

SETTLER COLONIALISM: A NEW APPROACH TO STUDY INDIGENOUS RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to bring forth the idea of settler colonialism as a possible instrument to address the ongoing indigenous rights crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)¹. The concept 'settler colonialism' has been used to study indigenous rights violations in many parts of the world including Canada, the United States, Australia and various South American countries. Here, we will focus on settler colonial tendencies centered around the indigenous population occupied territories in the world and see if they coincide with the situation in CHT, home to eleven indigenous communities of Bangladesh. The indigenous populations of CHT are increasingly being challenged to maintain their rights as indigenous communities and the situation is only getting worse every moment. This state of CHT is not an isolated event, dissimilar to other indigenous population inhabited areas of the world. Therefore, if we relate the ongoing crisis of CHT with the concept of settler colonialism, we may be able to observe the situation through a wide lens that may give us some new perspective on this historical problem that has been an issue for Bangladesh since its inauguration as an independent nation.

Keywords: Settler Colonialism, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Indigenous Rights, Indigenous Rights Violation

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous populations of Bangladesh's southern hilly region of CHT are being violated of their rights every moment. If we look at recent news reports and literature on CHT, we can easily identify a pattern to displace indigenous populations from their ancestral land and different initiatives to assimilate indigenous populations with the mass Bengali population (Barman & Chakma, 2010, PCJSS, 2020). These can also be construed as subtle ways to eliminate indigenous peoples and the idea of 'settler colonialism' is built on this very notion. Settler colonialism tries to extenuate indigenous existence and identity, which is a clear violation of their rights as human beings and as indigenous ethnic communities. Hence, I want to bring forth these elements while analyzing the social, cultural, and humanitarian crisis occupying CHT. In my opinion, this would connect the issues of CHT with other similar settler colonial zones in the world and create better ways for a wider audience, in and outside of Bangladesh, to understand what the indigenous communities of CHT are actually going through.

Settler colonialism is a very specific form of colonialism. Like colonizers, settler colonizers move to new spaces, but their goal becomes more than oppression and extraction, which are the main goal of colonizers, to include displacement of the natives. The extortion of indigenous peoples can take many forms like, "... *being physically eliminated or displaced, having one's cultural practices erased, being 'absorbed', 'assimilated' or 'amalgamated' in the wider population...*"(Veracini, 2011). So, settler colonialism looks to transgress human rights in every way to eliminate the natives from existence. If we look closely at CHT's present circumstances, we would see ever rising number of Bengali population that threatens to constitute indigenous populations as a minority in their own land, grabbing of indigenous ancestral lands to establish Bengali *Paras* (settlements), burning indigenous villages to clear off spaces in an effort to establish tourism sites, military camps and other, so called, development organizations. These activities are clearly against the rights and privileges our indigenous population deserves as instated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Thus, I believe 'settler colonialism' can work as a viable

method to understand and represent how indigenous rights are being violated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Settler colonialism evolved as a concept of analysis in the latter half of the 20th century (Veracini, 2013). It is a distinct form of colonialism that came into being when most of the colonized world was being released from European colonial rule. Where colonialism exerts an attitude of ‘You work for me’ on the natives, settler colonialism emits the notion that basically says, ‘you go away’ (Veracini, 2011).

Lorenzo Veracini defined settler colonialism as, “*inherently dynamic circumstance where indigenous (population).....progressively disappear in a variety of ways: extermination, expulsion, incarceration, containment and assimilation for indigenous peoples...*” (Veracini, 2010). So, settler colonialism may entail physical removal or displacement of indigenous populations, diminution of indigenous cultural practices, and/or assimilation of the indigenous population with the mainstream populations.

If we take into account Dina Gilio-Whitaker’s statement that reads, “*Settler colonialism...can be accomplished in overt ways including biological warfare and military domination but also in more subtle ways; for example, through national policies of assimilation*”, we can easily identify that all these overt and subtle elements have been present in CHT since the birth of Bangladesh. The civil war in CHT, between the Government of Bangladesh and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samity (PCJSS)ⁱⁱ, has displaced thousands of Indigenous families.

