

Culture, Identity and Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*

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Introduction

This brief paper addresses the problems and prospects of 'development' in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).¹ Anybody who has been following recent developments in the CHT would know that the region is about to become a site of a wide range of development activities. While 'development' is not a new phenomenon in the CHT, in the past all activities that might come under this rubric remained overshadowed by the armed conflict that plagued the region for so many years. However, in the aftermath of the Peace Agreement, it now seems to be the order of the day for the people of the CHT. Given this, some pertinent questions are unavoidable: What do different individuals, groups or institutions mean by development? What kinds of development are needed for the people of the CHT? How and by whom are various projects to be planned and implemented? And so on. In this paper, some of these questions are explored in the light of two interrelated concepts: culture and identity. It is argued that one must understand the dynamics of culture and identity of the people of the CHT (or of any other region for that matter) before one is to speak of development on their behalf.

The notion of development

There was a time when 'development' meant technological and economic growth in the manner of the industrialised countries and was seen as attainable and desirable.² While such conceptions still persist, they have been subjected to much criticism and reassessment over the last three decades. Given the widespread failure of 'top-down' approaches to development, since the 1980s the search for new paradigms of research and action has added new concepts in the field of development: e.g. 'sustainability,' 'grassroots development' and 'participatory research'. Today, the need

to involve 'local' people (i.e. those who are meant to be the 'beneficiaries' of development projects) at all steps of the development process is generally recognised by different parties involved: from local NGOs to international funding agencies. Similarly, recently there has also been much emphasis on the need to pay attention to 'indigenous knowledge systems' in development.³

While attempts to find new ways of thinking and acting in relation to development still continue, most of them fail to offer any fundamental challenge to the various structures of inequality--operating at global as well as national and local levels--that give the idea of development its meaning and force. From 'Third World' perspectives, critics have argued that the lack or slow pace of development in many countries is not due to the fact that they have not found the right path to progress, but because, historically speaking, the western industrial nations became 'developed' at the expense of their colonies, which became 'underdeveloped' in the process. They also argue that in final analysis, development projects mainly serve the economic and political interests of the industrial nations and the elites of the Third World who serve as their allies. Thus a growing number of critics have reached the conclusion that the idea of development needs to be abandoned in its entirety.⁴

Development in the CHT

If we turn our attention to the CHT, it is not difficult to see the validity of some of the criticisms of development mentioned above. As the indigenous people of the CHT have become too painfully aware, 'development' for them has meant dislocation, disruption and destruction.⁵ When the Kaptai dam was built in the 1960s, this type of 'development' projects was readily endorsed by most postcolonial states and donor agencies throughout the world. It is not necessary here to go into the details of the lasting impact that the Kaptai dam has had on the economic life and political development of the indigenous people of the CHT. It is enough to note that for the large number of people who still carry the memories of dislocation and deprivation brought about by the dam, any development project initiated by the state is something to be viewed with suspicion, and if possible, resisted.

The kinds of 'development' projects that were undertaken in the CHT since the 1970s in the wake of the armed movement organized by the Jana Samhati Samiti have not done much to allay the fears and suspicion of the local people. On the contrary, 'development' was conceived of as a counter against 'insurgency', as can be inferred from the fact that the CHT Development Board (CHTDB) used to be headed by military commanders until very recently. It is true that the CHTDB has undertaken

many projects that are purportedly for the benefit of the local people, but the extent to which these projects have improved the socio-economic conditions of the intended beneficiaries is open to question. Even if we disregard the role of military considerations in the conception and implementation of various development projects in the CHT, it may be asserted more or less incontrovertibly that institutions such as the CHTDB have hardly produced any 'success stories' that can be shown to the world. Such institutions do not generally consult its target groups in deciding what their socio-economic needs and aspirations are, and how they would like to attain them. Thus even if much 'development' may have taken place in the CHT on paper, it is doubtful that local opinions would confirm such an evaluation.

