



**UNRISD**

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

---

**The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord and After:  
Gendered Dimensions of Peace**

By Meghna Guhathakurta

October, 2004

Prepared for the UNRISD report  
Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

**DRAFT WORKING DOCUMENT**  
Do not cite without the author's approval



The **United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)** is an autonomous agency engaging in multidisciplinary research on the social dimensions of contemporary problems affecting development. Its work is guided by the conviction that, for effective development policies to be formulated, an understanding of the social and political context is crucial. The Institute attempts to provide governments, development agencies, grassroots organizations and scholars with a better understanding of how development policies and processes of economic, social and environmental change affect different social groups. Working through an extensive network of national research centres, UNRISD aims to promote original research and strengthen research capacity in developing countries.

Current research programmes include: Civil Society and Social Movements; Democracy, Governance and Human Rights; Identities, Conflict and Cohesion; Social Policy and Development; and Technology, Business and Society.

A list of the Institute's free and priced publications can be obtained by contacting the Reference Centre.

UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: (41 22) 9173020  
Fax: (41 22) 9170650  
E-mail: [info@unrisd.org](mailto:info@unrisd.org)  
Web: <http://www.unrisd.org>

Copyright © United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD).

This is not a formal UNRISD publication. The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed studies rests solely with their author(s), and availability on the UNRISD Web site (<http://www.unrisd.org>) does not constitute an endorsement by UNRISD of the opinions expressed in them. No publication or distribution of these papers is permitted without the prior authorization of the author(s), except for personal use.

## **Introduction**

In most societies conflicts are a common feature of everyday life. They range from conflicts arising over the allocation of resources, to conflict based on rivalry between different ethnic, linguistic and/or religious groups as well as class conflict. Such conflicts may not always create great disturbances or upheaval in the way that society functions. Indeed sometimes conflict is sometimes perceived as taking a society to a higher plane. This is the case with class struggle, with democratic challenges to despotism, and with women's challenges to patriarchy and fundamentalism. But it is also fair to say that certain low intensity conflict can result in economic and social stagnation, which in turn can intensify and aggravate the inherent tension.

It is when the elements of violence dominates and overwhelms such situations, often manifesting itself in armed conflict, that the normal day-to-day functioning of a society is threatened. The nature of armed conflict has features which greatly affect processes of democratization, the formation of civil society, the conduct of good governance, and ethnic and gender relations embedded in a society. This is precisely why it has become imperative to look at conflict situations in a broader social context.

Situations of armed conflict, whether internal or between states, interfere with or destroy altogether the normal conduct of statecraft or governance. This is precisely why protracted armed conflict can cause great damage and harm to individual psyches and/or to institutions and practices of democracy and civil society. This is especially true in cases where war is waged against a particular ethnic or religious group or segment of the population. Socio-cultural values such as tolerance and justice are undermined, resulting in the general undermining of democratic norms

This process has a gendered dimension. The mobilization of young men and their conscription into armies fuel the mechanisms of a militarised society. Women during wartime are often left behind to tend the day-to-day affairs of the family and state. In this sense they form the last vestiges of civil society. Their peculiar position in times of armed conflict has had a dual effect on the perception of their role in conflict situations. On the one hand they are made targets of the opposition forces. Rape or even the threat of rape is used as an instrument of war – an attempt to dismantle even peoples last attempt to survive with dignity. At the same time however, women in conflict situations may possess immunity as 'political innocents'. This enables them to move more freely in the marketplace and gives them greater access to officials and more scope for taking care of their children and family. This last feature has often placed women in a privileged position from which they can negotiate peace between conflicting parties or even develop alliances across social and political boundaries. The potential of this position is usually not recognized by official peace-makers, perhaps because often what a woman reads into peace-building has to do with how she herself experiences oppression and discrimination at home and in public life. This particular angle often puts women's perception of a just peace at loggerheads with official views of reconciliation and diplomacy.

The cessation of hostilities negotiated through a peace accord is thus merely the first step towards normalizing the situation and restoring governance and democratic

practices to war-torn regions. Much will depend on how trauma and inter-factional rivalry are dealt with, how local development needs are addressed, and on how institutional capacity-building takes place in the post-conflict situation.

