Chapter XIII

Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts

I have had exposure of one kind or another to nearly all the countries of South Asia so I thought it was high time that I took the opportunity to visit Bangladesh when it came on offer - so to speak – out of the blue in November and December 2008. I recollect that in working in Bangladesh I’ve been involved in two very distinct projects; the first chronologically was the EC/UNDP project located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts; the second was an EC funded review of secondary education based in the Ministry of Education in the capital, Dhakka.

Bangladesh is located on the fertile Bengal delta. It is bordered by the Republic of India to its north, west and east, by the Union of Myanmar (Burma) to its south-east and by the Bay of Bengal to its south. It is separated from the Democratic Republic of Nepal and the Kingdom of Bhutan by the narrow Indian Siliguri Corridor. Together with the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal, it makes up the ethno-linguistic region of Bengal. The borders of modern Bangladesh took shape during the Partition of Bengal and British India in 1947, when the region became the eastern wing of the newly formed state of Pakistan.

Following years of political exclusion, ethnic and linguistic discrimination, and economic neglect by the politically dominant Western Pakistani wing, a surge of popular agitation, nationalism and civil disobedience led in 1971 to the Bangladesh Liberation War, resulting in the separation of the region from Pakistan and the formation of an independent Bangladesh. After independence, the new state proclaimed a secular multiparty democracy. The country then endured decades of poverty, famine, political turmoil and numerous military coups. The Bengalis form the country's predominant ethnic group, whereas the indigenous peoples in northern and southeastern districts form a significant and diverse ethnic minority. The Bengal delta region has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The four largest religions in the country are Islam (89%), Hinduism (9%), Buddhism (1%) and Christianity (0.5%)\(^\text{78}\).

In participating on these two projects I came to learn of the often terrible poverty conditions under which the Bengali majority are forced to live. Sadly, I also became aware of the even worse conditions of the ethnically very different peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I commence my tale chronologically with the mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts or the CHT as they are almost universally known.

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\(^{78}\) Wikipedia
I flew to Skiphol - Amsterdam Airport where I was joined by my long-term Dutch working colleague. We flew Amsterdam to Delhi and overnighted in a dreadful hotel which had been suggested by the tourist agency who had booked our flights. When my colleague blows – she blows. We had to make an early connection for Dhaka. I was afraid that with the pressure she was generating that we would have the police and all Hell breaking around us. To extricate us required my pouring of much oil on those troubled waters.

Later, as we flew down to Dhaka we could clearly see to the north-east the Himalayan mountain plateau. It surprised us that Kathmandu is only an hour's flight time from
Dhaka. This helped to explain how it was possible for us to meet several of our Nepal colleagues and old friends again in Dhaka. One of these was Lohani who had helped to organise my flight out of Nepal when my sister died.

Once more with the good old UN – like old times – and not much more comfortable.
Standing with me is my friend and local counterpart team member.

The Bengali people are amongst the most interesting of the South Indian people whom it was my good fortune to meet. Devout Muslims – they are also liberal. I am aware that with writers like Tagore they have a long and honourable literary culture. There is dynamism about them. Indeed under the Raj - when Calcutta was the capital of Bengal and before it was ceded to India at partition - there was a well-known saying “What Calcutta thinks today – India will do tomorrow”.

Sadly, today Bangladesh is a very poor country much put upon by natural disasters. I was surprised when the people I met were not always so concerned about the well-known and disastrous tidal waves and tsunamis funnelling up the Bay of Bengal. This was because these calamities only struck a particular region every so often – maybe every fifty years. Their impacts were spread widely along the coast. Some areas could escape inundation for up to a century. No, their main problem was the impact of the mighty rivers crossing the country which are so prone to changing course along the low lying interior. The impact of such mighty meanderings on the riverine communities is calamitous and is continuing. These communities are seen to be the poorest of the poor. To alleviate their suffering governments ever since partition have adopted the practice of transferring them and ‘planting’ them – but at tremendous social cost - in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world! The country is twice the size of Ireland and supports a population of one hundred and fifty million

79 On a later mission a colleague, a demographer, expected the population to rise further to about one hundred and eighty million before it flattens off or begins to reduce. This situation and similar
compared to Ireland’s total of six million: North and South. Dhaka, the capital city, has a population of 14 to 17 million. It is difficult to live there. There is the dust in suspension that one encounters all over the subcontinent. On top of that people jostle each other everywhere all day long. There are pitiable beggars to be seen in the streets. Along with huge densities there are equally huge traffic jams. Just to travel around can cause major headaches. Because of the uncertainty and the long duration of these traffic jams it is difficult to plan meetings anywhere near peak traffic times.

