

# Displacement and Destruction of Ethnic People in Bangladesh

## DÉPLACEMENT ET DESTRUCTION DES GENS ETHNIQUES AU BANGLADESH

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*If a child cries in a Pahari<sup>2</sup> family his/her parent threat the child that 'Bangali<sup>3</sup> is coming' to stop crying; like ways, in a Bangali family, in such case, parent threat that 'Shanti Bahini<sup>4</sup> is coming'.*

**Abstract:** Historically the indigenous people living in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh have been oppressing by the dominant majority groups. Today the indigenous ethnic people are seem to be "outsiders in own-nurtured land" because of various forms of discrimination and exploitation since the colonial British period in this region. Eventually they increasing are not only outnumbering in their own land in terms of population number, alarmingly they are displacing from their own culture and traditions. The paper based on empirical research examines the historiography of displacement and destruction of ethnic minorities living in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

**Key words:** Displacement, destruction, demographic shift, peace accord, holistic approach

**Résumé:** historiquement, les indigènes vivant dans l'Étendue de la Colline Chittagong du Bangladesh ont été opprimés par les groupes dominants de la majorité. Aujourd'hui, les indigènes ethniques semblent être des étrangers dans leur terre où ils s'élèvent. À cause de différentes formes de discrimination et de l'exploitation depuis la période de la colonie britannique dans cette région. Finalement, leur augmentation non seulement est plus nombreuse dans leur propre terre en terme du nombre de population, mais ils se déplacent de leur propre culture et leurs propres traditions de

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<sup>2</sup> Pahari (those ethnic people who live in the hills) are those who are the local indigenous people living in the CHT.

<sup>3</sup> Bangali are the Bangla language spoken mainstream Bangladeshi people who also settled in CHT.

<sup>4</sup> Shanti Bahini (Peace Force) is the armed wing component of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS, in short JSS)- a political organization that have been working to establish the rights of Pahari in CHT.

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façon alarmante. Cette mémoire basée sur la recherche empirique examine l'historiographie du déplacement et de la destruction des minorités ethniques vivant dans l'Étendue de la Colline Chittagong.

**Mots-Clés:** déplacement, destruction, changement démographique, accord pacifique, approche holistique

## INTRODUCTION

The paper concerns the ethnic<sup>5</sup> people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts<sup>6</sup> (CHT) that situated in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. It is the only mountainous region of Bangladesh which is the only extensive mountainous region situated in the southeastern region of the country. The region shares a border with the Tripura and Mizoram states of India on the North and East, The Chin and Arakan states of Myanmar (Burma) on the South and Southeast, and the Bay of Bengal on the West. The area of the CHT is about 13,184 sq km, which is approximately one-tenth of the total area of Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> It consists of three districts- Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban; each district has a district council which controls internal affairs such as land use, the settling of disputes, and other matters that have been delegated to this level of indigenous administration (ADB, 2000). The region is a mixture of local people and immigrants from Burma and India. It is traditionally home to twelve different ethnic groups. The Mongoloid population group dominates the total ethnic population in CHT. The major Mongoloid indigenous<sup>8</sup> ethnic groups are Chakma, Marma, Tipra, and Rakhaine. However, the most recent immigrants in CHT are Bangalis<sup>9</sup> (Chowdhury; 2002). Local ethnic people differ significantly from Bangalis<sup>10</sup> in terms of their appearance, language, religion and socio-cultural organization.

South Asia is one of the most conflict-torn and militarized of all regions in the world. The CHT had been a conflict zone till 1997; still peace does not exist in CHT. This has its roots in the dissatisfaction and disaffection the ethnic peoples had with the continuing policy of colonization and oppression which began with the British but continued to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and beyond. The main factor to the ethnic peoples taking up an armed struggle in the mid-1970s was a response to the newly independent nation-state of Bangladesh, which proclaimed Bengali hegemony and domination as the guiding policy. The political life of the Hill people of the CHT thus began with a feeling of indifference and to a certain extent anxiety. According to them, ethnic peoples face 'double' 'discrimination' in their everyday life— because they are '*pahari*' (living in the hill or jungle), and they are '*tribes*', or '*upajati*' (mainstream people and also literature use these term to identify ethnic people). They say, '*life is not ours*'! They have learnt to survive oppression and marginalization, 'discrimination' and

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<sup>5</sup> Those, who live in Chittagong Hill Tracts from the time immemorial having different physiological and cultural features.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, CHT in this thesis for Chittagong Hill Tracts.

<sup>7</sup> Total population enumerated in the 2001 census was 1.3 million.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'indigenous' peoples has no universal, standard or fixed definition, but can be used about any ethnic group who inhabit the geographic region with which they have the earliest historical connection. The use of the term is often confusing particularly in those cases where it is hard to establish whether groups in question is the indigenous people of that area they inhabit or they migrated to that area from somewhere else, a very long time ago.

