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BUDDHISM

The Other Victims

Have the Chakmas averted extinction?

Six hundred thousand indigenous people inhabit the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, a region of 5,000 square miles which borders Burma and northeastern India. As Buddhists, and racially and linguistically separate from the Bengalis, these people, mostly Chakmas, had every expectation of being included with India at the time of partition. But that did not happen, and they soon found themselves faced with an unwanted invasion of Bengali settlers from the rest of the country. The percentage of Chakmas in the CHT was 98 percent in 1947; by 1981 it had declined to just 59 percent. Armed resistance developed among the Chakmas, backed by India, and the Bangladesh army was sent to suppress it. This resulted in widespread massacres of tribals in 1981, rape, destruction of temples and homes.

In 1992, 17 US Congressmen complained to the Government of Bangladesh about the on-going attacks. "According to reliable reports," they stated, "on April 10, 1992, the town of Longong in the CHT was surrounded by Bengali settlers accompanied by paramilitary forces. The inhabitants of the town were then systematically murdered. Estimates from Amnesty

International and human rights organizations in Bangladesh range up to 600 or more. Eyewitnesses report that the entire village was burned to the ground. Reports of torture, rape and extrajudicial execution have been common for years."

As a result, tens of thousands of Chakmas fled into India. Fifty thousand went to Tripura. Twenty thousand fled to the Arakan Hills in Burma where they permanently settled, another 70,000 are in the nearby Indian state of Arunachal Pardesh, where they face opposition to their presence.

In 1996 and 1997, the government of Sheik Hasina signed treaties with the Chakma, allowing them to have their own identity, and some autonomy, in exchange for an end to the resistance movement. However, the opposition party of Begum Khalida Zia is against the treaty, and if they come to power, may reverse it. A few of the Chakmas have since returned to Bangladesh.