In Dhaka we lived in the Gulsan 2 district which is probably one of the better residential areas. We were near the embassies and to the European Commission. But our local colleague was disappointed that we did not work from his office. That would have taken an additional two hours travel every day there and back. We were polite but firm that we were not going to do this. In Dhaka there are few hotels, if any, where alcohol is available. Normally expatriates will sign on as members of one of the local expatriate clubs. We were lucky that the Dutch club was within a 10 minutes rickshaw drive. I wanted to travel by a rickshaw because I thought it was environmentally clean. So it is. Tradition meets modern automation at night and without lights when the rickshaw attempts to cross a main junction with automobiles speeding along it. I suppose there are risks with everything - even going to work or going to the pub at night. Happily we have survived to see another day. Bangla script made it all a little difficult to get around.

Previously I had never heard of the Chittagong Hill Tracts or of the fierce 30 year long civil conflict continuing up until 1997 when the Chittagong Accords were signed between the central government and the indigenous peoples who live there.

The Mission covered two major issues relating to the current situation and the absence of law and order which over the years has brought any semblance of a primary education system there to its knees. The first was the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and plans and strategies to improve the quality and availability of education to situations in the adjoining countries of South Asia has huge implications for Europe and I fear for future world security.
the indigenous peoples living there. The second challenge was to obtain agreement between the two UN agencies - UNDP and UNICEF - as to which of them would be the leading agency. There was a long-standing feud between both organisations. This was the pretext for our mission as informed to us by the European Commission.

I had had my 65th birthday in 2008 a month or two before the mission. I wondered then whether it was high time for me to hang up my boots and retire as a decent man should or whether I should continue consulting? I needn't have worried. As soon as both UN agencies realised I had served in the UN previously - the ILO was considered to be neutral - they insisted I should be an arbitrator between them. I was very cautious and insisted that my team of three should always be present on discussions on their respective roles. I needed witnesses. I was surprised at the vehemence with which the senior officials of the two organisations fought with each other. It was much personalised. I don't think I would have been nearly as effective had I been a younger man. I was relieved and maybe after the experience I'll continue for a few more years 'bearing the old man’s burden’.

We spent about four hours in one of these UN boats visiting remoter areas without roads.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, the CHT, as it is known universally are situated in the south eastern corner of Bangladesh and the territorial boundary of the region is in the east the Arakan (Southern Chin State) of Myanmar and Mizoram state of India, in the north by the Tripura state of India, in the west by Chittagong district and the south by Cox’s Bazaar district. It has a total land area of about 13,294 square kilometres equivalent to about 10% of the land area of Bangladesh. It straddles the fault line between peoples of Indian and Tibetan/Burmese origin. The indigenous tribes of the CHT differ from the Bangladeshi in terms of racial identity, languages, religion and culture.

In 1947, when India was being partitioned the Indians insisted that the major port of Calcutta should be joined to India. This left the newly formed country of East
Pakistan without a deep water port. The compromise reached by the British was to cut off an autonomous region adjacent to the Burmese border and to add it into East Pakistan so as to add strategic depth behind the port of Chittagong. Sadly, it didn’t occur to anyone to request the opinion of the indigenous mountain peoples who are of Tibetan/Burmese origin and of Buddhist religion. These poor unsuspecting peoples were drafted into a Moslem majority country without any prior consultation. This unfortunate policy resulted in great suffering for the 11 different tribes, each linguistically different, who have inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts from time immemorial.

It covers a very beautiful area combining high hills and lake lands. In the hills it is mainly forest. It’s a huge contrast to the rather banal and flat low-lying territory of the plains where 90% of the Bangladeshi population live. The hills, rivers and cliffs are covered with dense bamboo breaks, tall trees and creeper jungles. The valleys are covered with thick forest. The vegetation is characterised by semi-evergreen (deciduous) to tropical evergreen and dominated by tall trees. Most of the hills are covered with forests containing valuable timber trees, bamboos, canes and a kind of grass known as Shan. The fauna is rich and includes monkey, fox, jungle cat, fishing cat, wild boar, land turtle, king cobra, reticulated python, rat snake and other non-poisonous snakes together with large number of species of lizards and amphibians like frog and toad, and tree frogs. The bird life of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is wonderfully rich. More than 60 species of birds are found.