Bengali people have migrated to CHT since the British government bought the Hilly region under taxation (Uddin, 2012). But, this type of migration isn’t considered as settler colonial enterprises as long as the Bengali people are there as civilians who want to earn their livelihood while maintaining harmony with the indigenous populations. However, the way the current Bengali settlers in CHT, who are backed by the administrative authority and the military, are trying to ascend their dominance over the indigenous populations, Bangladesh government’s

various development initiatives to assimilate indigenous populations with Bengali population, operations to remove indigenous peoples from their native lands to establish military campsites, tourism sites and plantations are features that imply CHT can be construed as a settler colonial zone.

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND TRANSGRESSION OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN CHT

Now, that we've established CHT can be perceived as a settler colonial zone, it is time to investigate how settler colonial tendencies transgress indigenous rights in this area. Settler colonialism takes away indigenous peoples' rights to autonomy, self-determination, marginalizes their social, economic, legal systems, and makes them vulnerable to physical violence in an effort to systematically eliminate them. The indigenous populations of Chittagong Hill Tracts, along with indigenous populations of other similar settler colonial zones in Canada, Australia, South America, United States (McGrath, 2019; Casumbal-Salazar, 2014; Mamers, 2017; Castellanos, 2017; Riddell, 2020) are facing similar transgression for years and years.

In order to protect indigenous peoples' rights around the world, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by UN General Assembly in 2007. The declaration includes the following statements;

- Indigenous peoples are equal to all other people (Articles 2)
- They have the right to protect their distinct identity (Article 3)
- Indigenous peoples have the right to resist forced assimilation(Article 8)
- Their rights to their lands, territories, and resources should be recognized and respected (Article 9, Article 26)

- Developments affecting indigenous populations and their lands, territories and resources should be controlled by them to ensure development in accordance with their aspirations and needs (Article 23)
- Military activities within indigenous territories should be restricted (Article 30)
- Their rights affirmed in treaties, agreements, and other constructive arrangements with States should be promoted and respected (Article 37)

(Source: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UN General Assembly, 13 September 2007)

The abode rights and recognitions are placed to stimulate a harmonious relationship between the Indigenous population and the states. However, these rights can't be executed where settler colonialism is present and well alive. If the settler colonizers want to establish rights on indigenous land and resources to eliminate the indigenous communities, they cannot have the indigeneity practicing these rights.

The indigenous communities of the area now known as Chittagong Hill Tracts of Southern Bangladesh have enjoyed considerable autonomy in their ancestral land for most of their historical past. They only came under jurisdiction during the late 19th century (Mahsin, 2002). Even then they were kept separate from the social and political commotions of the rest of British India. After Bangladesh became an Independent nation in 1971, the newly established government of Bangladesh was reluctant to distinguish the indigenous population's Identity as distinct from Bengali identity. As a result, the indigenous populations formed PCJSS to uphold their innate identity as distinctive ethnic communities of Bangladesh. At the same time, the Bangladesh government relocated thousands of Bengali to CHT and gave them access to lands, lands that traditionally belongs to the indigenous populations'. What's worse, the government didn't feel the need to consult the natives, when they were making decisions that were life-altering for the indigenous populations. Indigenous peoples are children of nature and land is their lifeline (Wolfie, 2006). Therefore, if they don't have their land rights, they don't have the right to live their distinct lives. So, Tension between PCJSS and Bangladesh government

continue to rise for the next few years and, eventually turned into an armed conflict within CHT that lasted for over two decades (Mohsin, 2002; Uddin, 2012).

The war ended when two disputing parties came to an agreement and signed a Peace Treaty in 1997. The main clauses of the treaty include reestablishing indigenous peoples' land rights, rehabilitating families who were displaced during the war, relocating military camps from indigenous areas (Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997). However, instead of removing military camps, after the war, numerous military camps settled in CHT and most of the displaced families still haven't been rehabilitated. As many of the important clauses of the treaty remain unimplemented, the indigenous communities are being subjected to continuous violation of their rights (PCJSS, 2020).

