they controlled the trade with the inhabitants of this area. The tribes of the interior, the eastern tribes in my terminology, however, had their own way of provisioning themselves. They raided the plains from time to time – reason enough for the British to extend the pax britannica to the area committed to peaceful trade, that is the western hills, later on called the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But opening the way for Bengali traders into this area hitherto beyond their reach, soon proved detrimental to the "simple-minded" tribals. It was not before 1919, however, that the British restricted the further influx of Bengali people into what the British had declared, fifty years ago, to constitute the CHT. The special status of this area, however, was already fixed by the CHT Regulation of 1900, a document especially dear to the present-day fighters for

autonomy of the CHT, amended and re-amended by the British and the subsequent Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments.

Due to the restrictions on Bengali immigration (while indigenous hill people, even from areas now under Indian or Burmese government, were free to move in and out) the Bengalis in the CHT by the end of the colonial time accounted probably for the less than 5% of the population, today they may amount to 50%. This increase, to be sure, has not been possible but by forcibly ousting a considerable number of the original settlers from their ancestral lands, a process facilitated by the western conception that these indigenous people had not property claims on the land they worked. Already in British eyes they were semi-nomads, making their living in "unclassified state forest." But the British, imposing on them a household "jhum tax," acknowledged their inherited right to do so, while at the same time trying their best to induce the indigenous people to change their ways and to take to plow cultivation on privately owned land. This first development projects (around 1900) met with some success in the central CHT, where British administration was most present.

The Pakistani government by constructing a dam for a hydroelectric project flooded exactly this area, depriving 80.000 Chakma, at this time a quarter of the whole CHT population, of their subsistence basis (cf. Sopher 1963). Money spent for so-called "rehabilitation" rarely reached those really affected: the area of formerly reserved forest opened to resettlement largely became an area of immigrant Bengalis. More than 20.000 Chakma finding no new place to stay emigrated to India and were removed by the Indian government to the North Eastern Province, where they were to compete for land with the indigenous people already settling there, similar in complexion, but otherwise totally unrelated to them. These Chakma, after thirty years still waiting for Indian citizenship, in the meantime number at least 60.000 and are again under the threat of expulsion.

Those who remained in the CHT had to be accommodated somehow, but whatever new land they were able to clear, they, like the remainder of those who had not to suffer "displacement" (in 1962-1964), after the formation of Bangladesh (1971) had to face a government sponsored influx of Bengali settlers. The independence of Bangladesh followed the stepping back of a military regime which had lost the support of the people and had to accept a democratic vote. In face of what had happened to a quarter of the population in CHT, one might expect a clear vote against this regime. But this was not the case. The Awami league of Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, subsequently the first president of independent Bangladesh won all over the country – except in the CHT. The tribals in their majority supported an independent candidate, the Chakma Raja, who in the end sided with Pakistan against

Bangladesh, after Mujib was unwilling to return to the CHT their special status granted them by the British.

There were, however, modernists who opposed the old "feudal" system of the Rajas and were elected on an Awami ticket into the provincial (after independence of Bangladesh, national) government in Dhaka, the eastern capital. They too asked for the restitution of the "autonomous" status of the CHT, but Mujib refused. They should forget their ethnic concerns, the CHT were to be opened for any citizen of Bangladesh wishing to settle there. Subsequently, the Awami league representatives of the CHT started to organise the resistance against the government sponsored Bengali "infiltration."

Opinion-leaders of today tend to tell you that the people of the CHT were against Pakistan and fought for independent Bangladesh; in Mujib's opinion the majority of the CHT population had supported the Pakistani side, and in this, according to my information, he was correct. Mru, Marma and Bawm informants in 1964 (the very year the Chakma had to suffer so much from the dislocation, lack of rehabilitation and additional Bengali immigration) were definitely fond of the military regime. It had, under Ayub Khan, introduced the "basic democracies" and thereby, the first time in the existence of the CHT, given the people a right to vote, to elect their own representatives in constituencies where they really mattered: at the local level (cf. Löffler 1968).

For the common people of the CHT in the 50s the Pakistani government was just another kind of foreign colonial power; but in the 60s it had assumed the role of a protector of their interests by allowing tribal representatives, elected by the people, to have a say, however limited, in local matters. It was the first time that government relief operations (as in the case of famine) really reached them, that their exploitation by local Bengali administrators, policemen and traders could in some instances be checked. Thus, when parliamentary democracy was to be re-introduced, people could not really be interested in getting rid of their Pakistani protectors who had restrained Bengali exploitative power. Only those who hoped that a democratic Bangladeshi government would grant more autonomy to the CHT (as well as those embittered against the Pakistani government because of the losses and sufferings after the construction of the dam) could support those who fought against Pakistani supremacy.