Highways and waterways are the chief means of communication but good roads are limited. The length of the metalled roads within Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban districts is 123 km, 134 km and 296 km respectively. Waterways are very important to the local economy. The length of the waterways in the above districts is 444 km, 640 km and 166 km respectively. The area is prone to serious earthquakes and to occasional flooding beside the lakes. While there are gas and oil deposits and coals across the region with the exception of the Kaptai hydraulic power station and associated paper mill there is little development as of yet. Hill people produce woven cotton goods and bamboo nets and baskets.

Overall, the CHT is one of the least developed areas of Bangladesh. Food poverty is widespread. Most indigenous peoples are not secured in relation to availability of food during most of the year. About sixty two per cent of households in the region irrespective of ethnicity according to the calorie intake (DCI) method are living below the absolute poverty line\textsuperscript{80}. There are other major issues in relation to support for human rights in which education is seen to have a major role.

Traditionally under the Mughals the CHT had been self-governing and this situation continued up until 1860 when the British took it over as their vassal territory. The indigenous people in CHT continued to have substantial autonomy until 1962 when the Government of Pakistan replaced the “excluded area “status of the CHT with that of “tribal area‖, reflecting the situation referred to earlier in West Pakistan, and began to send people other than those of indigenous origin to the region.

It was a wonderful experience to meet and to be able to relate to these most hospitable tribes’ people. Note the garland of flowers.

The population is about 1.3 million: very small in comparison to the total population of Bangladesh. Some ninety per cent live in the rural areas. While the national and official language is Bangla the literacy rate in Bangla is around 31%. This puts the local people at a considerable disadvantage in dealing with the bureaucracies. There are eleven ethnic multi lingual minorities in CHT. They are Bawn/Bawn, Chak, Chakma, Khyang, Khumi, Lushei/Lushai, Marma, Mrus/Mro, Pangkhua/Pankhua, Tangchangya and Tipperas. The pattern of human settlement throughout the CHT shows much territorial intermingling. Some groups dominate in certain parts of the CHT (e.g. the Chakma in the centre, and Marma in the tract between the Karnafuli and Sangu rivers) and others are concentrated in specific areas (e.g. Tripura in the north, Mru in the south). There was also a distinction between groups living in hill valleys and groups living on the ridges of the hills. In many places local settlement patterns are highly complex. For example, seven different groups could be found living in close proximity in an area of about 15 by 10 km around the township of Ruma on the Sangu River in the southern CHT.

Governance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts presents an example of a ‘legally and judicially pluralistic system’. This is in my opinion a legal spin for a cock-up where Murphy’s Law reigns supreme and unchallenged. With the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, a partial self-governance system was to have been re-established but the administrative structures remain complex: so both formal and traditional systems operate side by side. There are even serious disputes between several of the different tribes. When we were in the field we noticed a heavy military presence in all three districts of the CHT. Against this confused background we were to do our best for both the indigenous tribespeople and the settlers transferred or ‘planted’ there by the central government.

In 1950, the Pakistan Government with financial assistance from Canada and the World Bank initiated the construction of the Kaptai Hydro-electric Project to meet the need for energy for industrialisation and growing domestic consumption. The creation
of the Kaptai Lake and the construction of the Kaptai Dam have inundated 54% of the arable land of CHT. It caused displacement of over 100,000 people, mainly indigenous people, from their land. To sail on these beautiful waterways in a UN motorboat as we did to reach isolated communities is to marvel at the pristine beauty of your surroundings and to be oblivious to all that suffering.

On 3 April 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur, together with the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food sent an allegation letter to the Government of Bangladesh, to call its attention to information received concerning an alleged illegal seizure of the traditional lands of Jumma indigenous communities in Bandarban, Khagrachari and Merung districts, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Main items raised were:

‘According to the information received, since March 2007, an estimate of 4,500 acres of land has been reportedly taken away from Jumma individuals and communities in at least 16 villages or commons belonging to five Unions in Khagrachari district. Similar patterns seem to have been followed in other districts in the past.’

‘According to the information, the lands had been illegally and forcibly grabbed by Bengali settlers from different cluster villages gathered around army camps. It was reported that army personnel were directly involved in all these cases, creating a climate of fear among the local Jumma villagers and instigating the settlers to seize their lands. In other cases, army personnel have reportedly given grants to families willing to build their houses in the area. In other cases, army personnel have allegedly been directly involved in the planning and implementation of the settlement. It was also reported that army personnel have actively assisted the settlers in the construction of houses in the allegedly seized lands. Finally, in other instances, local administrators have been reportedly asked to provide forged land documents to the settlers. In many of the reported evictions, the indigenous families were forced to leave their homesteads, as well as their domestic fruit gardens, bamboo and teak orchards, upon which they traditionally rely for their subsistence.’

