

# historical background of the CHT administrative system

## **Pre-Colonial CHT**

The major topographical frontier of predominantly deltaic Bangladesh starts within the country itself, in the mountainous CHT region. The contrast in the geographical features between the hills and the plains is also mirrored in the different political developments in these regions (Brauns and Loffler 1990, p 27). The CHT is the only region of Bangladesh that was not directly administered by the Government of Bengal (later East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh) until after Bengal itself was colonised by the British. Prior to British annexation, the greater part of the CHT was included in the chieftoms of the Chakma Raja (a Chakma) and the Bohmong Raja (a Marma) (Hutchinson 1978, p 12), while the remainder of the region was included within the smaller spheres of influence of chieftains from the less numerous indigenous peoples (Schendel et al. 2000, pp 25, 29, 32).

## **The Process of Colonisation**

The CHT was colonised in stages over a period of more than two centuries. The voluntary (and irregular) payment of a trade tribute by the more influential CHT chiefs to the Mughal governor of Chittagong can be seen as the starting point of this process (Roy, B.M., cited in Ishaq 1975, pp 34-35). After the British East India Company took over the administration of Bengal from the Mughals in the 1760s, the aforesaid chiefs paid some tributes to the Company, but, as before, on an irregular basis. The administration of the region, however, remained in the hands of the indigenous people. Historical records of the period suggest that “[neither] the Mughal Government nor the East India Company had any direct influence or rule over the hill tribes” (Serajuddin 1971, p 57).

Meanwhile, in the 1700s, Bengali wet-rice farmers had immigrated into the territories of the Chakma and Bohmong Rajas, whose revenue and administrative authority they grudgingly accepted. When the East India Company took over the administration of Bengal, these settlers sought British protection whenever they felt that it was expedient to do so, and even complained of oppression by the CHT chiefs. By the 1770s, Bengali farmers had managed to take over a large quantity of the lands of the Chakmas with the tacit approval of the Company, and showed their interest in living under the Company’s rule (Van Schendel 1992, p 101). Settled Bengali farmers under the direct jurisdiction of the Company would bring in higher revenue earnings than swidden-cultivating hill people, who remained outside the formal rule of the Company and paid nominal tributes rather than substantive taxes, so that these proposed jurisdictional changes suited the British. At the same time, the CHT chiefs’

tributes, which were payable to the Company, had been farmed out to third parties – usually Bengali traders – and these proved to be quite oppressive on the hill economy, prompting the Chakma Raja to refuse payment. Using the complaints of oppression and the ‘non-payment’ of the tributes as an excuse, the British deployed military forces to subjugate the Raja (Serajuddin 1971, pp 43-57). After almost a decade of war, the Chakma Raja Jan Bux Khan made peace with the British, accepting British suzerainty, and paving the way for total annexation of the CHT, including the Chakma, Bohmong, and other territories (Roy 1994, p 53).

Up to 1829, the British East India Company had continued to consider the hill peoples as ‘tributaries’ rather than as ‘British subjects’ and had even acknowledged that it (the Company) had “no right to interfere in their internal [affairs]” (Ishaq 1975, p 28). This state of affairs did not last very long, formal annexation came three decades later, in 1860. The British created a Chittagong Hill Tracts District, which was later demoted to a sub-division.

The gradual but direct colonisation of the region was described by an erstwhile British administrator named Hutchinson in the following manner:

“ ..... the near neighbourhood of a powerful and stable government naturally brought the Chiefs by degrees under British influence, and by the end of the 18th century every leading chief paid to the Chittagong Collector *a certain tribute or yearly gift made to purchase the privilege of free trade between the inhabitants of the hills and the men of the plains*. These sums were at first fluctuating in amount but gradually were brought to specified and fixed limits, *eventually taking the shape not of tribute but of revenue paid to the State* (emphasis added).” (Ishaq 1975, p 28)

Between 1860 and 1937, the British Bengal Government integrated the chieftaincies and other local polities into an administrative set-up that gradually concentrated the most significant powers on the British-appointed district officer while correspondingly eroding the powers of the indigenous institutions. This change was facilitated by two statutes: the Act XXII of 1860 and the Act I of 1900, otherwise known as the CHT Regulation of 1900 or simply as the ‘CHT Manual’. The 1900 Regulation expressly repealed the 1860 Act.

Following independence, the Chittagong Hill Tracts became part of East Pakistan, and in 1971 part of the new country of Bangladesh.