

BOOK REVIEW

Humayun Azad, *Parbatya Chattagram: Shabuj Paharer Bhetor Diye Prabahita Himgshar Jharnadhara* [The Chittagong Hill Tracts: The Stream of Violence Flowing Through the Green Hills], Agami Prakashani, Dhaka, 1997, Price, Tk. 40/-, pp. 48.

It is refreshing to read a booklet on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) written in Bangla by Humayun Azad who is a versatile writer in his own rights and whose style of writing is non-conventional.

The mini-volume, under review, is the outcome of his visit to the CHT from 9-11 June, 1997. Understandably, along with other intellectuals, he was also invited by the current Awami League government and the Bangladesh Army to visit the CHT and to inspect the situation through his own eyes. What he offers is a vivid, precise, and clear-cut picture of the CHT problem touching upon the geography, economy, socio-cultural and ethnic features of the tribal people, the changed perception of the *Shanti Bhahini*, intra-factionalism within the *Shanti Bhahini*, the role of the Bangladesh Army and its attitudinal change about the CHT problem, the May 1997 peace negotiation and the possible India's involvement in it and a host of other issues related to the subject. Broadly speaking, Azad gives us a discourse on the CHT, which is political science-literature.

Azad holds that the key problem of the CHT stems from not out of the absence of "independence" or "autonomy" in the CHT. Rather, the problem emanates from the persistence policy pursued by the feudal lords of the Hilly region - the policy which has not helped improving the lot of the common people of the CHT. He reveals that the regulation of 1900 has made the common people of the CHT the slaves of the feudal lords. It is worth reflecting that Azad very consciously uses the word "slave" which is not usually found in the literature on the CHT. This is what makes his work non-conventional. He contends that through the regulation of 1900, the feudal lords have made the CHT an excluded country. He holds the view that still the feudal lords want to keep the CHT an excluded country - a fact about which the innocent poor people of the CHT are fully in the dark. Azad categorically asserts that this process cannot go; consequently he suggests that the existing feudal social structure must be abolished, for he sees neither the present nor the future of the commoners as long as the existing feudal social structure remains intact. His non-conventional style of writing becomes pronounced when he shows his lack of confidence in contractual peace; to him it is dubious in its nature; and he believes that the seeds of the breach of contract remain hidden within the contract itself. To him, the signing of the peace-contract cannot and will not establish peace in the CHT; it is only by way of improving the lot of the Hill people can peace be established there.

Azad argues that no rebellious movement can be carried for an indefinite period of time unless the rebels receive direct logistic support from the neighbouring states. In this connection he mentions the names of Myanmar and India which keep supporting the rebels. He contends that these two countries support the rebels not in the hope that one day they will emerge victorious; these two countries provide support so

that the process of rebellion does not come to a full end; Azad passes the judgement that both India and Myanmar know that it is of no use to make the rebels emerge as the winning party; he also passes the judgement that it is not possible to make the rebels victorious, and the idea of "Jummaland" is unrealistic; he mentions that Radcliff did not include the CHT as a geographical part of India because the CHT is economically fully dependent on East Bengal.

He shows that nowadays although the rebels have toned down their demand for "independence", they have many demands. The five-point demand, tabled by the *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS)*, actually contains 50 demands - asserts Azad (p. 35). He argues that if these demands are accepted, then Bangladesh will no longer remain a single political entity. Mentioning 7-point out of the 50, he forcefully argues that no Bangali can accept such demands, for they make the CHT an excellent "Jummaland" which would be an excluded area for Bangali. Azad finds it fully unacceptable. For, he maintains that the need of the hour for the people of the CHT is neither an autonomy nor a tribal parliament nor a Jummaland. The crying need for them is the development of their economic and educational condition within the shortest span of time (p. 36).

Azad, who is very critical [although he has not detailed them] of the past governments' role in the CHT, mentions that already the image of Bangladesh Army has been tarnished; he suggests that this has to be restored. To overcome this, he suggests to open the CHT to all people including the world body so that all people can go there and visit the CHT and see and inspect the real situation in their own eyes; this is how he feels to bridge the communication and perception gaps between the people of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Army.