‘In addition, it was reported that in those cases in which the Jumma villages lack a title deed over their traditional lands, the authorities consider them to be State land, freely disposing of it to facilitate the settlement of non-indigenous settlers.’

‘Concern was expressed that these cases may be part of a systematic campaign to support the settlement of non-indigenous families in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with the active support of the security forces, with an ultimate view to outnumber the local Jumma indigenous community in the region. Concern was further expressed that this process may be deliberately taking place to coincide with the state of emergency imposed on 11 January 2007 by the Caretaker Government.’

Extracts from the UN Rapporteur’s report to the Government of Bangladesh relating to serious abuses in the CHT.

The ratio of Indigenous People to Bengali settlers is approximately 51:49 (1991), while in 1860 it was almost 97:3. The local leadership has also lost control over land.

Combined, these are regarded as major causes of the armed revolt that began in nineteen seventy and ended in the late nineteen nineties. In 1972 a delegation of indigenous CHT people submitted a memorandum to the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh demanding constitutional recognition of the indigenous people living in CHT and regional autonomy for the protection of their ethnic and cultural identity. This memorandum has never been recognized or reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Bangladesh. Furthermore, armed groups of Bengalese from the neighbouring districts initiated forceful grabbing of some land traditionally owned by the indigenous people.
We were always under armed escort – even on the lake. I suppose it gave jobs to the military.

The government, in response to the subsequent insurgencies by the indigenous people in the CHT, undertook a counter strategy combining the use of military force and socio-cultural interventions and socio-economic assistance for development. Substantial numbers of the indigenous population were expelled from their land and villages coupled with transmigration of tens of thousands of landless and poor Bengalese from the plains land who were settled in plots provided by the state. The main objectives behind this were that the settlement of a large number of Bengali households in CHT would enhance the size of the population considered to be loyal to the state and that these settlements would act as counterweight to the population demanding indigenous peoples’ rights and regional autonomy.

Basic education is the worst of the UNDP project sub-sectors affected by the conflict. Due to closures, relocation of schools and displacement of elements of the population combined with personal and livelihood insecurity the progress in terms of enrolment, literacy and completion of children of the indigenous minority population is much lower even than national Bangladeshi averages. Substantial numbers of households still remain excluded from the educational process.

Among the main problems met/experienced under the Pilot Phase was the insecurity which still pervades the post-conflict situation. There is still a degree of tension across the CHT some ten years after the Accords were signed and there is only a partial implementation. In addition and as noted earlier there are serious disputes between several of the different tribes. The mission noted a heavy military presence in

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81 Sixty two per cent of the Bangalee population are living in rural CHT for less than thirty years. About twenty two per cent of the indigenous population have lost their lands: Socio-economic Baseline Survey of Chittagong Hill Tracts: Dhaka: September 2008.
all three districts and especially in Bandarban. The itinerary of the mission in the field was organised in advance between the UNDP and the military authorities and was not flexible. On one occasion the military advised it was not possible to visit a community because of the security situation.

In summary: over the years since partition the minority peoples have suffered greatly. Successive governments at the centre have turned the screw ever more tightly. There has been the transfer of the poorest Bengali population up into the territory putting intense pressure on the simple way of life of the indigenous peoples. Land has been appropriated by the government and given to the settlers at the expense of the tribes’ people. As noted above the hydro-electric dam to the cities was built which took up to 50% of the available arable land. Eviction of the local peoples led to fifty thousand dead.

There has been civil war with massacre and atrocities perpetrated by the army and the local indigenous peoples: according to the UN the vast majority of these being committed by the army. It was the impression of the mission that the present high profile mounted by the UNDP in its project activities appears to act to some degree as a peaceful counterweight to the heavy military presence. In 1997 the Chittagong Peace Accords were signed between the government and the tribal representatives. These conferred a degree of autonomy to the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

But still villages in the CHT have lower access to education as compared to the rest of the country. A UNDP assessment mission pointed out that only one in five villages has a primary school, as compared to two schools for three villages in the rest of the country. For children, especially the younger ones, it is difficult to walk through the hilly terrain to reach the schools. The distance of education facilities is an important factor in enrolment at the right age. The net enrolment rate in primary education is
believed to range from a maximum of 61% of Bengali children to a minimum of 12% of ‘Mro’ community.82

During the mission we visited all three districts under the protection of the UN. The UNDP approach is unique and is aimed at providing sustainability for education through organisation and development of ‘self-help’ in the targeted communities. In the field we were made aware of the positive impact of the other aspects of the work such as the community empowerment and gender mainstreaming and the development of income generation and their potential to support primary education. We were particularly impressed by the strength of commitment made by the Village Development Committees interviewed for the provision of schooling. There was no other way - as a strapped central government has no funds for this – even if it wanted to.