The constitution of Bangladesh does not recognize the authentic identity of the indigenous populations of Bangladesh. Rather it has reduced their identity as mere tribal populations. This excludes them from receiving protection under the rights of indigenous peoples as declared by the United Nations. Seeing indigenous populations as tribal peoples undermines their existence and justifies discriminative attitudes toward their traditional social, political and cultural processes.

I visited CHT a few times. My first visit was in 2014 as part of my undergraduate requirement. There, my assignment was to document the livelihood strategies of Marma and Tripura communities living in Lama Upazilla of Bandarban. However, when I talked to them about their livelihood they expressed their distress toward their limited access to their ancestral land. The Marma and Tripura people of Lama depended on the local forests and adjacent open areas to grow as well as collect food, to gather dried leaves and twigs for fuel, to graze their domesticated animals, basically uphold their traditional lifestyle. But, they confided in me how the department of forestry restricted their access to their ancestral land in the name of preservation and it was forcing them away from their traditional way of life and livelihood. They were cornered about the forestry department's intention, which claims huge amount of forest areas in the name of preservation and limits indigenous populations' access to their

ancestral lands. But, on the other hand, looks the other way when outside timber companies cut down miles and miles of timbers.

Over the course of my stay, I noticed various instances where indigenous land and forests were not only being claimed by the government and settler Bengalis, also being controlled by national companies (to establish plantations, tourism sites, timber brokerage), even international companies like British-American tobacco. They are actively relinquishing indigenous control over their ancestral land. The situation is very much the same in recent times (Daily Star, 13 February 2021). According to ‘Human Rights Report 2009-2010 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh’, *“In Bandarban district alone, around 50,000 acres of land for lease, 118,000 acres of land for protected and reserved forest and 71,711 acres of land for military purposes were grabbed”* (Dalem & Chakma, 2010).

This reductive and restrictive condition of CHT almost parallels the condition Canadian indigenous groups are facing, which Mamers describes as – *“a continuous situation of being reduced, circumscribed, and confined by a vision of a settler colonial future, from which Indigenous lives are excluded.”* (Mamers, 2017).

Violence toward the indigenous population in Bangladesh is at an all-time high. According to Annual Report on Human Rights Situation in CHT in 2020, there have been 139 human rights violation incidents committed against indigenous populations residing in CHT by BGB, the police, Bengali settlers. These violations include grabbing indigenous land, burning indigenous villages, the threat of evictions, physical assaults, and wrongful criminalization (PCJSS, 2020).

Indigenous population and the Bengalis who lived in CHT for generations are living in harmony. It’s the settler Bengalis who migrated there, after the government relocation initiative of 1978, are causing distress to the indigenous populations because they are backed by outside power and Military forces. The indigenous peoples, I’ve talked to, believe The Bengalis are there to scare of indigenous populations and make way for companies like Lama Rubber Industries and Meridian Company (Hill Voice, 2020; The Daily Star, 13 February 2021) to establish their domain. Consequently, the indigenous peoples have to leave their ancestral homes, cultivable land, and slopes to move further and further into the unfertile forest areas.

CONCLUSION

The indigenous rights defying the indigenous populations of the Hill Tracts of Chittagong have been seen as a consequence of ethnic difference for a long time. Nevertheless, after observing all the maneuvers to take over indigenous lands and remove them from their ancestral land, we can't just regard violations of indigenous populations' rights as ethnic difference. It is high time we look for other possible explanations to address the matter. Through the above discussion I've tried to present 'settler colonialism' as an explanation for the indigenous rights violations that happen with the help of structural processes. Studying CHT as a part of 'settler colonialism', a predicament that is evident in many indigenous population occupied areas of the world, would provide us a wider view of the human rights situation in CHT and help to reach new distinctive conclusions.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is located in South-East Bangladesh. The area encompasses three hilly districts named Bandarban, Rangamati, Khagrachhari. It is, also, the most ethnically diverse area of the country.

ⁱⁱ Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samity (PCJSS), also known as ‘United People’s Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts’ is a political organization that represents the people and indigenous communities of CHT. It was founded by Manabendra Narayan Larma in 1972.