The policy of the new Bangladeshi government, however, betrayed all hopes for more autonomy. On the contrary, it embarked on a forceful integration of the tribals into the national "mainstream" by flooding their area a second time, this time by Bengali immigrants from the over-populated plains. These Bengali farmers, to be

sure, were not prepared to cultivate mountain slopes, they spread in the valleys and wherever they found land suitable for plow cultivation or in places suited for crafts and trades, that is, especially all around the artificial lake, an area hitherto predominantly inhabited by the Chakma. Still, in the years to follow, the other "valley dwellers," Marma and Tippera, had to suffer under the Bengali influx as well. While there was little the Chakma could do against the rising water – they just had to move out – they now put up some resistance including armed resistance.

During the Bangladeshi liberation war, tribal defence guards had been formed to protect their villages from marauding Pakistani and Bengali troops in several places, and the new Bangladeshi security forces never managed to recover all the arms left in the CHT during the war. Since in the beginning these indigenous guards were meant to ward off the warring parties, they called themselves "peace force" (Shanti Bahini), and under this label the indigenous resistance organisation is fighting until today (1994) against the Bengali invasion. There are quite a few Marma and Tippera among the Shanti Bahini, but in their majority the fighters and their leaders are Chakma.

As already mentioned, the resistance organisation was built up by the very Chakma members of the ruling Awami league, who had been elected members of the national parliament in the newly proclaimed secular, socialist People's Republic of Bangladesh. They were the people who had fought for the independence of Bangladesh, expecting autonomy for the CHT in return. But nothing like that was ever written into the new constitution, and even though this constitution has been amended several times in the years to follow, any kind of autonomy is still denied to the people CHT on the grounds that this would violate the constitution.

Still, the performance of the new democracy thwarted not only the aspirations of the people of the CHT – disappointment also spread all over the country. The Prime Minister himself called his own parliamentarians a band of thieves and robbers, and when he tried to restore law and order by gaining dictatorial powers, he and most of his family members were assassinated by army officers. After several coups and countercoups, a military regime was re-established, Islam replaced secularism, and foreign policy was realigned to seek the help of Pakistan against India, Bangladesh's birth attendant. By this anti-Indian stance the Bangladesh military government also gained the support of the NATO – for the resistance movement, still oriented towards socialism, it meant some support from the Indian side. The Shanti Bahini, when pressed too hard by the army, could withdraw across the border to India, and up to now the security forces of Bangladesh have not been successful in wiping out the "rebels."

On the other hand, the continued existence of the Shanti Bahini and the initial support given them by the indigenous people has served as a welcome pretext for anti-insurgency measures like relocating the people into strategic settlements and handing over their former property to new Bengali settlers. When these settlers came under the attack of the Shanti Bahini, Bengali military and paramilitary forces retaliated by attacking, looting and burning the nearest indigenous villages, driving the people into refugee camps beyond the international border in Tripura state. Tens of thousands of Chakma, Marma and Tripura have become victims of the ethnic cleansing process (cf. Mey 1984, IWGIA 1991).

As already mentioned, not every place in the CHT is equally suited for Bengali settlers. Thus the smaller hill tribes have been under less pressure, but they too did not remain unaffected, since more and more military camps have been and are still erected all over the CHT. Indigenous villages were regrouped around these camps so that any attack of the Shanti Bahini would hit them first. As another protective measure the military insisted on having the surroundings of their camps cut completely bare. The villagers were paid for this by the USAID financed "food for work" program – more than often their only income since also their fields and gardens fell victim to this botanical cleansing process which in this area of heavy monsoon rains accelerates soil erosion to an unprecedented extent, while, in order to stop erosion, the hill people themselves are no longer allowed to practise their old slash-and-burn cultivation. They are pressured to take to plantation work instead – but no plantation can survive once the military decides to protect this area. In the 80s development specialists in the government of Bangladesh came to the conclusion that every inch of the hills could be planted with rubber, but rubber trees shed their leaves and regrow them only after the monsoon rains have set in. As a consequence, the ground soil is washed away, laying the roots bare, so that the plantations start to resemble mangrove forests. The hill peasants were dependent on the fertility of their soil – with rubber plantations it will be gone in a few years, and then they will have to go too.

