Colonialist Barriers to National Integration: Modern Bangladesh and the Problem of ‘Hill People’

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Introduction
A large number of the modern nation-states emerged after the Second World War as the colonial empires began to crumble. From Africa to Asia, anti-colonial movements had taken the form of nationalism, and these movements were successful in constructing the idea as well as the reality of what Benedict Anderson termed “imagined communities,” i.e., modern nations. However, after gaining political independence from colonial rule, almost all the post-colonial nations faced, in varying degrees, internal conflicts over differences of language, religion, race, and so on, or what can generally be described as ethnic problems.

Of course, ethnic problems are not limited to the post-colonial “Third World” states. The dramatic break-up of the Soviet Union is a case in point. While many explanations continue to be offered as to the break-up, it can be argued that one of the causes was the desire by different nationalities to be free from Russian domination. If we look at the other communist giant which is still existent, namely China, we see ethnic resistance to Han domination in Tibet and elsewhere. Turning our attention to the West, we see the presence of serious ethnic problems in many countries—the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), Spain, Belgium, and Canada, just to list the prominent cases. And there is that ubiquitous phenomenon in the West that goes by the name of racial conflict. From Bangladesh to Bosnia, from Sri Lanka to South Africa, from Punjab to...
Palestine, we can think of numerous cases which clearly show that ethnicity is one of the most challenging problems—both theoretically and politically—of our times.

About two decades ago, Geertz characterized the integrational problems faced by the post-colonial states as resulting from conflicts between “primordial sentiments” and “civil politics.” But the persistence and proliferation of ethnic problems around the world forces us to take a different view. The ways in which different ethnic groups articulate their identities and political aspirations cannot be simply dismissed as the expression of “primordial” sentiments. Rather, it is important to view the emergence of modern “nations” and the development of “sub-national” ethnic movements in the same historical context.

Historically, European colonial expansion has been one of the most powerful forces that have shaped the modern world. In a sense, it is colonialism that has created most of the modern nations, which cannot be thought of as entities that existed prior to colonial conquest, to reemerge heroically after beating the colonialists back home. Before European colonial expansion began, there were different “races” living in various kingdoms and empires, or as independent “tribes,” but nowhere were there nations in the modern sense of the term. Nationalism, “one of the strongest ideational forces of modern times,” was a European invention, which later spread through the rest of the world. Many of the ethnic problems that we encounter today are nothing but the growth of “nationalisms within nationalisms,” as Geertz himself noted. The most enduring impact of colonialism, then, has been to force so many people around the world to define their identities in European terms. And the forces of colonialism are far from gone.

Colonialism persists not only in the form of “neocolonialism,” but also through the colonization of the mind by colonialist ideas, images and categories (“internalized colonialism”), and in the continuation of colonialist forms of exploitation and domination within the so-called post-colonial states (“internal colonialism”). This paper explores the last two issues in the context of the ethnic problem that exists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.
Internalized Colonialism

At present, two terms, "tribal" and "hill people" ("Pahari"), are used interchangeably to refer to the various "non-Bengali" ethnic groups of the Hill Tracts collectively. Neither was in vogue until the British introduced them. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how and why the British constructed such categories.