It has been seen therefore that peace accords reached between belligerents often evade or fail to address the issues that have been at the core of the conflict, for example disputes over distribution of land and other resources, or policies of ethnic or religious discrimination. But if issues are bypassed, the roots of the conflict will continue to fester beneath the surface, thus endangering any peace-building process. (RAWOO, 2000)

### **A framework for the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding**

The literature on women in peace-building evolves around several theoretical propositions about women and war. Some of these theoretical propositions take the following form:

- a. men make war-women make peace
- a. victimization vs. women's agency
- c. causes not consequences

Much of the current literature on peace studies has focused on the gendered nature of war. These studies have unearthed the largely androcentric structure and male-dominated culture in the practices of soldiering and military conscription. This has led to the common assumption made by many scholars that men make war while women make peace. Many peacemakers have similarly claimed that while men are soldiers, women were the mothers. It was construed that women's social and biological roles as nurturers have generally made them adept at building relationships that bridge ethnic, religious and cultural divide. Feminist theorists however have ferociously challenged this notion. They claim that it essentializes notions of both masculinity and femininity and poses the latter as superior to the former. It has been noticed in different conflicts that women are not only victims of war but also active participants. Women can be involved not only as nurses, mothers of disappeared, keepers on the home front in times of war, but also in the role of those who commit serious atrocities and abuses. In Sri Lanka, some male fighters perceived women Tamil paramilitaries to be more violent than their male colleagues (de Silva, in press). But beyond the critique of this dichotomy, the usefulness of this assumption is made apparent in its focus on the socialization process. Thus roles may not be biologically determined but the different socialization processes, which men and women undergo in their life processes, may certainly influence them. These studies are therefore useful to the extent that they throw a light on these socialization processes.

There is a larger debate in the literature regarding women's agency versus victimhood. Women are more readily conceived of as victims of war. A consequence of this has been the tendency to limit women's agency in the peace-building process. As a counter to this trend, a body of literature has grown in which women's agencies have been made the focus of attention (Manchanda, 2001). As an alternative to this binary thinking Roberta Juliana have advocated a somewhat different approach (1997) using the concept of the victimized self to argue that by taking action against victimization, women actually diminish it.

Most of the literature on conflict deals with the consequences of conflict, for example what happens to women men, people, societies, nations as a result of conflict. But feminist scholarship on women and security has been among the first to foreground structures of patriarchy, capital and militarization as a cause of conflict rather than a consequence. Scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1993) have demonstrated how gendered structures influence military establishments and practices.

For our purpose here, which is to look at peace-building as a gendered process, it is more useful to take into account Cynthia Cockburns view that peace is a woman's issue because of reasons of justice. She maintains that "if women have a distinctive angle in peace it is not due to women being nurturing. It seems more to do with knowing oppression when we see it." Knowing what it is to be excluded and inferiorized as women, gives them special insights into the structure of unequal relations at the root of conflict. Women therefore are more likely to see a continuum of violence because they experience the connected forms of domestic and political violence that stretches from the home to the street to the battlefield.

The argument above has also relevance for the nature of peace-building process that we are talking about. If awareness of one's oppression is one way of gaining insight for a just peace, then very obviously processes of peace-building begin *during* conflict and not necessarily *after* the cessation of hostilities, which more often than not is marked by a formal accord.

We shall therefore examine the gendered dimensions of peace-building in the following ways:

- (i) As a formal process where women's roles, presence and perspectives are often excluded or remain neglected
- (ii) As a process whereby women bring into play their own perspectives and realizations about themselves and their community and mobilize and organize on the basis of such realizations during conflict and after a formal accord has been reached

Such a perspective will therefore lead us to examine processes of peace-building not only after a formal accord has been concluded but to look at processes both prior to and after the accord. We will thus look at the gendered dimension of peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts context in three phases pre-accord, at the nature and conditions of the accord itself and post accord situation. But before that we discuss a bit of the background of the conflict and the accord reached.

### **Background to the Conflict in the CHT**

The southeastern part of Bangladesh, commonly known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) occupies a physical area of 5093 square miles, or 13,295 square kilometres constituting ten per cent of Bangladesh's total land area. It shares borders with India and Myanmar and is inhabited by about 13 (according to some estimates 10) ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas, Marmas and Tripuras constitute the majority. Non-indigenous hill people, i.e. Bengalis who are predominantly Muslims also live in the CHT.