I refrain from listing more of these so-called "development" programs, financed by international aid. Suffice it to say that most of them are clearly detrimental to the survival of the indigenous people, the mere existence of whom has been denied again and again by representatives of the Bangladesh government in international bodies and committees. Still, international protests against the ethnocide in the CHT have been gaining in strength, and in 1988 the government under General Ershad decided to alleviate the situation by instituting a new democratic order in the CHT, allowing the people to elect local councils with the majority of seats and the chairmanship guaranteed for the representatives of the indigenous people. The Bengali immigrants,

by then constituting nearly half of the population of the CHT, opposed this new order as they found themselves underrepresented, but the resistance fighters equally opposed it as in their eyes it legalised the "illegal infiltration" of Bengali settlers who should be "repatriated" in order to allow the tribals to regain their ancestral lands and possessions. As a matter of fact, these local councils were given nearly no power to decide or change anything. In the eyes of the Shanti Bahini, the indigenous members of these councils were traitors helping the military in their dirty job, the military, on the other hand, suspected them to be Shanti Bahini members in disguise.

Thus, while the first experiment in local democracy under the military regime of Pakistan proved a success in rallying the people behind the government, the second experiment under the military regime of Bangladesh proved a flop, contributing to no confidence or alliance at all. In both cases, however, this experiment in local democracy proved a prelude to the re-introduction of parliamentary democracy at the state level, and none of these parliamentary democracies contributed anything to establish more democracy at the local level – until today the CHT are a territory under military rule. Indeed, to grant or to re-institute special rights for a minority may be much more difficult for a parliamentary democracy than for a military dictatorship.

In the last paragraphs I have treated the indigenous population of the CHT as a unit. I have, however, refrained from calling them the "Jumma Nation," as the resistance movement would have preferred to do. I did not do so, since I shall have to add some qualifications. The resistance movement is far from having the support of all tribals. It is organised by a highly educated Chakma elite with international connections, but with little esteem for what they would call the more backward hill tribes, the original jumma. The "most backward" of these are the Mru (cf. Brauns and Löffler 1990). A German chemical engineer, interested in the anthropology of Bangladesh, wrote about them: "By their way of life they are incapable to a civilisatory change; for them time has practically come to a standstill." Mistaken as he is in his judgement, he may share it with the Chakma elite.

But he also reported: "In October/November 1985 [...] the Mru and the Chakma fought a battle, with the Mru winning it according to their own statement" (Belitz 1987: 36,42). As I could ascertain in 1990, this time the story is true, with "the Mru" represented by some villagers, "the Chakma" by a camp of Shanti Bahini. It was not really a political fight but an act of retaliation for the death of a Mru girl the Chakma soldiers had brought into their camp. The Mru used their old breech-loading guns which they, as the only tribals in the CHT, still know to fabricate, illegal as it was. Like Belitz, the Bangladeshi policy makers took these villagers to represent "the



Mru" and the Shanti Bahini camp "the Chakma." As a result the Mru were encouraged to form their own defence force, to be trained, armed and paid by the Bangladesh military. Still, in 1991 when I intended to revisit the Mru village I had studied years ago, the Bengali security forces insisted on having me accompanied by themselves, not by the Mru Bahini, who, as I learnt from other sources, had not seen any payment since long and had not fought any battle with the Shanti Bahini whom they preferred not to take notice of. However that may be, the Mru definitely did not give any support to the Chakma and hence might be viewed to side with the government against those who fought for protecting their rights against the encroachments of the Bengalis who did not hesitate to drive them out of their villages without any compensation, whenever they found it convenient (Löffler 1991).

The Mru, as I knew them, since long feared and hated the Bengalis, but despite all their plights they never organised themselves to put up an armed resistance. Instead (in the middle of the 80s) many of them became adherents of a new religion, based on rules written down in a new script of their own (quite unlike Roman, Bangla, or Burmese script) by a young prophet who himself had disappeared but might return to salvage God's own people, that is the followers of the new rather puritanic religion. Thirty years ago, I had come to know the Mru as rather rational individualists, having no priests of their own and doubting the metaphysical truth offered to them by the surrounding religions, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. By 1991 they had developed a millenarian but no military movement. They had caught up with their neighbours by having their own script and had organised their own schools, but the contents of their learning were quite different from those of the modern Chakma, Marma, and Tippera elite. While the latter based their claims on internationally accepted human rights, the Mru had started to trust in their own God to rescue them from any Bengali, Chakma or whatsoever worldly power.