That the categories "tribal" and "hill people" were colonial constructs can be shown quite easily. Captain Lewin, the first Deputy Commissioner of the Hill Tracts, informs us that "none of the [hill tribes] appear to have any general term for all the hill dwellers." This means that the "hill tribes" did not see themselves as constituting a special and distinctive category. Nonetheless, the British thought otherwise, and they felt that there should be a general term to designate all the "hill dwellers." Terms such as "hill tribes" and "hill men" were coined for precisely this purpose. Thus a new type of ethnic division—"tribal"/"non-tribal"—was created which had not been used previously either by the "hill people" or by their neighbors in the plains. Earlier, each of the "hill tribes" had their own way of designating ethnic boundaries. For example, the Tripuras used the expression "Wanjwi Shikam," which literally means "Bengalis and Kukis," to mean "Other people." From this it may be concluded that the Tripuras in the past felt no closer affinity to the "Kukis" than they did to the Bengalis. However, today a Tripura will include the ex-"Kukis" in the same category of "We the tribal people," where a distinction is implied with respect to "Them Bengalis." As for the Bengalis, they did not in the past treat all the "hill people" as belonging in one ethnic category either. Lewin tells us: "The Bengalees distinguish hill men into two classes. The friendly tribes living close along the Chittagong border, they call Joomas [i.e., Jhumias]; and all other hill men, more especially if unable to speak the vernacular of Bengal, are distinguished as Kookies." Clearly, the "tribal"/"non-tribal" or Pahari ("hill men")/Bengali dichotomy that is commonly used today in the Hill Tracts was not in use until the British introduced it. Now, what prompted the British to demarcate a distinctive category of people they called "hill tribes" or "hill men"?

To call a people living in hill areas "hill people" may seem to
make linguistic sense. But in British usage, such a designation involved a number of dubious assumptions regarding the nature of the societies so designated. One of the main assumptions for the British was that the “hill peoples” were all tribal societies. But there were really no specific criteria by which the British could decide when a society was to be regarded as a tribal one. For them, “tribal” mainly meant “primitive,” “savage,” “wild,” etc. In anthropology, a tribal society is understood to be one in which social, economic, and political relations are all organized on the basis of kinship principles. By definition, tribal societies lack state organization, and they do not constitute parts of state-organized societies. In this sense, there are really no tribal societies in today’s world, because there are no societies which live beyond the reach of the modern state-system. However, when the Europeans began building their world-wide colonial empires, presumably there were many societies which were still “tribal,” that is, they lived in isolation from the state-organized societies. It was in this sense that the communities living in the hills bordering Assam and Bengal came to be designated as “hill tribes.”

In reality, many of the so-called hill tribes did not at all live in isolation from the “non-tribal” communities of the plains. For example, the Tripuras, who had lived under a “feudal” form of state—the Kingdom of Tripura—for several centuries, had close cultural contact with the Bengalis. Similarly, the socio-political organization of the Chakmas and the Marmas had evolved in close interaction with various state-societies, namely the kingdoms of Tripura and Arakan, and the Mughal empire. Thus it was problematic from the very beginning to call these communities “tribes,” and changes brought about by colonial rule certainly made the notion of tribal society even less applicable. However, though the label “tribal” was inaccurate from an anthropological or historical perspective, it provided a waste basket category where communities which did not fit the evolving definitions of “Hindu,” “Bengali,” and so on, could be placed. Thus the tribal/non-tribal dichotomy became an important theme in the British “ Orientalist” discourse on Indian society and history.

The tribal/non-tribal dichotomy was conceptualized in terms of differences in various areas: geography, language,
racial origin, moral character, and so on. In terms of “Orientalist” categories, the “hill tribes” were “Tibeto-Burman” speaking “Mongoloid” “immigrants” who had remained outside the fold of the “Hindu” caste-system or of the Mughal empire. But while the “hill tribes” were thought to be less advanced culturally than the “Assamese” and the “Bengalis,” their moral potentialities came to be evaluated highly. They came to be depicted as Children of Nature, untouched by the social evils prevalent in the plains. However, in putting forward this simplistic image of the “hill men,” the British confronted certain anomalies. Thus, of the Tripuras, Lewin wrote: “[They] are the only hill people...among whom I have met with meanness and lying—the only people whose savagery is unredeemed by simplicity and manly independence.”9 While Lewin did not cite any instance of meanness or lying, it is clear where his low esteem for the Tripuras came from: “The Tipperah [Tripura], where he is brought into contact with, or under the influence of, the Bengalee, easily acquire their worst vices and superstitions, losing at the same time the leading characteristics of primitive men—the love of truth.” 10 Lewin did not like the Bengalis11, therefore it was only natural for him to single out the Tripuras, who in his view had come under the “corrupting influence” of the Bengalis, as a debased type savage. Actually, those “tribes” which were supposed to have remained at a more “natural” state were not totally innocent either. For example, one of the reasons why the “Kukis” carried out their infamous raids was to collect “slaves” who were made to work in jhum fields.12 However, rather than questioning the validity of their simplistic notions, Lewin and other colonial writers simply glossed over the contradictions between their assumptions and observations. It was in this way that the tribal/non-tribal dichotomy was constructed by the British.