According to the 1991 Census, the total population is 974,465 out of which 501,145 (51 per cent) belong to groups of different ethnic origins. About 49 per cent are

Bengalis. It is to be noted that about 70,000 refugees who were in the Indian state of Tripura from 1986 to 1988 are not included in the Census report. Out of the total land of the CHT, only about 3.1 per cent is suitable for agricultural cultivation, 18.7 per cent for horticulture and the remaining 72 per cent for forestry.

Over the last quarter century, the indigenous people of the Hill Tracts have been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state. The main roots of the crisis on the CHT centred on the land issue, the transfer of population from plain districts and the control of administration by non-inhabitants. Besides, discrimination, deprivation and exploitation in social, cultural, economic and political fields and the programme of assimilation of the indigenous hill people into the majority Bengali population were other bones of contention. (Tripura, 1992, Ahmed, 1992, Mohsin, 1997a)

It was in 1997 that the Parbottyo Chattagram Jan Samhati Samiti (PCJSS or JSS), the armed wing of the struggle for Jummaland reached a peace accord with the Government of Bangladesh. The accord came in for considerable criticism by people of different political persuasions. The mainstream political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party BNP (then in the opposition), thought it was a sell out on the part of the government to the rebels. The ‘civilian wing’ of the struggle, the Proshit group, through it was a sell out on the part of the Shantibahini (as the armed wing was popularly called). The split within the struggle resulted in the formation of two parties of which one, the JSS, because it had signed the accord, now became the official party to form the Regional Council, and the United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF). The result was the polarization of the politics of the Hill Tracts and the division of the people into two – and as a consequence their bargaining power has been reduced. More than five years have passed since the Accord and signs of implementation have been slow, and the JSS is now threatening civil disobedience if the government does not act.

### **The accord and the responses**

The CHT Accord, concluded by the official wing of the Parbotto Chottogram Jana Sanghati Samiti and the Government of Bangladesh in 1997, consists of four sections: (Roy, 2003)

- The first section, recognizing the CHT as a ‘tribal inhabited area’, deals with commitments to pass legislation and sets out details of the composition of a Committee to oversee the implementation of the Accord (but does not set out any time frame for implementation).
- The second section, entitled “Hill District Local Government Councils/Hill Districts’ Councils”, details proposed legal amendments to strengthen the District Councils’ existing powers and to extend their jurisdiction to include new subjects.
- The third section, entitled “Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council” lays down the composition of a new unit of regional authority to be constituted and styled as a “Regional” Council incorporating the three hill provinces or “districts”. In the case of both the Regional and the District councils, the chairpersonship and two-thirds of the seats are to be reserved for indigenous or “tribal” people.

- The fourth section, entitled ‘Rehabilitation, General Amnesty and Other Matters’ addresses a wide range of issues, including the rehabilitation of international refugees, internally displaced persons and indigenous fighters, and the grant of amnesty to the guerillas and other people involved in the armed struggle.

Whatever the disputes regarding the contents of the accord, one of its prime limitations was the lack of a time frame for its implementation. According to the PCJSS, which has been protesting against the non-implementation of the CHT Accord, the following major unimplemented provisions were considered to be crucial:

- a. the non-withdrawal of (all except a few) non-permanent military camps;
- b. the non-transfer of land and law and order matters to the District Councils;
- c. the passage of the CHT Land Commission Act of 2001, in violation of provisions of the Accord (reducing the geographical jurisdiction of the commission and providing too much power to its non-indigenous chairperson);
- d. the non-commencement of the work of the Land Commission;
- e. the appointment of non-indigenous persons to the post of (cabinet rank) Minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Chairperson of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board.

The PCJSS have also criticized other aspects of the situation following the Accord, including:

- f. the inclusion of non-permanent residents of the region as voters in the recent parliamentary elections (which were participated in by the UPDF and boycotted by the JSS)); and
- g. the inclusion of non-indigenous people within the list of the “internally displaced.”

It may be mentioned that the UPDF were the dissenters who thought that the Accord was a ‘sell out’ on the part of PCJSS as it compromised the prime objective of the struggle i.e. regional autonomy. The Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) who was in the opposition at the time of signing the Accord also critiques it but as a “sell out” on the part of the Awami League (AL), since it compromised the Constitution and national integrity of the country. Even since it came to power in the 2001 elections, it has been trying to undermine the demands of the PCJSS and threatening to scrap the agreement altogether.

### **The gendered dimension of peace building**

#### **a. pre-accord**

It has been mentioned before that processes of peace-building not only make themselves evident after a formal accord has been concluded but that they occur both prior to and after the accord. In examining the more informal processes of peace-building in the Hill Tracts, where women’s contribution has been significant, we come across their political awareness; in the literature they wrote, the songs they sung, how they confronted the day to day realities of war both at home and in public, how they mobilized and organized themselves.