To explain these phenomena by the civilisatory backwardness of the Mru will not do. The life style of the Chakma, Marma and Tippera by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite of their overtly differing religious affiliation, was rather close to that of the Mru. They all were illiterate "jumma" and the concepts of nature and the world were mutually intelligible. The real difference lies in the development of a modern elite. Some exceptional Mru have acquired some education by their own efforts, but until recently nearly no Mru had ever had the chance even to visit a primary school. The Chakma on the other hand can boast their own high school and university professors, international businessmen and diplomats, as well as, as I mentioned, their own members of parliament. Marma and Tippera lag behind the Chakma; correspondingly less is their participation in the resistance movement. Nobody knows

how many Marma had to leave their homes under Bengali pressure. They, like many Mru, may have moved out to Burma without asking for any attention to their flight. Those who provided the international human rights bodies with the numbers of their compatriots in exile were the Chakma. It is they who know how to organise resistance and support. No Mru could do that. No Mru can hope for any help from outside – for these people there is nobody but God to turn to.

The reaction of the Chakma and the Mru to the intensely experienced threat to their further existence is quite realistic, but it is moulded on the development of their elite. The Mru will not be able to organise themselves even on a tribal basis; the Chakma elite, on the other hand, envisage the supra-ethnic jumma nation. This elite in theory fights for democracy, in practice it would loath to be told by a majority of "backward" illiterate hill people what to do. Chakma peasants have learnt to submit to and follow the orders of some learned, economically or politically powerful men. The Mru have learnt to be submissive too; but whenever they can, they evade any power. They never mistake the compliance forced upon them for a higher truth to be followed in their own interest. They have a very clear conception of the reasons and consequences of social stratification, and they tried their best to prevent its institutions among them by refusing the introduction of landed property even for collectivities.

In their view democracy means that everyone is free to decide for himself what is good for him without encroaching on the same rights for everybody. The Mru grant these rights even to children and insist on not physically punishing them for antisocial behaviour; they are convinced that their youngsters before reaching adulthood will have learned to behave as considerately as they themselves. This, to be sure, may change once these youngsters are subject to the rude training of the Bengali military. At present, however, I can well understand the mistrust of the military officers for their Mru voluntary allies whose egalitarian conviction makes them unfit for any reliable military discipline. For the same reason, however, they will not join the guerrilla forces. In case of emergency they will only see one possibility: to move out without resistance.

The Buddhist Chakma who resist Bengali oppression are much closer in mind and morals to their enemies than are the Mru. The Chakma claim equal rights with the Bengali because they have become equal to them; the Mru try their best to preserve what Marx would have called primitive communism. Their opposition to the exploitative Bengali society is much more fundamental than that of the Chakma whose young leaders in 1970 were joining forces with their Bengali colleagues in fighting colonialism and feudalism in order to achieve modern socialism. The

Chakma socialists had to experience betrayal, oppression, expropriation and expulsion from their former Bengali allies before they turned ethnic nationalists.

Still, the modern Chakma elite is divided in view of the question which of their identities is more fundamental, being Chakma or being Jumma. The Mru do not doubt their Mruness. Even though officially ordered to stop slash-and-burn cultivation, they still, even if badly, live on it, thus continuing their existence as jumma in fundamental opposition to the economically intruding and politically dominating foreign Bengali. But their cultural commonness has no consequences: they will not join forces, neither as Mru nor as Jumma. And I even doubt that they all will join as believers in their new religion. Some will, others will not. What the Chakma try to achieve by their military resistance, the Mru try by cultural resistance: the preservation of their ethnic identity. So far the Mru have fared better: while the Chakma are already in search of their identity (they have become a class society, the Mru still have preserved it (there is still no lasting stratification among them).

What is all this going to tell us about democracy and ethnicity? It all depends on what you understand by these terms. There is the original democracy of the Mru; the "basic" and "local" democracy granted to the people of the CHT under military dictatorship, and the parliamentary democracy on a national level which never granted any new form of selfgovernment to the people. There is the ethnic identity of the Mru which never grew into an organised ethnicity, and there is the national Jumma ethnicity of the Chakma which tends to negate tribal distinctiveness in a way not too different from the Bengali doctrine of a single nation, even though on a lower level corresponding to the real state of discrimination.

Ethnicity was not a thing invented by the tribal leaders of the CHT; the state of Bangladesh itself was founded on the claim that Bengalis were not just Pakistanis, but had a language and a culture of their own to be respected by the central government. And as this government would not listen to this claim (it would have split apart West-Pakistan in turn), Bangladesh had to become an independent nation. But as there were Bengalis on both sides of the border with India to be easily overridden by a secular socialist credo equally popular on both sides of Bengal, to retain the identity of Bangladesh meant reviving the Islamic identity which at the same time excluded the people of the CHT and betrayed their modernists who had believed in the common ideal of a socialist people's republic, free from exploitation.

