

**ETHNIC CONFLICTS: THE PROBLEMS OF BENGALI
IDENTITY IN PAKISTAN AND TRIBAL IDENTITY
PROBLEM IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS,
BANGLADESH (1947-1975)**

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Abstract

Ethnicity has remained a crucial issue in the subcontinent that is still a center of many political movements in some countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. It is vivid in post partition political scenario of these countries that people have remained more worried about their ethnic identity than religious one. It is an ethnic identity which has been playing an important role in order to connect people without any difference of religion. Likewise, politics of ethnicity is so common phenomenon in South Asia. This paper is divided into two sections: The first section highlights the role of political parties like Awami League in Bengali Language Movement in united Pakistan (1948-56). In first section, it will be highlighted that how the ethnic identity especially identity based on language, played a vital role in organizing the people of East Pakistan for getting their rights from center (West Pakistan). The second section will deal with the ethnic problems in Chittagong Hill Tracts i.e. a district of Bangladesh, and this paper will look into matter that whether Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rehman, founding father of Bangladesh and his party *Awami League* (People's League) took any measures to resolve ethnic issues of people of CHT after he came into power or state machinery of Bangladesh also adopted same tactics against Tribal people as such tactics were used in order to suppress Bengali identity politics in united Pakistan?

Key Terms: Awami League, Bengali, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Ethnic Conflicts, Language Movement.

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1. **The Problem of Bengali Identity & Bengali Language Movement in Pakistan:**

It is well known reality that ethnicity can be a useful source to gain fair share in the resources and also to gain powerful sharing in state apparatus. As Tariq Rehman quoting Tahir Amin writes; “Amin used modern theories of ethnicity to explain that ethno-national movements are the products of the demand for a just share in goods and services in a modern state”.³ Likewise right after the creation of Pakistan, it was first Bengali ethno-nation that challenged the policies of government like government’s efforts to make the language of only 6 percent speaking people i.e. Urdu, as a national language of Pakistan. Demanding for making Bengali one of national languages of Pakistan was considered a great threat for ideology of Pakistan because unlike Urdu Bengali was not only spoken by Muslims but non-Muslims as well.

Because of state negligence to make Bengali language as one of national languages of Pakistan, the Bengali language movement was started after the decision of education conference held by “Fazl-ur-Rehman, Bengali Minister of Education, called this conference for introducing reforms in educational system and promotion of Islamic ideology. The conference also decided that Bengali would be dropped from all government stationeries, including money order forms, envelopes and postcards, which would be printed only in Urdu and English.”⁴ This was a first decision which considered an attack on Bengali identity, and it was condemned by the members from East Pakistan were present in that conference, especially the members of Tamaddun Majlish. “Tamaddun Majlis was organized by professors and students of Dhaka University under the leadership of Professor Abul Kashem in September 1947.”⁵

“Tamuddun Majlis issued a pamphlet on September 15, 1947 entitled "Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla Na Urdu?" (Pakistan's national Language: Bangla or Urdu?). This booklet was strongly advocated that Bengali had all the qualities to become the language of instruction in

³Rehman, Tariq. (Nov. 2-15, 2002). Language, Power and Ideology. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (44/45), 4556.

⁴Jabeen, Mussarat, Amir Ali Chandio and ZarinaQasim. (January-June 2010). Language Controversy: Impacts on National Politics and Secession of East Pakistan. *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25 (1), 104.

⁵ Ibid

offices and courts of East Bengal.”⁶ Like Tamadun Majilis, some other political parties, student wings and language committees such as the first *Rastra bhasa Sangram Parishad* (Language Action Committee) was founded in December 1947, and Dhaka University Students Union (DUCSU) also started to play their role in the movement to make Bengali one of the national languages of Pakistan.