#### ***i. Political Awareness of Hill Women***

Women in the Hill Tracts have been highly politicized through their struggle against state oppression, especially with regard to ethnic and national identity. Earlier it was explained how the term Jumma, a source of collective identity has been used as marker to offer the hill people a new sense of being. Women too have internalized this in many ways. One of the indicators of this is evident in many of the protest songs and poetry written during this period and sung by activists. Kabita Chakma a young activist poet's famous poem is called Joli No Udhim Kittei. (Why Shall I not Resist! \_\_ originally written in Chakma and Bengali)

Why shall I not resist!  
Can they do as they please -  
Turn settlements into barren land  
Dense forests to deserts  
Mornings into evening  
Fruition to barrenness.

Why shall I not resist  
Can they do as they please -  
Estrange us from the land of our birth  
Enslave our women  
Blind our vision  
Put an end to creation.

Neglect and humiliation causes anger  
the blood surges through my veins  
breaking barriers at every stroke,  
the fury of youth pierces the sea of consciousness.

\_\_ I become my own whole self  
Why shall I not resist!  
(Chakma, 1992.7)

She also writes of the day when the struggle will end. Here she does not talk of revenge but of love.

### **Someday**

Someday my heartland  
will light up in the sun -  
This jhum, this forest  
will be full of light, wonderful light.

The Kajalong river will overflow its banks  
sweeping away the hurt and humiliation  
Then may this land, the forests of my heart  
drench ecstatically in showers of love.

The imaginings of the homeland in these poems is not novel to the psyche of the hill people. Traditional folk songs contain much imagery that depicts the individual in intimate relation with her/his natural surroundings. The concept of *desh* or country

therefore implies both physical space (the hills, the forests, the sky, the stars above) as well as their personification.

Though Kabita's poems are an example of the more articulate voices of Chakma women, the feelings she expresses are not exceptional. Women in their own way have admitted that despite differences in culture and language among the different communities, the hill people have been drawn together by the common bond of resistance against the repressive forces of the Bangladesh state. Many women claimed that they needed to participate in the resistance movement because it was the only way to ensure their dignity. Many claimed that it was the only way to ensure their existence, both physical and cultural. Even if they did not directly participate in the movement they gave economic or moral support.

### ***ii. Women negotiating everyday conflict***

Women in the CHT have been negotiating conflict both in the public as well as private spheres. In the cases mentioned above we have seen how women caught in the conflict have been engaged in the struggle for survival, i.e. going about the daily chores, looking for food, going to the market etc. and in the process how some of them had to adapt and rework traditionally gendered roles. We saw how housewives whose husbands were away or arrested had to cope not only with daily household chores but having to manage public relations in a crisis situation like procuring the release of her husband, or having to appease the army during raids.

Parenthood also took on a new meaning during the struggle. Parents of many young girls and boys were at first hesitant when their children started joining the resistance movement, but later the parents themselves encouraged it, because they realised that it was the only way they could walk the streets with safety and dignity. The archetype of the heroic mother who sends her children to fight has also been valorised as for example in the following protest song:

“We cannot survive without opening our mouths, how long are we to lock up our voices, the time has come to take to the streets. So Mother don't prevent us anymore.”

Mother, we have to go  
Join the demo in the street  
We have to face the bullets.  
Oh Mother, don't forbid us  
Don't pull us from behind  
The streets quake  
With the slogans  
And the sound of protest.  
We all have to fight!  
Mother don't worry about us  
Stay calm and happy  
If we are killed  
Then think yourself to be the mother of a Shahid \*(martyr).

The public sites of negotiating the conflict were therefore streets, the marketplace and the school. Hill people needed passes to go to the market. It was written in the pass: *Anumati deya holo, Bangladesh amar pran !* (Permission granted, Bangladesh is my

life.) Women often had to go to the market instead of men because men would be more likely to be suspected and picked up than women. Women were visibly harassed, often physically, mostly verbally. Derogatory names which often one community used for another e.g. Chakku, for Chakmas. Moghs for Marmas etc. were used as verbal abuse by security personnel on the streets. Even then women tended to go rather than let their men be picked up. Security personnel often searched buses coming in and going out of the hills. Then Bengalis and Paharis were separated and Paharis especially were searched. Women Village Defense Police gave hill women a body search. But though they were women, they performed their duties in a very rude manner. This humiliated Hill women even more.

