



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies
1/46, Old Elephant Road, Eskaton, Dhaka-1000

Seminar
on
The People of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Their Development Needs

Organised by BISS on Monday, 21 April 2015

SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

1. Introduction

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a **Seminar** on "**The People of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Their Development Needs**" at the BISS Auditorium on 21 April 2015. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, **BISS** delivered the Opening Remarks and presided over the session. **Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**, Adviser on International Affairs to Hon'ble Prime Minister, graced the occasion as Chief Guest and gave his valuable address. Two papers were presented in the Seminar, one by **Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and another by the Key Note Presenter of the Seminar **Professor Dr. Khurshida Begun] Syed**, Commissioner, Information Commission, Bangladesh. The designated discussant of their papers was **Professor Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed**, Department of International relations, University of Dhaka.

Following the presentations, a lively Open Discussion session took place where distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives_ of multi-disciplinary professional bodies, representatives from the foreign missions, government and non-government agencies and policy makers actively participated, raised questions and gave their valuable comments, suggestions and recommendations. **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BLISS, concluded the Seminar.

2. Opening Remarks

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad addressed in the opening remarks that the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is of tremendous strategic significance to Bangladesh for its location, size and resources including human resources. He also described the crisis of armed conflict in the CHT and the initiative of Peace Accord signed in 1997 between. Bangladesh government and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS).. He stated that Peace Accord opened the door for peace and development in the area. He remarked that, in spite of good intentions behind the

Peace Accord, its implementation, however, has been fraught with difficulties resulting from misinterpretations, diverse opinions held by different groups over the Peace Accord and ineffectiveness of legal bodies constituted as per the agreement. Considering this, he added, BISS has conducted this Seminar to generate dialogue among all the stakeholders to take a step forward in better understand the development needs of CHT. He remarked that restoration of peace following the conflict has no guarantee for sustained peace. Therefore, he emphasised on the need for peace building through appropriate socialisation, integration, rehabilitation and sustained development. Mr. Ahmed also informed the audience about different development projects initiated by the government for the development of the CHT and remarked that those initiatives deserve appreciation. He further added that, it is very important to take note of the interests of all groups as well as the security interests of Bangladesh. According to him, peace and development in the CHT is about creating an environment would enable the people of the region to live with each other in peace and harmony based on dignity, social justice and equal rights. He finally commented it is necessary to realise that CHT is a part of this country and everyone either individually or collectively should work for the sustainable development of this region.

3. Key Note Presentations

At the inception of his speech, **Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, quoted from historical CHT Peace Accord, Part 3, Section 9, that the government should allocate additional finance on priority basis for the implementation of increased number of projects towards development of CHT. He also remarked that the government should implement new projects on priority basis for the construction of required infrastructure. He then informed the audience about the topography of CHT. He added that about 42 percent of the forest land lies in CHT plays an important role on biodiversity, preventing erosion, maintaining water quality and flow, reducing the severity of flood and regulating local and regional clarity. He noted, despite rich biological, cultural, and environmental resources, CHT remains most disadvantaged and backward region of the country. Mr. Tripura then mentioned some of the major challenges of CHT include predominantly rural atmosphere, scattered settlement, extreme topography, remoteness, isolation, poor infrastructure, population explosion, etc. He remarked that despite the challenges, there are potentials which could improve the lives of the local people and environment of CHT. He further added, in recent times, the framework for rural development has changed significantly due to globalisation, labor mobility, increased cultivation, progress in transportation and communication and advancement in mobile and interne technology. As the remote villages are increasingly being connected to national, regional and global market, young generation is keen to work in service sectors for facilitating labor movement from farm to non-farm sectors, including trade, business, tourism, etc. He opined Bangladesh government is committed for the socio-economic development of CHT people. Therefore, he suggested appropriate studies are required to integrate the CHT people in the mainstream socio-economic development. He also remarked, although the whole Bangladesh is facing the problem of wide spread poverty, development challenge faced by the CHT is quite different. It lags behind in almost all development indicators, such as poverty, income, food security, health, education, access to road, infrastructure, electricity and trade facility. Rate of poverty is 50 percent which is much higher than national average of 31 percent. Therefore, he commented, as CHT has specific needs, requirement and capability, different measures,