Over the Hill Tracts as noted earlier the UNDP with EC funding is implementing primary education reforms under a pilot phase. The pilot has been quite successful in demonstrating that it is possible to strengthen and support existing systems such as the School Management Committees (SMCs) to achieve much more than they were previously achieving. It has demonstrated how new systems can be established and can have potential for achieving positive prospects for sustainability. The challenge for another education Phase II which we were to prepare was to take this preparatory phase forward and to lobby effectively for policy change at all levels to support the strengthening of basic education provision and essentially so children can realise their basic rights to education.

The CHT is the only region in Bangladesh where the authority for primary education is supposed to be decentralised to district level – to the three Hill District Councils (HDCs) and the Regional Council (RC) empowered by the CHT Peace Accord 1997, and the Hill District Council Act of 1998 to deliver a wide range of services. The roles and authority of the Councils under the new dispensation are still unclear and somewhat fragile. At present these institutions fall short in terms of human and financial resources. Unfortunately, while the Accords were signed they have only been implemented to a limited extent. There is reluctance on the part of certain elements of the government and of the army to have them fully implemented.

I think this is an opportune time for to attempt to share some of the impressions made through meeting the indigenous people from the Hill Tracts. These peoples are amongst the most poor in the very poor country of Bangladesh. Medical assessments find them to be undernourished. Their lives are short. Again, it is well recorded that almost 60 per cent of them, adults as well as children, have no security for access to food for the order of up to six months in any year. Notwithstanding all of this the welcoming the mission received into their communities, their friendliness and relief to have us visit them, their willingness to share whatever they had with us made a huge and positive impression.

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82 World Bank, unpublished paper, 2004
It is certainly ironic that we always received the most generous reception from the poorest. From the beginning as we approached the village in our UN jeep the villagers were there to greet us: the gates decked out in flags and colourful cloths. When we had descended from the jeep we would meet with the head people of the village. They would present us with flowers tied in beautiful bouquets. They would place another garland of flowers around our necks. I smile as I recall feeling insects detaching themselves from the garlands and attaching themselves to my neck.

The villagers would line the approach to the village on both sides and we would walk between them as they showered us with flower petals from the bowls they carried. We soon managed to overcome our embarrassment and to enjoy their pleasure and their welcoming - and all the excitement generated. Normally - with our armed guards who always were so much out of place - we would be ushered into the central area of the village where a table would have been set facing the crowd of chatting, friendly, and inquisitive people. They would be seated on the ground in family groups; their bemused children looking at these white people and enquiring from their mothers or fathers as to where we came from. Occasionally a young child cries out or squabbles or one who insists on being breast fed announces its needs during the proceedings. Personally, I have found it a revelation in speaking to these friendly people through an interpreter as to how a normal and informative and pleasant such a dialogue could be.

You are truly a part of a village celebration. The village head man opens the proceedings. After a few dignified words of welcome and some questions and replies put somewhat formally the floor would be thrown open for any interested person to put questions to us as to the purpose of visit or the impressions we had of their village and of their hopes for the education of their children. In this simple way we could
exchange a great deal of information. The barriers were let fall and we were speaking
together as friends.

At the same time for us the spectacle was so unusual and colourful. The ladies dressed
in such colourful saris. Some would be breastfeeding others would have their arms
around their happy contented children as they spoke to us. The men were not so
colourfully dressed but they presented a spectacle as they pulled on their simple
bamboo pipes, puffing contentedly. At times I thought I was in a Garden of Eden. My
mind went back to a primitive picture I had collected in Tanzania which showed a
scene from the Garden of Eden with the lion lying down with the lamb, the elephants,
and the snakes - all in one happy consortium. It was so charming.

While the people we met possessed a natural dignity and - given it was so unusual for
them to meet or to talk with strangers from the so-called developed world - they were
quite nonplussed by the occasion. I am convinced there is no difference between most
of us whether we come from the West with our cars and our obesity and our rigid
lifestyles and these people who appear to be so close to nature. At the same time these
people have needs just as we do and are much more exposed to the basic needs of
providing food and nutrition for their families. The realisation that life was so hard for
them humbled us a lot.