Schools were sites where Bengalis and hill people usually interacted with each other. Many interviewees said that normally relationship between them were smooth, but whenever the general tension would be raised in the vicinity usually due to some incidents, then personal relationship between the two communities too would suffer, then even a small quarrel between class friends would be blown up out of proportion. Some however mentioned that sometimes if the Bengali learnt of an imminent army raid, they would warn their Pahari friends beforehand.

Within the home and family the crisis created difficulties and complications in personal relationships. Children grew up in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Moitri a young activist tells of her childhood memories: “we had to flee to the jungles for a week. That was the worst nightmare in my life. On the one hand, I feared ghosts! On the other hand, I was frightened of tigers, bears and the army! The days used to go by somehow. But at nightfall, my fear increased. There was no sleep in my eyes, only tears. Whenever I think of those days it fills me with dread. I start up inadvertently.

As children, if we cried, our parents used to threaten us by saying “Hush, the army is coming, or the Bangali *shoronartha* (refugees) are coming. Our tears used to dry up instantly. Then one didn't need toys or dolls to keep us quiet. Because we used to dread the army and the refugees, no matter how much we pouted, fear melted it all away.”

If bringing up children was a problem during these dire times, protecting the young women in the family was even more daunting a task. Again in some of the cases it was mentioned. how girls used to go to school or out in the streets always in a group, seldom alone. Many stray incidents of rape or molestation have occurred when poor women have been caught working alone in the fields. The story of Koli and Shikha adequately demonstrate the vulnerability of the woman in the face of the absolute power enjoyed by security personnel. It is was in the face of such oppression that hill people developed almost a total anathema to the concept of inter-communal marriages. In almost all the cases interviewed, it was stated that Chakma, Marma or Tripura men or women who married outside their community especially into Bengali community was not accepted by the Shomaj.

It has also been reported that fertility rates are not as high in the hill people because of the instability in society. The average family size for Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban is 5.4, 4.9, 5.2 respectively compared to 5.6 for Bangladesh as a whole. Hill people also apprehend that the family planning programme is another device of the state to keep the population low, so that Bengalis can become the majority ethnic

group in the CHT. Census reports revealing a demographic shift in favour of Bengalis tend to confirm these apprehensions. (Mohsin,1997b:128).

### *iii. Women's organised activism*

The formation of the Hill Women's Federation from the late eighties and early nineties acted as the most organized forum from where Hill women could make their voices heard. Women have always been active in the student's front of the JSS in colleges from an early period. According to the information received, I have heard of at least two women who have fought as combatants in the Shantibahini army. One of them, Madhabilata is still alive and living in Khagrachari. She is currently a member of the Executive Committee of the JSS. However, although the struggle in the CHT did not register a high number of women combatants, it did feature a highly politicised and sensitized corps of women cadres at the political level.

The case of Mithila who was V.P. of Pahari Chatra Samiti at Rangamati College has been mentioned before. She described how she perceived her role in the organization in those early years. Mithila used to be a dancer. She even won an All Pakistan Dance Award in 1968. She therefore emphasized the cultural aspect in the student's front. She felt that if Paharis were to have a different identity from Bengalis, then they must demonstrate it in their culture. So she started to learn the dances of all the indigenous people by staying with them and then taught these dances to a group of women. In this way a cultural troupe of the students' wing was formed by the name of 'Giri Shur' (music of the hills). They performed their first show called Ek Mutho Alo (A fistful of light) in 1972. It created quite a stir among the hill people. Later they were asked to perform in the victory day celebrations in Dhaka. Mithila claimed that because of her endeavour the Government of Bangladesh was forced to recognize cultural differences and later appropriated it into state practice by setting up a tribal cultural centre which was set up in Rangamati. On a trip to Rangamati in the early nineties with a batch of departmental students, I noticed that the signboard, which said Tribal Cultural Centre was somewhat dislodged and the word tribal was almost erased from the board!