It may be argued that in the post-Peace Accord period, there is now a genuine opportunity for promoting development activities that are sustainable, participatory, and truly beneficial to the local people. This is how many people seem to think, as is attested by the competitive zeal with which many national and transnational NGOs as well as a growing number of newly formed local NGOs have begun, or are planning to begin, operations in the CHT. However, as long as 'development' means the uncritical adoption of ideas, models and techniques developed elsewhere, it is very likely that within a few years, the people of the CHT will also have to start thinking not in terms development alternatives, but in terms of alternatives to development.

Like everywhere else, the development institutions and organizations that are beginning to make their presence felt in the CHT will not be found lacking in highlighting notions of sustainability, participation, empowerment and so on. Thus it would be necessary to discern whether those professing allegiance to these notions are simply paying lip service, or are genuinely trying to introduce fundamental changes in thought and action. Most importantly, the people of the CHT will need to generate and articulate their own ideas as to what kind of development, if any, they want. These ideas will have to be rooted in their own historical experiences and must be meaningful in terms of cultural categories they can relate to. This is a process that has hardly begun in the CHT, thus there seems to be a long way ahead for all concerned. But many people in the CHT think that there is no need to rush to action. As I heard someone from the CHT say, "We lived without development for over two decades, so we can do without it for another few years."

Identity and development

The caution and patience that the anonymous statement just quoted suggests would be justified in the long run if the people of the CHT begin to ask themselves: What

does it mean for us to be a Pahari or a Bengali, a Chakma or a Jumma, a Marma woman or a Bawm man, an educated Chak or a Mru jum-cultivator, and so on? The answers to these questions are by no means as straightforward as they seem. I am a Tripura by birth. But I did not, could not, automatically fit myself into this 'vessel' of identity to which I was born. As I grew up, I had to develop--through my interaction with family members and other relatives as well as many other categories of people in my village, at school, at the marketplace, and so on--my own sense of what it meant to a Tripura. And over time, I began to realize that what being a Tripura meant to me was not always the same as what it meant to others around me. Moreover, my own interpretation of my Tripura identity has changed over time. And I have other identities as well: I am a Pahari, a Bangladeshi, a man of certain age and social standing, and so on. Now how do such various layers and dimensions of identity relate to one's economic and political aspirations and views of the kind of identity he or she wants to pass on to the next generation? This is a complex question which I can only touch upon very barely.

Let me try to address the above question by offering a hypothetical case study drawn from my personal experiences and observations. Imagine a Tripura boy growing up in the 1960s and '70s in a village located next to a market-cum-administrative centre where all the traders and shopkeepers and most of the government personnel were Bengalis. At home and in his own village, he interacted with relatives and friends who spoke Kokborok (Tripuri). But at school, he was shy because he could not yet speak Bengali very fluently. His shyness was further intensified when one day a teacher humiliated him by mistaking his difficulties in expressing his thoughts in Bengali for a lack of aptitude. There he was also intimidated by a few Chakma boys who bullied him and made fun of him for being a Tripura and a sissy. He began to dislike school, and maintained a distance from the marketplace and the government office buildings. The only place where he felt at home was his own village. Although many of the boys of his age in his village did not go to school, he saw them as friends whom he liked to play sports with and whom he could converse with fluently.

Our Tripura boy, however, gradually learnt to distinguish himself from other Tripuras he saw around him. He saw them as poor, illiterate, ignorant, superstitious and so on--in short, 'underdeveloped.' He dreamt that one day he would do something for their development. Some of his Chakma friends also had similar thoughts, which they shared with one another. Together, they used to dream of becoming doctors, engineers, magistrates, pilots, and so on. But soon many of them changed their minds as an armed conflict engulfed the whole region. Many of them wanted to join

the Shanti Bahini, and they did. One day, after being beaten by a Bengali soldier, the Tripura boy also thought of joining this guerrilla organization. Did he?....

