

Chapter 16

The Transforming Role of Education in a Post- Conflict Region in Southeastern Bangladesh: Reaching Out With Education for Peace

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide an insight into the transforming role of education in peace-building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The region has been witnessed ethnic conflict since the mid-1970s. However, the situation intensified with the government sponsored population transfer program (1979 onward), which not only changed the demographic profile, it forcibly displaced many indigenous people—who less than two decades earlier had already been displaced by the Kaptai hydroelectric project (in 1960s). Consequently, the indigenous people who were already in duress because of land scarcity caused by the dam and transmigration faced further survival problem in competition with the Bengali settlers. In this situation, the indigenous people resisted the influx of the Bengali settlers in the hills. In response to the resistance, the Bangladesh government deployed a huge number of military and other armed forces to foil the “insurgency”. In consequence, many incidents of massacre, attack and reprisal attack, killing, sexual violence, etc. took place, often committed by the armed forces and Bengali settlers. However, a couple of initiatives led to a long-awaited agreement in 1997, which formally ended the two and half-decade-long bloody conflict in the hills. Even though 17 years have elapsed since the signing of the Accord, the region is neither a peaceful nor a secured region to its people. Under the circumstances, this paper proposes education can transform the communities toward peaceful coexistence. Addressing the sensitive issues education can contribute to reconstruct and social renewal in the aftermath of violent conflict. Based on empirical findings, also consulted with secondary sources, the paper posits, merely education is not the solution of the long-standing conflict; however, it has significant role to play in peace-building in the post-conflict and conflict-affected societies, like the CHT.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), an out-of-the-way, unusual and little known region located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh bordering with northeast Indian states of Tripura and Mizoram, and eastern Myanmar state of Rakhine. Given the geographical location, “Southeast Asia meets South Asia” in this borderland (van Schendel et al., 2000, 1). This is an extensive hilly region comprising 5,089 square miles with very limited cultivable land (3.2 percent). Other than the Bengali settlers, 13 distinct indigenous communities live in the CHT. Each group (e.g., Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Pangkhoa) has their own history, culture, language and custom. Although internally diversified through cultural attributes (e.g., dress, language and religion), the indigenous groups are collectively called as *Pahari* (hill people). The indigenous groups differ markedly with the mainstream Bengali in terms of race, language, religion, economy and socio-cultural aspects.

The CHT has been a site of much contention between the indigenous people and the state since the colonial period (1757–1947) that continued even after the creation of postcolonial Pakistan (in 1947), and independent Bangladesh (in 1971). It has witnessed ethnic conflict since the mid-1970s. However, the government-sponsored population transfer program toward the region (began in 1979) intensified the situation, which not only changed the demographic profile of the CHT, it forcibly displaced many indigenous people—who less than two decades earlier had already been displaced by the construction of Kaptai hydroelectric dam (in 1960s). Consequently, the indigenous people who were already in duress because of land scarcity caused by the dam and transmigration faced further survival problem in competition with the Bengali settlers.

In this situation, the indigenous people began resisting the influx of the settlers. In response to their resistance, the Bangladesh government deployed a huge number of military and other armed forces to foil the indigenous resistance termed as “insurgency”. In consequence, many incidents of massacre, attack and reprisal attack, indiscriminate arrest, judicial and extrajudicial torture, killing, rape, sexual violence, forced religious conversion, forced marriage, and abduction took place, often committed by the armed forces and settlers. However, a couple of initiatives led to a long-awaited agreement in 1997 (widely known as “peace accord”) which formally ended the two decade-long bloody conflicts in the CHT. Nonetheless the CHT is neither a peaceful nor a secured region to its people though 17 years have elapsed since the signing of the accord. Still people bear fear in their mind while peace is far away from the hills.

Under the circumstances, this paper intends to offer a scholarly contribution to a newly emergent field of study, that of *educational outreach*-- in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies. The paper aims to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between education and conflict, both during-- and post-conflict reconstruction phases, and of the multiple ways in which education can contribute in peace-building. Thus, three major interrelated issues are explored in this paper: conflict, peace process and role of education in peace-building. The role of education in peace-building is the main theme of this paper but it cannot be wholly understood unless an appraisal is made on peace process in the CHT. Assessing the accord, we will focus on our main research question whether education can play role in peace-building in the post-conflict regions like the CHT.

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