No doubt the issue of rape and harassment of women by security personnel, was the single most important factor behind the formation and consolidation of Hill Women's Federation (HWF) from its precursor, Pahari Chatra Parishad. Sujata Chakma of Guimara, Khagrachari was allegedly raped by Army personnel and the Guimara HWF made its first protest to the District Commissioner in 1989-90. They placed a petition to the DC. The rapist was caught red-handed by the Paharis in a public place. They also gave witness although they were greatly threatened. The Additional District Magistrate chaired a hearing. The victim was even brought in to identify the rapist, which she did because the HWF supported her. She had to undergo great mental torture. The Chairperson of the HWF was even made member of the enquiry committee. But when she saw that the information was being distorted she resigned. After her resignation, another demonstration was staged. Three days of meetings were held with authorities, but on the second day nothing was found in the enquiry. A human rights team came from Dhaka, but that too did not bear fruit. The incident was reported to human rights organizations, but no report was published.

Failures like these strengthened the determination of women activists even more. They felt the need for building awareness both outside as well as inside their

community. Kalpana Chakma, the Organizing Secretary of HWF who was abducted by army personnel in a fateful night of June 1996, expressed this powerfully. She left behind her diary where her comments on the movement reveals to us the challenges she faced in conducting such a movement (Guhathakurta, 1997).

In depicting the life of a woman in the CHT she writes, "on the one hand (the woman faces) the steam roller of rape, torture, sexual harassment, humiliation and conditions of helplessness inflicted by the military and Bengalis, and on the other hand, she faces the curse of social and sexual discrimination and a restricted lifestyle. Kalpana's understanding of oppression embraces all women of Bangladesh. "I think that the women of my country are oppressed." In expressing her yearnings for freedom from oppression, she uses a beautiful metaphor:

"When a caged bird wants to be free, does it mean that she wants freedom for herself alone? Does it also mean one must necessarily imprison those who are already free? I think it is natural to expect the caged bird to be angry at those who imprisoned her. But if she understands that she has been imprisoned in a cage and that cage is not her rightful place, then she has every right to claim the freedom of the skies!"

For Kalpana Chakma, democracy did not mean merely free and fair elections. It means participation in the political process and more specifically participation as a Chakma woman. She therefore stridently voices a critique of her own student's movement, which remains male-dominated. She writes:

"Despite the fact that women constitute half the population, they are not taken seriously in any movement for social change. As an example one can point out that the numerous demands voiced during the current movement, even the 10 point demand of the Chattro Shongram Porishod, do not specifically speak of problems faced by a woman! Many conscious men seem to think that such problems are not important enough to be dealt with at this hour. Therefore the issue of women's emancipation has remained neglected in the agenda for class struggle and political change."

It is an irony of fate that Kalpana Chakma who herself became a victim of state violence should become the subject of a campaign which would help take the woman's question onto another plane. The constitution of the United Peoples Democratic Front (the front for the dissident group of the PGP, PCP and HWF who critiqued the accord), equality of men and women was recorded as one of the objectives and area of work of the party.

#### **b. the accord**

Amena Mohsin, in her study of the peace accord has critiqued the process in the following way. The peace accord reached between the PCJSS and the Awami League denied many of the longstanding demands of the Hill people, which to them were crucial for reaching a just peaceful settlement. "Their demand for recognition as the Jumma nation was denied, instead the CHT was recognized as a Tribal inhabited area. No provision was made for the compensation of war victims, the raped and the widows. Justice was denied to the Hill women. There was no attempt to even acknowledge that the Hill people had been wronged. The accord made no mention about the Bengali

settlers, though a Land Commission was to be constituted for the resolution of the land question, but it remained a puzzle as to how the issue could be resolved without withdrawing the Bengalis who were in occupation of the land regarded by the Hill people as their communal land, but the modern state considered land without ownership documents as government owned land or Khas land, so it considered it perfectly legitimate to settle its citizens on those lands. Peace thus remained a chimera in the Hills; the foundations of peace after all cannot be laid upon the structures of hegemony, control and domination, so intrinsic to the notion of nation with its homogenizing thrust.” (Mohsin, 2003)

In the formal peace accord, the membership of the Regional Council did provide for reserved seats for women members. Among the 25 seats, 12 were male (‘tribal’) and two female (‘tribal’) and among the non-tribals six were male and one female. There were no women who participated in the peace talks. Hence not only was the woman question missing from the accord but there was also a total absence of women from the entire peace process, despite the fact that women had not only been the worst sufferers and victims of the insurgency but they had also been an integral part of the autonomy movement. Little mention was made about hill women’s sacrifices and participation in the peace-building activities. The HWF had brought the rape issue into the public fore through networking with the Bengali women organizations. They had carried on their movement both within and outside the Hill Tracts. Their workers dared not go home for years for fear of being arrested. The Organizing Secretary of HWF Kalpana Chakma was abducted from the Hills on the eve of 1991 general elections allegedly by an army officer. Yet the woman question remains subsumed under the national question, as Shantu Larma, the leader of the PCJSS had put it, “I do not believe in women empowerment, once the nation is empowered women would automatically be empowered.” (Mohsin, 2003)