The role of Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman in Bengali language movement before and after the creation of Awami League and its faction All Pakistan Awami Muslim League cannot be ignored. During agitations in favor of Bengali language in 1948, Mujeeb played a vital role, and he also was arrested. On 23 June 1949 All Pakistan Awami Muslim League was formed and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad and A. K. Rafiqul Hussain were elected as first Joint Secretaries of All Pakistan Awami Muslim League, a faction of Awami League that was recently separated from AL. Mujeeb also played an important role in language movement in 1952 when this movement was on its peak. In order to weaken movement, the then state authorities ordered an open fire on a rally led by students on 21 February. Because of such harsh action by state, many students were killed and these killings in that rally in 1952 known as tragedy of 21st February that will be discussed in this paper later.

1.1. Attempts of the then Governments and State Authorities, including Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, in making Urdu only National Language of Pakistan:

It was unfortunate that both the leading leaders of Muslim League i.e., Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan who specifically Jinnah was main proponent of provincial autonomy before the partition of India, was now neglecting the importance of nations merged in Pakistan. This can be observed from statements and speeches of Jinnah and Liaquat given below;

On 23rd February in 1948, the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan held its first session at the then capital of country i.e. Karachi. “It was proposed that the members would have to speak either in Urdu or English in the Assembly. Dhirendrana Datta, a member from East Pakistan Congress Party, tabled an amendment motion to include Bengali as one of the languages of the Constituent

⁶ Ibid

Assembly along with Urdu and English. He pointed out that “out of 69 Million population of Pakistan, 44 Million were from East Pakistan with Bangla as their mother tongue.”⁷Liaquat Ali Khan the then Prime Minister of Pakistan replied that ‘Pakistan was created by the efforts of millions of Muslims whose language was Urdu not Bengali so it was impossible to make Bengali one of the national languages of Pakistan.

When this news spread that the Bengali language was ousted from Constituent Assembly; currency notes etc. this act was condemned through observing a strike on March 11, 1948. In this agitation a large number of students joined the movement. The police cracked down in which more than fifty students were injured and a large number of political workers and students were arrested. The strikes were observed continuously from 11 to 15th of March. Because of these strikes and crackdown of police, the situation was deteriorating day by day. Jinnah the then Governor General of Pakistan came to visit Dhaka in March 1948 in order to control the critical condition in East Pakistan, but he delivered speeches in favour of Urdu, and also he neglected the importance of regional identity which hurt the sentiments of Bengali people specifically students and political workers. Jinnah said during a speech delivered at Quetta Municipality on 15th June 1948 that;

“All these pillars of provincial autonomy and local freedom were created as the safeguard against the control of the British, to which few people are holding fast even till today, but now we have our own central government which is totally powerful, therefore sticking to old and a wrong proposition is equivalent to sticking to the pathetic supports. He further said it should be remembered that provincial bias as well as endeavoring for personal, local gains is equivalent to suicide.”⁸ Likewise this speech, Jinnah also made such speeches in Dhaka University and on public places in Dhaka where he faced resistance from people especially students of East Pakistan.

⁷ Ibid, P106

⁸Chandio, Jami. (2013). *The Crisis of Federalism in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges*. Islamabad: Strengthen Participatory Organization (SPO), 14.

After the death of Jinnah in 1948 and Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951, the language controversy was still continuing. It was Khuwaja Nazimudin who became Governor General after the death of Jinnah had been repeating the notion of Jinnah again and again that ‘Urdu and only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan’.

1.2. The February 21st Tragedy:

“On January 1952, the Basic Principles Committee of the Constitution Assembly of Pakistan submitted its recommendation for making Urdu as the only state language, which sparked off a wave of anger in East Pakistan and protests erupted. The representatives of various political and cultural organizations held a meeting on 31st January, which was chaired by Maulana Bhashani. An All-Party Central Language Action Committee was formed with Kazi Ghulam Mahboob as its convener and Maulana Bhashani as its chairman. The Language Action Committee decided to call a strike and hold demonstrations and processions on February 21st throughout East Pakistan.”⁹ On the contrary, the government imposed section 144 in Dhaka city. Students decided to defy the section 144.