The British no longer rule us directly, but their categories and notions continue to rule our minds. Colonialist assumptions such as that the people of the Hill Tracts are “tribal,” that they live beyond the pale of civilization, are still with us. Thus even in scholarly journals, one still comes across passages such as the ones quoted below: “The most distinct features of the tribes are their social structure and political system, which are exclusively tribal in character with each group dominated by its
clan head.” 13 “Most of the tribals are yet to receive even a peripheral contact with the civilised world, about a half of them having a semi-nomadic life.” 14 Clearly, such conceptions only help to reinforce the “tribal”/ “non-tribal” dichotomy that the British bequeathed to the post-colonial nations of South Asia. Given the uncritical acceptance of the categories, notions and theories inherited from the British, it is only natural that post-colonial national identities—Pakistani, Bengali, Bangladeshi—have not been broad enough to accommodate the “tribal” people.

When the “tribal” people are described as “Mongoloid” people who speak “Tibeto-Burman dialects,” practice a “primitive” form of agriculture, and so on, they appear really alien with respect to the “non-tribal” people, i.e., the Bengalis, who are “racially mixed,” whose language is “Indo-European,” etc. Not that there are no differences between the “tribal” people and the Bengalis, but the problem is that they are conceptualized in such ways that they preclude the formulation of a more encompassing identity. The racial categories that we learned to use from the Europeans were constructed on the racist assumption that there have been some original “pure” races in history, an assumption that is not supported by modern anthropology. When we say that the “tribal” people are “Mongoloid” whereas the Bengalis are “racially mixed,” we ignore the fact that there is a substantial diversity of physical features among the “tribal” people also. Similarly, when we say that Tripuri and Bengali belong to the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-European “families” respectively, it is implied that the two languages have no “genetic” relationship. Yet they show very close similarities at the levels of syntax and morphology. Clearly, the “tribal”/Bengali differences are far from being clearcut, and a careful reading of history will confirm that whatever differences there are were considered far less significant in the past than they are today.

If we want to imagine the national community of Bangladesh in such a way so that the “tribal” people feel at home, it is obvious that we must decolonize our received notions, our sociologies, our histories.

Internal Colonialism 15

The tribal/non-tribal division, however, cannot be dissolved
simply by discarding colonialist assumptions. Colonialism persists at a more material level as well. If we examine the position that the “tribal” people occupy in the nation-state’s economic and political set-up, then the arrangement can easily be shown to be a form of colonialism. For the “tribal” people, the end of British rule merely meant a shift in the locus of state power, but the colonialist appropriation of their land that the British had initiated continued unabated, only to accelerate since the 1960s.

The Hill Tracts is an “internal colony” both in being an area economically exploited by the state at the expense of the local inhabitants, and in being treated as a wasteland where peasants from outside can come in and settle. No doubt, the ideological foundation for exploiting the resources of the hills for the benefit of ruling outsiders was laid down by the British. By definition, the “tribal” people live at a “primitive” state of culture, thus outsiders have never had any doubts that the people of the Hill Tracts must abandon, among other things, their “crude” form of agriculture, i.e., jhum cultivation.

When the British came to rule the Hill Tracts, they tried to determine the best way to exploit the area economically. The jhum cultivators produced very little surplus that could be appropriated. But if they could be induced to take to the plow, the amount of collectible revenue would increase. The British also saw the forests of the Hill Tracts as a rich source of timber, so they set up “reserved” forests (reserved for the rulers to cut down). This had the effect of limiting the amount of cultivable land for the jhumias, who now would have to make a gradual transition to growing wet rice in the valleys, just as the British wanted them to. The British had no doubt in their minds that jhum was a crude and primitive mode of agriculture standing in the way of better utilization of resources.