### **c. Post-Accord**

After the Accord has been reached incidents of violence against the Hill people by Bengali settler communities allegedly triggered off by the armed forces has not been uncommon. The Mahalcchari incident was one such event. The joint forces of Bengali settlers and the armed forces staged a recent attack of villages in the Mahalcchari Upazila. Riots between Bengali settlers from the plainland (especially those settled by the Armed forces as part of a counter-insurgency plan) are not uncommon. But this incident was the first one of its kind to occur after the Accord, which was of a major proportion. Here too women have been victims women’s organizations have rallied forth to protest the atrocities and offer relief and succour to the victims.

The incident was instigated by the abduction of a Chakma girl by a Hindu Bengali settler and the counter abduction of a Hindu businessman by the Hill people. It is alleged that the armed forces instigated the Bengalis to attack the Pahari villages as a repercussion. They not only instigated but also accompanied the Bengali settlers in their rampage on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2003. Five villages were attacked, about 231 houses were burnt including places of worship, and about 400 families were affected. Organizations working in that area confirm that about 10 Chakma women were gang

raped in the villages of Pahartoli and Babupara. Victims also confirm that armed personnel together with Bengali settlers took part in the gang rape. Two people were killed, and a eight month old baby strangled to death. People were beaten and mentally and physically tortured and their houses burnt. The fire was so big it even burnt the trees in the villages. People were left homeless, all their possessions either looted or burnt. The underlying motive for the attack was assumed to be to extend the land of Bengali settlers and hence to create terror and fear among the Hill people to make land grabbing easier.

We have seen how in conflict situations mothers are often lead to playing a role in society, which under normal circumstances would have been natural to them but in a conflict becomes a symbol of protest. Mourning of the dead in most societies is usually a private and social act where women play an important part. But in situations where 'death' itself is not recognized, then the very act of mourning is held to be a symbol of protest. Not only does such actions contain a cathartic and therapeutic element for emotions suppressed, but it also foregrounds the private into the public arena, hence making grieving or mourning an intensely political act, which transforms victims into survivors. Kalashona Chakma of Mahalchhari was a grandmother who used to be a day labourer. When the Bengali settlers attacked her village, supported by the armed forces on that fateful night of August, her first thought was to save her young married daughter. She quickly took her eight-month old grandson from her daughter's lap and asked her to run for her life. But alas it was Kalashona herself who was chased and assaulted and gang raped jointly by armed forces and Bengali settlers! In the process the eight-month old grandson who was crying out loud on the floor, was strangled to death. Kalashona survived the ordeal only to be hounded by the army since she had made public the crime committed to her. She has also been disowned by her own husband is now having to live in the jungle because she can find no one who would give her work. Three Hill Women's groups had brought Kalashona Chakma along with other victims of the surrounding villages for a Press Conference at Dhaka. After long months of deliberation they had decided to take the risk and make this journey to seek justice for themselves. (Guhathakurta, 2004).

Thus we see that in both pre-accord and post accord situations whether as widowed wife, grieving mother or bare survivors, it is women who are seen to seek justice. The impunity of soldiers and other law enforcing agencies have often been the target of criticism of many civil society and human rights organisations. But at the ground level the demand for justice had always been fuelled by the demands of war widows or mothers of martyred children or the children of martyrs who through their immediate involvement carry through these demands even at great odds.

### **Conclusion**

All this indicates that the peace accord in the CHT has not been able to or indeed was not even designed to address some of the more root causes of conflict like militarization or resolving the disputes related to ownership of land. The gender question too has remained unresolved both within the purview of hill politics as well as between hill organizations and Bengali civil society groups. Hill women are still in the process of defining for themselves a space of their own both within their organizations as well as within their societies. The capacity for strong leadership is there but has yet to crystallize itself in a more institutionalized form. As yet the Hill Women's Federation of both factions is under the dominant influence of their master

organizations, the PCJSS on the one hand and the UPDF on the other. The polarization of politics between the two factions has not helped much. Because of this polarization even hill people themselves have questioned their credibility and representation. In the meantime with the lifting of security barriers, development agencies have been given free play. Many developments concerned with women's programmes have flourished where local women have been inducted in. But by definition because of the charged nature of politics in the hills, these organizations try to steer clear of anything 'political'. As a result root causes of conflicts tend to be neglected and development comes to mean only a stopgap measure.