Thousands of students were gathered on February 21, 1952 at Dhaka University Campus and chanted slogans. On the other hand, police opened fire and in result many students including girl students were killed and many were wounded. This incident fueled the movement and on 23rd February a memorial was erected at the spot where students had been killed. This incident made realized the government that Bengalis could die for the sack of their ethnic identity such as language so after four years the government declared Bengali one of the national languages along with Urdu in first Constitution of Pakistan in 1956.

2. Ethnic problems in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh:

In order to understand the ethnic problems in CHT, it will be better to have a look at brief history of Chittagong Hill Tracts. “The Chittagong Hill Tracts is an area of Bangladesh where 13 minority ethnic races are inhabitant. The Chittagong Hill Tracts comprising three districts (Rangamati, Khagra Chari, and Banderban), is geographically an isolated region of Bangladesh. It is surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura on the north and Mizoram on the east, by Burma

⁹ Jabeen, Mussarat, Amir Ali Chandio and Zarina Qasim. (January-June 2010). Language Controversy: Impacts on National Politics and Secession of East Pakistan. *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25 (1), 109.

on the south and east, and by Chittagong District on the west. Its inhabitants are of Sino-Tibetan descent belonging to the Mangolian group and closely resemble the people of the vast alluvial plains of Bangladesh.”¹⁰

Before partition of India, British authorities separated Hill Tracts from Chittagong District in 1860, and British colonial administration introduced administrative reforms, according to those administrative reforms; “the administrative staff, including the police, was locally recruited from the tribal population. The tribal chiefs collected revenues and dispensed traditional justice in tribal courts. The British administration adopted certain principles to limit interference by the civil administration in tribal affairs.”¹¹

British announced administrative reforms once again after the turn of century which was commonly known as Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900. “According to this regulation, the district of Chittagong Hill Tracts was divided into three circles: the Chakma, the Bohmong, and the Mong. Each circle was placed under the jurisdiction of a tribal chief who was responsible for collecting revenues and managing internal affairs. In 1920 a new administration was formed through an amendment in regulation of 1900 in which the district was declared as “excluded area” independent of general administration.”¹²

As the many studies show that Chittagong Hill Tracts was included in East Pakistan by a betray with the people of CHT, because the people of CHT were assured repeatedly that as 93 percent of population of Hill Tracts was non-Muslim so it was decided to merge CHT with India after partition. But “only on 17 August, two days after independence, it was announced that the Chittagong Hill Tracts had been included in East Pakistan, together with East Bengal.”¹³

¹⁰ Ahsan, Syed Aziz-al and BhumitraChakma. (October 1989). Problems of National Integration in Bangladesh: The Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Asian Survey*, 29 (10), 961.

¹¹ Ibid, 961-62

¹² Ibid, 962

¹³ Salam, Mohammad Fakhru and Hajera Aktar. (2014). Ethnic Problems in Bangladesh: A Study of Chittagong Hill Tracts. *SUST Journal of Social Sciences*, 22 (2), 54.

Like other nationalities of Pakistan, people of CHT also wanted autonomous status that was promised in Lahore Resolution of 1940 and because of that they preferred Pakistan against India but it went in stark situation against wishes of tribal people of CHT when “in 1948 the indigenous tribal police was disbanded as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Frontier Police Regulation of 1881 was repealed. The constitutions of 1956 and 1962 maintained the CHT as an ‘excluded area’, but this ceased with passage of constitutional amendment in 1963.”¹⁴ The conflict was strengthened when “in the 1960 the construction of a hydroelectric dam at Kaptai was completed, flooding 40 percent of the land available for plough cultivation in the CHT and displacing hundred thousand people. In 1964 the special status of CHT was also completely abolished.”¹⁵

Pakistani government on the one hand was dominating the Bengali population in East Pakistan, at the same time it was also suppressing the tribal population of CHT as these districts were part of the then East Pakistan. After separation of East Bengal from Pakistan in 1971, Bengali people got independence but what happened with people of CHT and what was the role of political parties of Bangladesh with regard to resolve issue of tribal population after Bangladesh got independence? Especially what was the role of Mujeeb’s government after separation of East Bengal in 1971 in order to resolve the ethnic problems of tribal people?

