

**Paharer Ruddhokontho:
Pahari Narider Nipiron o Protirodh**
(Silenced Voices: Oppression and
Resistance of Hill Women)

Edited by Shomari Chakma, Kobita Chakma, et.al.,
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Two years after an agreement was signed that ended hostilities in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, facilitated return of refugees from India, and helped surrender of arms by the rebels, there is no clear road map to sustainable peace in the region that could be conducive to fulfilling the aspirations of the Hill People. The agreement, if anything marked a beginning of a difficult process, not an end in itself. Challenges that lie ahead are enormous, especially if the principal objective of the agreement is to create the political and social space that could provide a foundation for an enduring process of reconciliation and mutual trust enabling a stable and harmonious pluralist social structure.

The book titled *Paharer Ruddhokontho: Pahari Narider Nipiron o Protirodh* (Silenced Voices: Oppression and Resistance of Hill Women), published by Hill Women's Federation is a graphic account of trauma and courage that post-CHT Agreement Bangladesh, especially the state and Government, and most importantly the people of this country need to know. Written in Bangla, and edited by Shomari Chakma, Kobita Chakma, Ilira Dewan and Meky Khisha, the book contains over two dozen short articles and a number of poems and songs of the hill people.

This small monograph is a unique collection of personal narratives from the lives of the hill people, who have witnessed and experienced atrocities and violence perpetrated by the state of Bangladesh, especially its security organs - military and police force. These are accounts of untold sufferings of the children victims of war, their parents, brothers, sisters, and neighbours, as well as a simple and candid statement of how they survived the years of conflict and how many of them became actively or indirectly involved

in Hill Women's movement. Each of the stories is also a picture of mindsets of the perpetrators of violence.

Reading this book one is bound to be convinced about the paramount need to re-conceptualize the politics of Hill People in democratic and emancipatory terms in a pluralist framework. An opening has been made in this direction by the signing of the CHT agreement, but just a step on a road that is long and difficult to say the least. The personal stories presented in plain and simple terms tell us the distance that Bangladesh has to go.

The contributors are all victims of blindness of the Bangladeshi State to aspirations for political emancipation of a tiny ethnic minority community. These are biographies of people whose lives have been intertwined with the idiosyncrasies of Bangali and Jumma (hill people) nationalisms. To that extent this is an expose of a process that builds into ethno-nationalist exclusivism, and a political, social, cultural and military narrative of "we versus they".

While reading the book one can clearly see how deep was the level of mutual mistrust, hatred and fear during the period of conflict in the region, and also how real is the fear of collapse of what can be achieved by the agreement – as little or symbolic as it may be. The authors bring into sharp focus the need to work for an intellectual framework in which political equality and social justice in a plural setting must be the fundamental impulses of democratic institutionalization in Bangladesh. It is a powerful critique of Bengali nationalism and its majoritarian hegemonism, at the same time also a hard reflection on the limits of Jumma exclusivism.

The stories as well as poems and songs published in the book are not organized in a particular thematic order. But as a collective these make a vital point that contemporary ethno-nationalism - whether majoritarian or minoritarian - can express assertion or grievance of a community, it can lead to violence, war, death and destruction, but it cannot provide political emancipation to the people it represents. The monograph is a persuasive argument to rethink nationalism, and work towards a framework of ethno-religious and cultural inclusivism and pluralism. The stories contained in the book underscore the need to abandon isolationism in political and intellectual practice and to strengthen dialogue

and understanding of all in making the state and its agencies accountable to its citizenry. The book highlights the need to recognize diversity and pluralism as fundamental realities in a nation-state; and to create political structures and institutions conducive to living as *citizens*, not nationalists.

*Reviewed by Iftekharuzzaman
Executive Director,
Bangladesh Freedom Foundation.*