But from a long term perspective there are signs to show that the sacrifices of women like Kalpana Chakma and others will not be in vain. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a whole generation was born who lived, bled and survived one of the worst kind of violent domination. A whole generation now witnesses the transformation of these relations both in their personal and public life. A part of these relations have to do with gender. Yes, women want to see equal relations established within their own community, yes, they want equal inheritance for women and they express their desire that in the future their movements will address such issues. But beyond that they want to reclaim their right to dignity and humanity and because the process of domination and transformation has been going on for a long period and a whole generation has been affected, it will not be possible to 'forget the past' since memories of the struggle have already been constructed and are still being constructed into effective counter-narratives of the Bangladesh state. If the Bangladesh state fails to recognize this then it will be in for a deep shock.

A six year old Chakma girl going to a posh school in Dhaka finds it second nature in her to contest her classmates when they call her a Chakma as if that was a disqualification for being human. She retorts, "so what if I am a Chakma. It is a *jati* (nation) just as being Muslim is a *jati*."

### **References:**

#### **Guhathakurta Revised**

Ahmed, Imtiaz. 1992. 'Modernity, Bangladesh and the Chakma Issue', in *The Journal of Social Studies* Vol.No: 56, pp.12-18. April. Dhaka.

Bhaumik, Subir, Guhathakurta, Meghna & Chaudhury, Sabyasachi Basu Ray (eds.). 1997. *Living On The Edge: Essays on The Chittagong Hill Tracts*. South Asia Forum for Human Rights and Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata.

Chakma, Kabita. 1992. *Joli No uddhim Kiteye (Why Shall I not Resist)*. Nari Grontho Probortona , Dhaka.

Enloe, Cynthia. 1993. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics After the Cold War*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 1997. "Overcoming Otherness and Building Trust: the case of Kalpana Chakma" in S. Bhaumik, M. Guhathakurta, S. Basu Raychaudury (eds). *Living on the Edge: essays on the Chittagong Hill Tracts*. South Asian Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR), Kathmandu.

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 2001. " Women's Narratives from the Chittagong Hill Tracts" in Rita Manchanda (ed.). *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agencies*. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi.

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 2003. Minorities Women and Peace, in *The Journal of Social Studies*. Vol. 100, pp. 88-99. June, Dhaka.

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 2004. " *Ethnic Conflict in a Post-Accord Situation*" *The Mahalchhari Incident in the CHT*" Paper presented at international seminar on " Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Conflict in Multicultural Societies" organized by the Dept of Sociology, University of Mumbai, India from 3-5 March 2004.

Manchanda, Rita (ed). 2001. *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Mohsin, Amena. 1997a. *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. University Press Limited, Dhaka.

Mohsin, Amena. 1997b " *Military Hegemony and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Subir Bhaumiki, et. al. (eds). Living on the Edge, Essays on the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, SAFHR, Kathmandu.

Mohsin, Amena. 2003. "Women, Peace and Justice: A Chronology of Denial", in *The Journal of Social Studies*. Vol 100. pp. 58-71. June, Dhaka.

Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council RAWOO (Dutch abbreviation). 2000. Mobilizing Knowledge for Post-Conflict Management and development at the Local Level, Publication no. 19 (report). The Hague.

Roy, Devasish. 2003. The Discordant Accord: Challenges Towards the Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts accord of 1997 in *The Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 100. June. pp.4-57. Dhaka.

Tripura, Prashanta. 1992. The Colonial Foundation of Pahari Ethnicity. *The Journal of Social Studies* Vol No: 58.pp. 1-16. Dhaka.

### **Acronyms**

AL – Awami League

BNP – The Bangladesh Nationalist Party

CHT – The Chittagong Hill Tracts

HWF – Hill Womens Federation

PCJSS/JSS - Parbottyo Chattagram Jan Samhati Samiti

PCP – Pahari Chhatro Parishad

PGP – Pahari Gono Parishad  
RAWOO – The Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council  
SAFHR – South Asian Forum For Human Rights  
UPDF - United People’s Democratic Front