During the period of united Pakistan, the Bengali political leadership was busy in fighting Bengali population case so they were not cooperating with the people of CHT, and at the same time Bengali population migration to CHT was also going on. Therefore, it was matter of worry for people of CHT that they could be converted in minority in their dominated areas of CHT. This was one of major reasons that the Chakma which consisted of larger population of CHT, sided with Pakistani authorities during war in 1971. For Chakma Raja Tridiv Roy-a member of national parliament, it was better to sided with Pakistan than East Bengal in order to serve his people.

¹⁴ Ahsan, Syed Aziz-al and BhumitraChakma. (October 1989). Problems of National Integration in Bangladesh: The Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Asian Survey*, 29 (10), 963.

¹⁵ Salam, Mohammad Fakhru and Hajera Aktar. (2014). Ethnic Problems in Bangladesh: A Study of Chittagong Hill Tracts. *SUST Journal of Social Sciences*, 22 (2), 55.

2.1. Ethnic Conflicts in CHT and the Role of Mujeeb's Government to resolve these Conflicts:

How conflicts between people of CHT and the newly government of Bangladesh started, can be understood through looking at Ananda Baikash Chakma's these words "The problem in the CHT region originated with the demand for special ethnic identity by the hill people and the denial of such special identity by the government of Bangladesh's independence leader Sheikh Mujeeb Rahman. It was therefore no surprise that the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh neither included any provisions for recognizing the distinct identity of the indigenous hill people nor accorded the CHT any special administrative status. In the response to such utter neglect of the hill people and their demand, Manobendra Narayan Larma (M.N Larma), member of the Parliament for the Chittagong Hill Tracts North constituency, declined to endorse the new constitution."¹⁶

2.2. Negligence of Tribal People by Mujeeb Government and the Formation of Shanti Bahini:

As an armed wing/group namely Mukti Bahini was formed with the cooperation of Awami League in order to fight for creating an independent state i.e. Bangladesh. Likewise the people of CHT formed the pro-autonomist group called 'Shanti bahini'. The injustice with tribal people of CHT was continuing but "in 1975, Bangladesh switched over to one-party presidential rule and disbanded parliamentary government as well as existing political parties (except the ruling Awami League), and Larma went underground soon after. Since then, the pro-autonomist group, the Shanti Bahini, has emerged and demonstrated increasing insurgency."¹⁷

In order to diminishing ethnic conflict, Mujeeb's government also introduced some reforms in order to promote living standard by granting some benefits to the people of Hill Tracts like introducing special quota system for the tribal students for admission into higher educational institutions, granted foreign scholarships, and allotted hostels to students of CHT in Chittagong

¹⁶Chakma, Ananda Baikash. (2014). Peacebuilding in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT): An Institutionalist Approach. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Hum)*, 59 (1), 112.

¹⁷ Islam, Syed Nazmul. (December 1981). The Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh: Integrational Crisis between Center and Periphery. *Asian Survey*, XXI (12), 1219.

and Dhaka. But the problem was that despite introducing these policies, he fully rejected the separate identity for the tribal communities which hurt the tribal ethnic identity sentiments.