After the discussion was complete there was always the invitation to join the people
for a simple meal. The meal would consist of colourful local fruits mainly served with
nuts and with banana and other delicacies and washed down with coconut milk. This
would give the community the opportunity to present their children to us. This was the
occasion when they would have us entertained by their children singing and dancing
and sometimes both. The villagers looked forward to this with great interest and
enthusiasm. I remember saying to an elder of the village that I loved the children and
wished I could take them home to Ireland with me.
I enjoyed being with these gentle people so much. Their lives appeared to be so simple and close to nature. At the same time this friendly show covered up the harshest of realities. Some of these people would have been expelled or exiled or would have lost relatives in the troubles leading up to the peace accords. It often crossed my mind that these people or people like them had borne the hideous impact of the construction of the dam and clearing out of the local people and the resultant deaths.

There was informality mixed with hospitality. On one occasion we three were invited to one of the elder women’s homes. We sat down on mats on the earthen floor and enjoyed a happy lunch with a good lot of banter and witty gestures. They could see we were enjoying ourselves. Then the nice old lady produced a bottle of twice-distilled Duitse Wine – it sounded to mean German wine but that was just a coincidence. Anyway, it was the best of its kind. It certainly packed a punch! She insisted we took the bottle but we only accepted it if she would accept money towards the school.

I think all of us and that would include our local counterpart colleague, were so impressed by the simple dignity and hospitality shown to us. This was irrespective as to whether it was the tribes’ people or the settlers or a combination of both that we had met. On one visit we were really excited to be regaled by the local male traditional band. The wind instruments the band used were all made from hollowed out vegetables. They had hollow pipes. On top of the pipes were positioned what looked like amplifiers but which must have been made from the simple vegetable material. The sound they made was very much like the Highland bagpipes but not so loud. In addition to these - I call them flutes - there were the more conventional drums. The orchestra thus equipped introduced us to what to me was quite acceptable music - if unusual. But after all I am well acquainted with traditional Irish music which had some resemblance to it. I certainly felt they would create a sensation if they could be persuaded to perform in a traditional pub in Ireland.
Young girls displaying their traditional dances.

At the same time one has to be impressed with the evidence that even in such a deprived society there was still an appetite for making music. The instruments showed that there is a tradition and one that was appreciated in the community. The orchestra playing before us was a way they demonstrated the expression of hospitality and respect to their visitors.

In contrast to the countryside the towns we visited in each of the three districts for the most part were not so attractive. There were the usual bazaars where there were souvenirs and good quality traditional clothing for sale. The hotels were very simple. One in Bandarban where we had a workshop was really impressive. This was an exception. The menus were somewhat limited. If you wanted omelette you got omelette. On the other hand the waiters could usually manage to organise our bottle of the Duitse wine, which was always much appreciated. There was more than one location when I woke up to hear multi-pede footsteps of little and not so little cockroaches waltzing across the room.

During a mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a team we were all concerned with the effects on the livelihoods and on the poverty levels, which the trans-plantation of people from the destitute areas of the plains to the Tracts might have. We were concerned with equity issues, and the rights of these poor tribal peoples to equality and decency before the law. It was my conviction that a wrong was being done through the policies of successive Governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh in planting alien Bangladeshi Muslims into their midst. But in spending some time in Dhaka with occasional visits into the communities I was made aware, painfully aware, of the levels of abject poverty, which exist both in the slums of Dhaka and the other large cities, and along the banks of the major rivers, which change course annually.
causing destruction and havoc to the poorest populations, who try to make a living along their banks.

The question I put to myself concerns the nature of the rights of all the peoples of Bangladesh, including the Chittagong hill tribes. Is it not valid for a government to try to ease the pain of and even more abject poverty by translating some of the poorest of the Bangladeshi Muslim poor to have a marginally better prospect of life in the Chittagong Tracts? I can see, there is a strong case for this government policy, but at the same time the solution has to take into account the rights to the survival of the indigenous tribal peoples. I see these rights to be paramount in so far as these are areas in which the indigenous tribal peoples have traditionally lived over centuries.

Without the United Nations presence they run the risk of being eliminated and destroyed. We – all of us - have a right to peace and security. Wherever we live, and these rights should not be challenged just so as to offer another and in this case the majority Muslim population an improved opportunity to make a living. I suppose in some ways it represents the same arguments for and against the Plantation of Ulster in 1609 and other European experiences where the introduction of an alien population into an already impoverished area can only be to create conflicts and hatreds such as those that emerged from a similar situation more than three hundred years ago in Ireland.