adjustment and deliberate mechanisms are required considering the appropriateness to the local culture and social context. Mr. Tripura finally concluded his speech with a quotation from 6th Five Year Plan and remarked that, lack of comprehensive understanding of the ethnic community and lack of specific objectives considering the needs and concerns of ethnic people in the mainstream policies remain the major problems and these need special consideration in the 7th Five Year Plan.

Dr. Khurshida Begum Sayeed, Commissioner, Information Commission, Bangladesh, in her presentation argued that the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh opened its enactment in the full conviction that the Liberation War in 1971 was thoroughly a people's war as it fought by the people from every corner of the territory irrespective of ethnicity, religious identity and gender. Their sacrifice and contribution were unparalleled. The presentation also highlighted that the CHT is in the south eastern part of Bangladesh. It covers an area of 1381 square km which is 8.9 percent of whole country. The topography of CHT is featured by forests, jungles, and hills. She also informed that Bangladesh is inhabited by 69-70 small ethnic groups which are 1.5 percent of total population, whereas; Bengali population is about 89.5-99 percent. There are more than 50 languages spoken by the small ethnic people. The small ethnic people of Bangladesh can be grouped into two categories: the ones who live in hill areas and others who live in the plain land. Considering all the topographic and demographic features, nevertheless, Dr. Khurshida suggested a three dimensional approach to the development of CHT people. This three dimensional approach consists of infrastructural dimension; expansion of social security network and human resources development; and political socialisation. Of the three, she emphasised on political socialisation means the development process by which people acquire political orientation, patterns of behavior and attitude. These values transmit from one generation to others. She also addressed that the people of CHT are all citizens of Bangladesh. They have their roles and responsibilities as citizens. She further argued, the terms 'primitive' and 'indigenous' are not the same. The primitive people can take permission to live in Bangladesh but they are not indigenous. Indigenous means 'belongingness to a particular place'. She also opined that the term 'settler' is not only absurd, but a deep conspiracy. She finally pointed out some priority areas for development needs like to develop a Bangladesh free from racial and religious conservations; replace the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs with Ministry of Ethnic Development following Constitutional guarantees, etc.

4. Designated Discussant

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, stated that any state needs the consent of the people. Without consent, it becomes domination. The people in the CHT must feel that there is consent and no domination. He noted that the problem lies with nationalism that creates alienation. He also said that the concept of nation originated in Europe does not belong to Bangladesh's civilisational discourse. With the concept of nationalism, there is an attempt to make cultural people a political one that will not go very far. He stated that Bangladesh is an idea in which people will live in harmony. Humiliation leads to conflict which should be avoided. It is a humiliation to identify the people of CHT as the small ethnic people. According to Dr. Ahmed, India is a signatory of the International Indigenous

Convention. Therefore, Bangladesh should also sign it. He insisted on establishing a university in CHT to nurture all the languages. The extinction of the languages will go against the spirit of the 1971 Liberation War. Finally, he said that by changing the mindset and trusting each other, sharing of land and resources will be possible without going further divergence and confrontation. •

4. Open Discussions

Gyanendriyo Chakma, Executive Director, Source Group, gave an observation that Dr. Khurshida Begum did not identify the problems of CHT people adequately, but Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, Secretary of Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, articulated the CHT issues and concerns properly.

Dr. Mohammad Mahfuz Kabir, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS posed some questions to the presenters such as-What is the nature of allocation of budget for CHT? When are we talking about the development needs or what the government is actually doing? Then he remarked, the growth of population in CHT region is not consistent with the other areas of Bangladesh which is quite alarming for the entire development process.

Goutam Kumar Chakama, a member of negotiating team with the Bangladesh government in 1997 and a member of PCJSS has shared some ideas on how the development activities can be done. He suggested the development process needs to be accomplished in line with the CHT Peace Accord. Also, the development process should be bottom-up and the process of integration should be continued.