It was a great tragic that Sheikh Mujeeb who struggled against Punjabi domination in order to recognize language and culture of his people as one of superior languages and cultures of Pakistan, now when he became Prime Minister of Bangladesh, “he failed to recognize the legitimacy of a similar demand from the indigenous peoples. He told them to forget their ethnic identities and to be “Bengalis.”¹⁸

It seemed that history was revising itself because as at initial stage, Awami League was demanding just for due share for people of East Bengal in the light of Lahore Resolution of 1940, but because of complete negligence by state authorities of Pakistan, AL went for separatist movement. And as Sheikh Mujeeb gave six points in order to resolve issues between the then East Pakistan and West Pakistan, likewise, “at the initial stage of independent Bangladesh in 1972, Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghathi Samiti PCJSS had been formed to realize the demands of the tribal communities of the CHT and they demanded four point programmes led by Manindra Narayan Larma. These were:

- i. Autonomy for Chittagong Hill Tracts and the establishment of special legislative body;
- ii. Retention of Regulation, 1900, in the new constitution of Bangladesh;
- iii. Constitution of the office of the Tribal Chiefs; and
- iv. A constitutional provision restricting the amendment of the Regulation of 1900 and imposing a ban on Bengali settlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.”¹⁹

But again because of Mujeeb government’s negligence the demands were not accepted.” Mujeeb Rahman outlined two reasons for rejection of these points. Firstly, the government was highly busy with re-establishing the administration, reconstructing the war ravaged economy, managing the counter revolutionary turbulent activities of the anti-liberation armed groups, withdrawal of

¹⁸Salam, Mohammad Fakhrus and Hajera Aktar. (2014). Ethnic Problems in Bangladesh: A Study of Chittagong Hill Tracts. *SUST Journal of Social Sciences*, 22 (2), 55.

¹⁹ Ibid, 57

Indian armed forces, achieving recognition of the country and so on; secondly, there were reports of involvement of some groups of the chakmas in the anti-liberation activities in 1971.”²⁰

However, the ethnic problems in Chittagong Hill Tracts were not resolved by the founder of Bangladesh who before the creation of Bangladesh was one of the main proponents of ethnic identity. He was assassinated on August 15, 1975, but the ethnic problems are still prevailing in CHT.

Conclusion:

It was Awami League which played a vital role in Bengali Language Movement along with National Congress, Tamaddun Majilis and East Pakistan Communist Party, but unfortunately after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the same Awami League turned towards the policy of suppressing the tribal ethnic identities. If someone compares initial days of Bangladesh with the initial days of Pakistan then it will be vivid that because of almost similarities in governments' policies, it seems that history was reviving itself and it was strange that rather learning lesson from suppression of Bengalis at the hands of Pakistani authorities, same had been committed by Bengali Liberation leader Mujeeb with tribal people of CHT as well. It is interesting to note that, the founder of Pakistan Jinnah was claiming that it was for the sack of integrity of Pakistan that he was supporting the idea of making Urdu only national language of Pakistan, because at that time Pakistan was facing so many problems like refugee settlement problem, Kashmir issue etc. so it was dire need of the time to get unite under Muslim identity. Likewise, during initial days of Bangladesh, Mujeeb was repeatedly saying same thing like it can be analyzed from his argument in his reply to Larma's four points that there was need to re-establish administration, there was issue of returning of Indian forces etc. so he rejected Larma's four points.

If someone sees the first point of Mujeeb's six points that was the formation of parliamentary form of government in United Pakistan, but on contrary, he himself rejected parliamentary form of government in Bangladesh and introduced one party system of government in 1975. Sheikh Mujeeb also did not recognize ethnic identity of tribal people of Chittagong Hill Tracts as a separate identity from Bengali and he had asked them to adopt the Bengali identity. Because of such kind of policies of his government that hurt the sentiments of tribal people, the armed wing namely Shanti Bahini was formed like Awami League's supported armed wing Mukti Bahini in

²⁰ Ibid, 57-58

united Pakistan. In this context, it was really strange that a leader like Mujeeb who played his important role in ethnic movement i.e. Bengali Language Movement, being a head of government of Bangladesh, had denied the status of separate identities of the centuries old ethnic tribal people.

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