Azad reveals that the Bangladesh Army has awakened to the self-realization that the solution to the CHT problem lies not in guns. Since the problem of the CHT is essentially a political one, it has to be solved politically and on humanitarian basis. Azad believes that now time has changed; and along this the very mindset of the Bangladesh Army has changed. The other dimension of the CHT problem that relates to the Bangladesh Army is: malaria, mosquitoes, and alienation. Azad points out that the Army has been plagued by these problems.

Azad demonstrates that extortion of tolls by the *Shanti Bhahini* is the key means which keeps the rebellion movement going. He estimates that about Tk. 20-30 crores a year comes out of this toll-extortion. "Toll or death" is the option offered to the people of the CHT. Naturally, people cannot willfully embrace death, so they offer toll against their will. Thus, it is utterly a hostage-like situation where the government has been metamorphosed into a powerless organ to stop the process. But he reveals that it is not only the *Shanti Bhahini* which extracts tolls; the system has also given birth to other various groups who too seizing the opportunity keep extracting tolls.

To Azad, one needs to be a real dove to have peace in the CHT; it is not possible to have peace and at the same time to be a hawk. Digging out the recent intra-factionalism within the *Shanti Bhahini* regarding the leadership, [Shantu Larma has been expelled from the *Shanti Bhahini* as its Chief and he has been replaced by a radical, Ushatan Talukder] Azad talks about the rumour that the current government is going to strike a peace deal with the wrong person as the government has picked up Shantu Larma who has no backing of India. Rather, it is heard that India backs Ushatan Talukder. The situation has become further complicated as the *Shanti Bhahini* wants India to be included in the peace process. Azad maintains that it has

both good and bad sides. The good one is that if India really wants that peace should prevail in the CHT, then peace will come; and the bad one is that if New Delhi does not want peace there, peace will never come in the CHT. This is a very bold projection which shows that the India factor looms singularly very large over the CHT problem. And, New Delhi can become both hero and villain.

Azad mentions that the regulation of 1900 was annulled in 1930; but this was disliked by the Hill people and consequently they protested (pp. 20-22). Why did the Hill people act the way they did? The reason being, Azad shows, the Hill people wanted to be confined within their own world, thereby isolating them from the outside world (p. 22). If so, then who is to blame for their slavery as they protested the annulment of the regulation of 1900 in 1930? Azad has not addressed this. He has not also addressed the issue of limited-demilitarization in the CHT. Azad has recommended for the overall improvement of the lot of the common people of the CHT and at the same time has suggested to make them modern educated men. Well, these are daunting challenges. After all, modernization is a relative term. Clearly, the prescription that Azad offers is a Bangali prescription. Question is: do the Hill people perceive it the way Azad does? It appears that Azad has not tried to feel the pulse of the Hill people on this point. Argued thus, one can question Azad's impartiality. In addition, the printer's devil has made its presence visible (pp. 23, 25, 26).

What are the points of strength then *Parbatya Chattagram: Shabuj Paharer Bhetor Diye Prabahita Himgshar Jharnadhara* do have? One strength of the piece lies in Azad's mastery to dissect an intricate problem by way of demystifying some popular perceptions. And, the other strength of this

oeuvre is its rich literary flavour and texture that keeps bubbling up all through the volume as readers find that Azad often uses similes, metaphor, and analogy while analysing the subject-matter. For example: the opening sentence of the book runs as such: "The Chittagone Hill Tracts, a panoramic piece of land of Bangladesh, remains *sick* and *injured* for three decades." Note how deftly and intelligently Azad paints the problem of the CHT by using two metaphors: *sick* and *injured*. These two metaphors are enough of a hint to finger out how precarious is the situation of the CHT, and one cannot but be pretty sure that unless this on-going process of sickness and injury come to an end, the future of the CHT remains ever bleak. The bottom line is: peace has to be established in the CHT not through by guns but by humanism. Azad puts humanism above all.

Overall, Azad is quite transparent, bold, candid, and straightforward in his judgement, argument, assertion, and logic. The volume advances, as hinted earlier, some significant new arguments and hence it is hoped that it will invoke interest among the readers and receive wider readership from all sections of the society.

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