Exploitation was rife in Pakistan times, and in the CHT it was felt as an ethnic exploitation juxtaposing the indigenous people to the Bengali. But the socialists conceived of it as a class phenomenon hitting the poor Bengali in the same way as it hit the poor people in the CHT. This analysis did not lack some truth, but the

common people in the CHT had only too often experienced it as an exploitation legitimised on the Bengali side by cultural and religious (Muslim) superiority, and even the socialist elite of the CHT could not ignore this aspect. So they had to ask for protective state measures for the "honest hillman" against the impertinent, deceitful and grabbing Bengali, measures which already the British colonial administration had found necessary to take. As a matter of fact, laws were there. What was lacking was the chance of a poor man, to say nothing of a hillman, to see them applied in his favour. That Pakistani courts started to curb the craftiness of the Bengali big shots contributed much to win the approval of the hill people who until then had experienced justice as a matter of ethnic affiliation.

Thus, whatever the value of the Marxist analysis, it was ethnic antagonism that dominated people's consciousness and definitely turned into ethnic confrontation, once the socialists of the dominant majority tried to negate it. It only could gain in momentum once the redefined Muslim nation started to oust the opposing minorities from their ancestral lands. Still, the practical difficulties experienced by the modern elite of the CHT to redefine the ethnic diversity of the CHT as a common Jumma identity and fate – an identity which should logically result in a common struggle against the intruding Bengali Muslim majority, which, however, factually results in quite distinct forms of mutually unacceptable forms of resistance – clearly shows the militant ethnicity to be an import from outside. The first to introduce it were the university students and the political elite of what was to become Bangladesh, and they introduced it as a coinage to buy international support in their liberation struggle, will say their fighting for the power to exploit their people on their own account without Pakistani interference.

The coin of Bengali Muslim identity had two faces, to be turned up as opportunity demanded. Democracy was just another of these coins to be used for gaining popular support and international credit. As basic or local democracy it was used to strengthen the military regime, as parliamentary democracy it was used to bring the military regime down again. The only time it gave some relief to the rights of the lowest strata was the last days of the Pakistani regime when the bourgeois elite and the military elite vied for control.

Today, the bourgeois elite and the military elite have agreed on mutual support: officially Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy, but practically nothing can be done without the consent of the military. Since the start of armed resistance in the CHT the military administrators have succeeded in transforming the area into a marvellous bonanza of their own, and the prime minister of the Republic, whether the wife of a former military dictator or the daughter of the former "socialist" would-

be dictator, found no reason or had no chance to interfere. While the colonial system imposed a single tax, the inhabitants of the CHT in 1990 had to pay four times, once to the civil administration, once to "their own" local councils, once to the Shanti Bahini and once, last but not least, to the military who provided for their survival by international aid. There is democracy, but it deprives the people of their rights, there is ethnicity, but it is used to extinguish ethnic identity.

Could there be a way out? To be sure, there could be one. Demilitarise the CHT, allow the people their ethnic identity and allow them democratically to decide about their own future. But this would mean peace, and why should policy makers be interested in peace when so much is to be gained by war? In order not to be misunderstood: I am not just blaming the elite of Bangladesh, but above all our own governmental businessmen who, in full knowledge of the disaster going on, offer more aid money to Bangladesh than can be decently swallowed. With all that money the so-called "international community" since long could have bought the CHT from Bangladesh in order to make it a zoo for studying the last remnants of unstratified truly democratic people without ethnicity.

More realistic, however, is the chance that the military policy will succeed in completely and irretrievably destroying the country's natural fertility, the basis of tribal livelihood, thereby solving the questions of ethnicity and democracy. The oil companies will move in again<sup>3/</sup> to continue their search for natural resources yet to be unearthed, an endeavour disrupted by the Shanti Bahini. I should add, however, that the Shell Oil Co. is said to have paid a very substantial ransom fee to the Shanti Bahini and may not have been willing to resume its activities since the government of Bangladesh did not consent to let the tribals participate in the gains to be expected. Near Eastern countries are alleged to have sponsored the islamisation of the CHT. But let us not talk about religion. Once the backward natives are gone, there will be no obstacle anymore to business as usual.

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<sup>3/</sup> [Postscript 2001:] This was my prediction in 1994. After the "peace accord" of 1998 it became true.

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