On returning to our main task namely to prepare a report on the capacity and ability of the two UN agencies to implement wide-scale education reforms across the CHT we concluded that UNDP was working effectively on the ground. On the other hand while it was carrying out good and useful work it was not taking into account at the macro level the chaotic and poorly managed education system into which their activities had to be integrated. The proposal prepared by UNDP didn't take into account adequately the need for it to have long-term sustainable policies for the schools created to ensure takeover by the relevant government Department of Primary Education adequately supported by the community who would pay for teachers’ salaries and for learning materials. Nor was there an adequate provision for strengthening staff responsible for education implementation in the Regional Council and the three Hill District Councils.

The UNDP, while good on the ground in implementing the reform strategies appeared to us to have missed a bigger picture: that of ensuring that the central government agencies were engaged and approved of the reforms being applied. This in our opinion wouldn’t be easy to achieve but successful integration into the central government administration was the only guarantee of long-term sustainability, after the UN had withdrawn. We recommended that UNDP be appointed by the EC and funded adequately subject to their proposals being adjusted to take these longer-term sustainability issues into consideration.

Turning to the UN agencies themselves we became conscious of the institutional gap that existed between UNDP and UNICEF and of their inability to cooperate or to work together on an advocacy programme to promote the support promised for the CHT Accords. It was depressing that neither was prepared to work with the other. At times the discussions at which we participated became very heated indeed. The one-page draft Memorandum of Understanding they produced jointly for us was not
convincing. Having seen them attempt to work together at senior management level we felt such an agreement could easily become unstitched. Sadly we did not have much faith in the agreement proposed by the MoU.

In taking this approach it was our intention to provide support to the children of the CHT and to their parents and guardians. Inter-institutional rivalries we felt should have no place in a situation where the needs and the poverty are so great. In making such recommendations we were aware that we passed on substantial pressure to the local EC Delegation who would be there over the longer term. But we had been impressed with the supportive stance they had taken with respect to the human rights of the CHT peoples irrespective of whether they are the tribespeople or the impoverished settlers.

A spectre which haunted us over much on the mission in November/December 2008 was the ferocious attack on the financial services centre of Mumbai including the beautiful old Raj Hotel by a group claiming to represent Muslims coming from Pakistan. Following the attack the security services across India were strengthened and in the bureaucratic way that India is famous for it certainly contributed to delays and uncertainty for us on the way back to Europe.

**A sequel: the Bangladesh Secondary Education Sector Review March/April 2009.**

I was surprised following the earlier mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the report write-ups, which finished about February 2009, to be invited back as team leader and part of a three-man team to carry out a review of the 26,000 odd secondary schools, the policy adopted by the Ministry of Education for them and to identify a project for strengthening the quality of secondary education which the European Commission could support.
I suppose looking back, as a team we had been critical of some of the projects the Commission had supported in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where schools had no prospect of sustainability and following a five year period of support had to close down, leaving the children with no further prospects of education. There had been some discussion, and not a little tension between the Delegation and us as a team on this point. We had conceded on some small issues, but not a lot. The Delegation appeared to be satisfied. It was only afterwards that they noticed that some of the more telling criticisms remained in the document they had accepted.

On March 16th 2009 I flew Dublin to Amsterdam to Dubai and onwards to Dhaka. In Amsterdam with my colleagues, I was present at a party, where each of the seven nationalities involved in the office contributed a native dish. For me it was salmon and some whiskey. The next day, after leaving Dubai I became very sick indeed. It was the worst I've ever experienced. At this stage in my life, I'm beginning to dread these long, complicated flight schedules. I remember arriving in Dhaka and standing in the visa queue and vomiting. A half an hour later when I arrived back in my previous hotel, I repeated the performance.

After that induction, anything was an improvement, and I enjoyed a three week long bout of hard work with my Scots and my Bangladeshi counterparts. I met several of my old friends, including in the World Bank a lady I had worked with on mission 15 years before in Karachi. Then she had presented me with a birthday cake for my 50th birthday. On meeting her in the World Bank the first question she asked was “how was my boat?” Meeting again with old friends and through them developing an informal network and exchanging notes undoubtedly helps us to be much more effective. It even meant that we gained more insights into what organisations such as the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank were doing than the permanent EC Delegation in Dhaka had.