The jhumias had their own logic which was valid given the ecological and historical factors that prevailed in the Hill Tracts. As long as the land-population ratio stayed within the carrying capacity of the land, jhum was more “profitable” for the cultivator because it met all her needs and was not very labor-intensive. And rather than being destructive to the environment, jhum was a good forest management technique because at any given time, only a small portion of the total land
area was cultivated. If jhum was really as destructive as thought to be, then one wonders why the forests of the Hill Tracts were found to be a rich source of timber. Deforestation was never a serious problem until societies more “civilized” than the shifting cultivators introduced efficient ways of cutting down trees.

In the Hill Tracts, the jhumias who lived in the valleys also had to take the “Kuki” factor into account. Even if they ran out of land for jhum cultivation, plowing the valleys was not an option since it would have meant a more settled life, thus making one an ideal target of the Kukis. However, after the British “pacified” the Kukis, the fear of raids disappeared. This change and the setting up of reserved forests gradually induced the jhum cultivators to switch to wet rice-agriculture. However, the removal of the Kuki factor also meant that Bengali peasants too could now go into the Hill Tracts in search of land, but the British policy of “protective insulation” limited the number of Bengali peasants who could settle in the Hill Tracts. Thus the possibility of Pahari-Bengali conflict over land was precluded until the 1960s when the Pakistani government finally lifted the colonial policy of keeping the hills for the “hill men” only. But by this time, most of the valleys were being cultivated by the “tribal” people themselves. Thus the “tribals” and Bengalis headed for a collision course over the limited amount of valley land that existed in the Hill Tracts.

The creation of the Kaptai Dam only aggravated the situation further. Not only did this development project not create any economic opportunities for the “tribal” people, but it displaced a very large number of them and submerged 40% of the total amount of prime agricultural land of the Hill Tracts. Clearly, the Kaptai Dam was one of the most dramatic manifestations of internal colonialism. Now, rather than trying to minimize the disruptions that this development project caused in the lives of the “tribal” people, rulers only added more pressure to their survival by opening up the Hill Tracts for Bengali settlers. It was in this context that the “tribal” people began to raise their voices, and later, took up arms, demanding regional autonomy.

The notion that there is room for more people in the Hill Tracts loses ground when ecological characteristics of the area
are considered, and when it is recalled that of the nearly 100,000 people displaced by the construction of the Kaptai Dam, many ended up as refugees in India, where they were resettled in places as far away as what is now Arunachal. Nonetheless, in the late 70s and early 80s, a large number of Bengali peasants were brought into and resettled in various parts of the Hill Tracts. In the process, once again many “tribal” villagers became uprooted from their homes to become refugees in India as well as within Bangladesh. Ironically, it is the Bengali settlers whom many “tribal” people refer to as sharanarthis, i.e., refugees. Of course, they are refugees in an economic sense from their own point of view, but for the state, they are above all weapons, both in military and political senses. In the military sense, they act as “human shields,” located in strategic locations, usually around military camps. In the political sense, they are weapons for drastically altering the demographic make-up of the Hill Tracts.18

While this large-scale population relocation program is usually defended with the false argument of “low” population density of the Hill Tracts, the fact that it was planned secretly and carried out under active military guidance leaves no doubt as to the “strategic” calculations that were behind the move. Rather than addressing the legitimate grievances of the “tribal” people, grievances that the Shanti Bahini capitalized upon in launching its movement, the rulers merely added more reasons for the “tribal” people to suspect that all the Bengalis—the military, the settlers—were there to evict or exterminate them.