I want to leave my story incomplete and return to the present. More than a year has passed since the Peace Accord (much acclaimed or vehemently condemned depending on one's point of view) was signed. While the implementation of the accord drags on at present, one hopes that it will be completed some day. If this process ends well, then in the near future we are likely to see a greater number of 'tribal' people occupying important positions in various institutions and organizations responsible for formulating policies, plans and regulations that will shape the future of the CHT. Suppose the Tripura boy of the story above, now a grown-up man, is one of these individuals. He used to dislike schools, markets and government offices. So if he is put in charge of any such institution, how will his past experiences influence the way in which he would like to run and develop it? One hopes that he would try to make these institutions more accommodating, and more open and responsive to the kinds of people he grew up with. But as long as he views such people as ignorant, superstitious and inferior to him, he is not likely to achieve the results that he may think he wants. Instead, he is likely to repeat the same kinds of 'mistakes' that others before him--Bengalis, Punjabis and the British alike--have made.

Thus, to bring our imaginative exercise to an end, let us remind ourselves that even though the total population of the CHT is not very large compared to the rest of the country, the ethnic make-up of this region is a complex one that needs to be taken into account in all development activities. Apart from the Pahari-Bengali divide that exists there at present, the Paharis themselves are divided into more than ten ethnic groups or subgroups. While as Paharis all these groups have gone through similar experiences, there are also important differences among them. In addition, within each group, there are various degrees of differentiation along the lines of class and gender. If we take all these factors into account, we will have to stop looking for any singular conception of development, and start looking for new ideas in the plurality of lived experiences in the CHT itself.

Conclusion

So far, I have hardly said anything directly about 'culture', although this word appears in the title of my paper. As a student of anthropology, I find it difficult to use this word meaningfully without bringing in ongoing debates about this central concept of our discipline. Nonetheless, let me just say that as I understand the term, culture is something--a system of symbols and meanings to be precise--that mediates all

human thoughts and actions. It is not something to be looked for in museums or staged 'cultural' performances alone. It exists everywhere where there are living human beings interacting with one another. For anthropologists, all human activities from the planting of crops to the building of dams to the organized relocation of populations are cultural events. And the various layers of identity that we discussed above are all constructed through cultural categories and symbols that change in the course of history. This means that being a Chakma or a Jumma or a Bengali is not a matter of sticking to a fixed set of values, ideas or norms. Such a conception of culture and history helps us look towards the future optimistically. Perhaps one day the people of the CHT will learn to live with one another more peacefully, not by eradicating their cultural differences, but by understanding the historical circumstances which produce such differences.

I would like to end this brief discussion by posing some questions to ourselves. In various cultural programs [such as the one organized after the seminar for which this paper was written, we often come across] dances and songs in which one would get a glimpse of the rich cultural diversity of the CHT. But what is the extent to which such performances represent the circumstances and the dreams and aspirations of all classes of people? The performance of dances or songs in which jum-cultivators are depicted in an idealized setting does not necessarily conform to the historical experiences of contemporary jum-cultivators. It seems that for many urban Jummas, the quest for identity is confined to such symbolic and romanticized reconstruction of a way of life that they themselves have left behind and will never return to. On the other hand, there are still many people in the CHT for whom jum continues to be important as a principal means of subsistence. So the questions that I would like to pose are as follows: How much do we educated urban Jummas know about the conditions under which today's jum-cultivators live? What are their futures? And so long as they want to continue to practice jum, how can it be ensured that they look like the happy people that we see depicted on-stage?

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Notes

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Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy at Proshika, 1998], and then reprinted in *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk*, ed. P. Gain, Dhaka: SEHD, 2000; and further reprinted, in abridged form, in *Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladeshi Nationalism*, ed. Naeem Moyaieamen, Dhaka: Drishtipat Writers' Collective, 2010.

- ² I am indebted to Ainoon Naher (1996) in developing this section of my paper.
- ³ Since the 1980s, much has been written in trying to promote alternative notions of development. In anthropology and related disciplines, some of the most widely cited works in this vein include those of Chambers (1983, 1994), Hobart (1993), Long and Long (1992), Pottier (1993), and Warren et al. (1995).
- ⁴ Authors who view 'development' and 'underdevelopment' as interlinked processes include 'dependency theorists' such as Frank (1969). Among those who have recently called for an end to development are Escobar (1995) and Rahnema and Bawtree (1997).
- ⁵ For a recent assessment of the "aggression of development" in the CHT, see Muhammad (1997)

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