Mr. Md. Touhid Hossain, Former Foreign Secretary, stated humiliation and mindset are the two most important aspects need to be taken care of. He further noted development is the vehicle to get over it. There is a necessity to get out from the past and look towards the future. He identified education sector as extremely important. There should be special provisions so that people of the CHT get more benefit out of the institution. He added communication is the most important as far as the economy is concerned. He also commented the real catalysts for the development of the region is tourism and giving high value of agriculture.

Major General Md. Abdur Rashid (retd) pointed out the burning issues of CHT are identity, political assimilation and tolerance which are very contradictory at this moment. He noted the settlement in 1997 Accord was done very nicely despite some complaints regarding the implementation of the settlement. He emphasised on coming into a consensus. He added the CHT people also have to learn the technique of accepting power. The land settlement must be done first. He further lamented that improving security situation will lead to demilitarisation. However, he feared, a sudden demilitarisation will lead to a vacuum in that area.

Mesbah Kamal, Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka, critically analysed some view points of Professor Khurseed Begum Sayeed. He wanted to know the source of Bangladeshi people living in CHT for 5,000 years. Then he raised some questions and viewpoint such as, who would bring or plan the development issues of CHT? Is Bangladesh going for commercial tourism or eco-tourism in CHT? He emphasised on control over resources.

Indigenous people should have due share on development. They should be part of the whole process including planning. The population transfer issue is a very important one. Population settlement or transfer must be stopped to ensure their own development process. The issue of rejection of university or medical college • by them should be taken with sympathetic consideration. In his opinion, there is fear behind this kind of situation which the government and people of Bangladesh should take into consideration.

Major General M Harun ur Rashid (Retd.) pointed out two development needs of CHT people: socio-political development and physical development. According to him, the major hurdle of CHT is the problem of mutual understanding. He opined, if the problem of land issue could be solved, all misunderstanding will be removed. He also viewed confidence building is the prime requirement and therefore, political integration and physical building should be ensured with utmost importance.

General Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan, • Chief of Army Staff, raised a question on the concept of marginalisation. Whether marginalisation from the Bangladesh or within the CHT people? He appreciated the bottom-up approach of development for CHT. He opined that, why should we keep a track on movement of population. It should not be stopped. Any part of Bangladesh, everyone has the right of moving. If Bangladeshis are stopped to move to CHT, then it would go against our Bangladeshi nationalism.

5. Address by the Chief Guest

Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser on International Affairs to Hon'ble Prime Minister, started his speech by thanking the two keynote presenters for their excellent and insightful ideas. He put emphasis on regular dialogue or meeting to remove misunderstanding between Bengali settlers and people of CHT. He identified some conceptual misunderstandings which create problems and tried to clarify it. First of all, he raised the idea of nation state. He opined that, the idea of nation state was emerged in late 17th and early 18th century. Nation come first and state later. He gave the example of condition of the sub-continent after colonial rule. The colonial ruler created the state and handed over the power to us. They left behind the multi-cultural, multi ethnic and plural society. India is far most a complex society and nation as it has survived through democratic process. He then explained in details as to where the problems are emerged. He mentioned about Huntington's book named "political Stability and Development" which stated that, all forms of identity including language and ethnicity are pre-modern. Only modern identity is nationhood. That analysis is based on misconception of modernity, according to him. People have plural identity. The identity is contextual. Misperception has been created based on identity. On the basis of this, he suggested that, we need to focus on consensus building recognising the diversity as strength, recognising the multi-cultural society as beauty and above all, need to include everybody. A cohesive society comes from inclusiveness. People's problem can be solved by them who face the problem and therefore active participation of the local government and emphasising on decentralisation process is required. According to him, the entire CHT Peace Accord is based on 'creating cohesive society". Lastly, he accomplished his speech by quoting Bertrand Russell that the future generation will remind a nation on how they treat their minorities.