So far, the military has been the main instrument which all the successive governments of Bangladesh have relied upon in dealing with the problem of “tribal insurgency.” But it seems that the real function of the military is not to confront the insurgents directly, but to contain the “tribal” people as a whole. The village regrouping program that was carried out some years ago was a clear indication of this.19 And, on a more daily basis, the “tribal” people’s movement within, into, and out of the Hill Tracts is strictly controlled by an elaborate network of military checkposts, where ritual displays of power are enacted everyday in the form of Bengali soldiers inspecting the belongings and the bodies of “tribal” citizens. Nowadays Bengali civilians are
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subjected to inspection as well, but there used to be a time when sentries would simply board a bus and announce, “All you tribal people, get off the bus.” Below the security rationale behind all this, one can see the daily reassertion of state power, and the reinforcement of the gulf that separates the Bengalis and the Paharis. If the Hill Tracts is an internal colony of Bangladesh, then at the checkpoints are enacted, on a daily basis, ritualized encounters between the colonizer and the colonized.

Conclusion: Beyond the Boundaries

In addition to the colonialist attitudes and policies of the ruling Bengali elite, the current problem in the Hill Tracts is further confounded by the “Indian factor.” Bangladesh accuses India, though not always directly, of aiding the Shanti Bahini. However, whatever the extent of Indian involvement may be, too often the issue becomes just a pretext for ignoring the endogenous factors that keep the insurgency going. After all, India did not help create the Shanti Bahini, which initially looked towards China as a potential source of help. It was only after the changeover of 1975 in Bangladesh that India began aiding the Shanti Bahini. However, it is clear that so long as relations between India and Bangladesh continue to be less than cordial, the “tribal” people will be doomed to remain pawns in geopolitical games. But if the neighboring countries can rise above narrow interests—the creation of SAARC is a positive indication that efforts are being made towards this direction—then perhaps the concerns of the “tribal” people can be accommodated without much strategic worry.

It remains to be seen whether the Paharis, the Bengalis, the Bangladeshi nation, the Indians, and larger entities such as SAARC, can all co-exist and flourish without being in conflict with one another. It seems that decolonization at various levels is a necessary step towards achieving this ideal.
Notes and References

5. For a more detailed treatment of the issues discussed in this section, see this author's article (1992), "The Colonial Foundation of Pahari Ethnicity," in *The Journal of Social Studies*, No.58, Dhaka: CSS.
7. Ibid.
10. ibid, p.86.
11. "A tithe of the care and beneficence expended upon the Hindoo would make of these hill races a noble and enlightened people....My great and distinctive feeling with them has been that they were my fellow creatures, men and women like myself: with the Bengallee I have never been in accord." Ibid, p.118.
12. cf., ibid, p.35.
16. "The fear of the inroads and attacks of the independent tribes on the frontier has hitherto prevented the large level of tracts existing all over the district from being occupied by Bengali settlers, but a movement is now commencing and during the last year or two, much land along the Chittagong Border of the district has been leased to men of the plains, and there is but little doubt that under more favourable conditions of tranquility the greater portion of the district will be brought under
cultivation, and that the main source of revenue, as in other parts of India, will arise from the land-tax." Lewin, op. cit., pp.27-28.


18. In this regard Bangladesh shows remarkable parallels with China in many respects. In China, as in Bangladesh, one ethnic group, the Han, constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population (94%). But faced with non-Han ethnic groups living in sensitive border areas, as in Tibet, the state encouraged Han migration to such places. What is remarkable is that the Chinese had initially accepted the Leninist position that national minorities had the right to secede. But soon they backed away from this official position. Thus today China regards Tibet as an “integral” part of its territory, where the Han Chinese has far outnumbered the Tibetans. See, L.W. Pye (1975) “China: Ethnic Minorities and National Integration,” in N. Glazer & D.P. Moynihan (eds.) *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

19. When “tribal” villagers were rounded up in the “cluster villages,” they were told that this was to provide them with the amenities of modern civilization, but in reality it was nothing but a counter-insurgency technique, pioneered by the Japanese in Manchuria in the 1930s, which has been tried by various states, including India, who tried it on the Nagas in the 60s and 70s. See, N. Maxwell (1980) *India, the Nagas and the North-East*, Minority Rights Group Report No.17, (New edition), London: MRG, p.7.