During our stay in Dhaka, we learned a lot about the perception of threats - apparent or real – coming from the Muslim Koranic schools or madrasas. The madrasas cater for the most impoverished communities in Bangladesh. Earlier in Pakistan, the madrasas located around the city of Peshawar in the North West Frontier province gave rise to that murderous regime, the Taliban, which took control of Afghanistan. Under that regime, girls’ schools were closed down and women's lives restricted strictly within the house and to the savage and repressive sharia law system. In 2009 there were active fears at the government and at international level that the madrasas in Bangladesh would adopt similar approaches. In our briefing by the Delegation we were instructed to take into consideration in making any recommendations that any suggestion that the EC in Brussels should support terrorism was out of the question. As individual EC citizens we as team members didn’t expect any other attitude.

In Bangladesh, just fewer than nine million students are enrolled in about twenty seven thousand secondary institutions, excluding madrasas. There are about seven thousand madrasas with almost two million students in attendance. These latter students are important because they represent the children of the poorest communities. These communities would normally be targeted for support by the donor agencies but there was an over-arching hesitation arising from the Pakistani precedent.
I found the government-supported madrasas where the government pays most if not all of the teacher salaries to be very similar to the denominational schools in Ireland or in the UK, the Netherlands, and many other European countries. I certainly wouldn't bracket them or associate them with fundamentalists. It surprised us therefore that up to our mission none of the donors appeared to have studied these state-supported madrasa schools to the extent either of the curriculum in use, the role of religion in the learning process or the application of any kind of other sinister disciplines.

As a team we visited, a typical state-supported madrasa and found to our surprise, that 16-year-olds were studying in mixed classes. The major focus of the school management was on gaining parity with the best of the secular state schools and on obtaining better prospects for promotion into tertiary level. As a team we will admit that our sampling was more than a little limited. We had every opportunity to go to another school and found a similar situation applied. But a few schools out of seven thousand schools like one swallow ‘won’t make a summer’. Nevertheless, what we did find was good and acceptable. It did raise questions about the conventional wisdom amongst the donor community in relation to the state run madrassas. We recommended that a more detailed and comprehensive assessment be organised. In highlighting the difference between the conventional wisdom, and what we encountered, we nevertheless hope that the survey results will go some way to convincing the donors to reconsider and perhaps to provide support to these very madrasas.

There are also another stream of Qawmi Madrasas which has no contact at all with the state and where doubts could be much more realistic. During the mission one of them was raided by the police and bombs, munitions and weapons were found. These have no connection with the state-supported madrasas.

It did come to our attention however, that some of the Development Banks had also advocated such a study.
under-resourced institutions. I suppose it's tricky to come to conclusions on the radicalism or non-radicalism of the state-supported madrasa schools - when your findings will be presented in advance of such a national survey.

To end on a cultural note: during one of several visits to the Delegation we met the Delegate (Ambassador). As part of his work he had been fostering cultural relationships between Bangladesh and the European Union. A local talent he had come across was Shambu Acharya, a very famous local Pata painter. ‘Patachitra’ is an age-old form of popular art which has been practiced in what is now Bangladesh since the twelfth century. Pata pictures depicted scenes from religious stories and cultural myths and themes from life in rural Bangladesh. Rural bards and story-tellers would use these scrolls which had pictures depicting various events and the themes of the stories they would tell.

The patachitra of the Village Bride making herself beautiful. I enjoy the stylisation and the remarkable freshness of the colouring so much.

The earliest ‘patuas’ usually took the themes for their paintings from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, various legends, myths and religious stories and later expanded the range by including many popular and secular stories of the land. Patachitra, like many other popular folk arts of Bengal such as pottery and the weaving of Muslin was practiced in families from generation to generation. The skills and the commitment to the art form were handed down from the fathers to their sons and daughters.
The family of Shambu Acharya has been practicing ‘patachitra’ or scroll painting for more than four hundred years and eight generations. He uses only local materials for his paintings. For the canvas he uses ‘markin’ cloth applying age-old techniques. The cloth is first layered with mud or cow dung and dried. It is then layered again with a paste made from tamarind seeds and powder of brick and chalk. This canvas lasts for ages. For making his colour he uses black ink made from the smoke of flames, zinc oxide, vermillion, egg yolk, the sticky juice of wood apples and various kinds of earth colour.

I was thrilled to be able to purchase one of his paintings entitled ‘Village bride making herself beautiful’. It is a beautiful addition to the pictures, wall hangings, batiques, tapestries and carpets I’ve collected over the years which contributes to making our house something of a museum. I hope it will remain in the family for many years to come.