<sup>9</sup> The mainstream population of Bangladesh (Bangali) whose mother language is Bangla (in English Bengali).

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violence, without losing the wisdom and patience to build on and to share experiences.

Since the independence of Bangladesh, successive governments have always legitimized the militarization of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, predominantly because it is a frontier state and more so because of the existence of a movement for autonomy and self-rule among the indigenous people, which, from the perspective of the State, came to be called an 'insurgency'. Over the last quarter century, the indigenous people of the Hill Tracts have been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state. In the name of counter insurgency, massive violations of human rights were committed by the military. These included cases of extra-judicial killings, torture, abduction, forced religious conversion, religious persecution, forced eviction, rape, harassing, destruction of homes and properties, and wide scale arrests and detention. Virtually conflict and crisis of CHT centered on the transfer of population from plain districts to CHT and the control of administration by non-inhabitants. However, 'discrimination', deprivation and exploitation in social, cultural, economic and political fields and the program of assimilation of the indigenous hill culture into the majority Bengali population were other bones of conflict.

This paper addresses some specific aspects: conflict situations, struggle, and forms of displacement and destruction by the state. Traditional and adopted existing life-ways of the ethnic peoples are somehow related with the Bangladesh policies. Insecurity, threat and instability of their life started with the state policies like hydro-electric project (locally known as Kaptai dam) which instantly displaced a huge number of people from their land, pushed them to be migrated in nearby country; and ultimately made the whole CHT situation a 'in-secured' zone. The research context has been set within the theoretical orientation of ethnicity and displacement.

## **HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENT AND DESTRUCTION IN CHT**

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is located in the south-east of the country, near the Myanmar and Indian border. It has had close physiological and cultural ties with northeast Indian and Myanmar rather than their present country (Bangladesh). In the following section, the early history of the people of CHT will be described based on secondary sources. The way of displacement by the state policies and forms of destruction will be discussed based on local perceptions after that. I therefore will discuss on the peace accord of CHT which was signed in 1997 by the GOB and JSS. I will also discuss the passage and holes of the peace accord after eleven years of signing, towards peace in the historically ignored part of Bangladesh, CHT.

### **British period (1757-1947): displacing from traditional socio-political systems**

Bengal region was ruled by the British from 1757 to 1947. Although there was a sharp physiological and cultural gap between the Pahari and Bangali, geographically the CHT was close to the Bengal region. However, it was an independent region having of twelve different ethnic groups who bear distinct culture, language and way of life. The British occupied and then annexed the region with Bengal in 1860 and named it Chittagong Hill Tracts. Since, they found the hilly area after near Chittagong they named it as Chittagong Hill Tracts (*Parbatya Chottogram*). However, the British realized the distinct culture of the region and created an

autonomous administrative district known as “Chittagong Hill Tracts” within the undivided British Bengal. The British introduced the most important administrative reform- the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900 (popularly known as CHT Manual) in 1900 to “protect” the Pahari people from economic exploitation of non-indigenous people and to preserve their traditional socio-cultural and political institutions based on chief ships, customary laws, common ownership of land and, so on. The unified CHT was divided the CHT into three circles in 1884, and each circle was placed under the jurisdiction of a chief, who collected revenues and managed social order. Corresponding to the three circles were three subdivisions under the supervisory officers. The basic objective for this set up was to restrain the district administration from interfering in the socio-cultural affairs of the local population. Throughout the British colonial period the CHT Manual Act functioned as a "safeguard" for the Pahari people, prohibited land ownership and migrations of non-indigenous peoples in the CHT, and also provided full local autonomy to the Pahari peoples in respect to their practice of customary laws, traditional ways of life and land rights (common ownership).

### **Pakistan Period (1947-1971): displacing from cultural uniqueness and self-determination**

British introduced Hill Tracts Manual despite some flaws have been considering the safeguard for the Pahari, on the other hand, it is the British who annexed the CHT with Pakistan in 1947 when Pakistan was divided from the undivided India based on religion (two-nation theory). In accordance with the provision of the Indian Independence Act of 1947 the CHT being a Non-Muslim populated area was due to be included into secular state of India. CHT people wanted to be part of India not Pakistan, because, Pakistan was an Islamic country. Besides, they experienced earlier how they were compelled to vacate the lands they had in the Chittagong district. Indian flag had been hoisted in Rangamati and Burmese had been hoisted in Bandarban district in 1947 for one or two days just as protest. As a result, the government of Pakistan did not accept it and adopted hostile attitude toward the indigenous hill people of the CHT. The Bangali Muslim rulers of the then East Pakistan and the Bangali Muslim administrators and businessmen took the fullest advantage of it. They identified the Pahari people as pro-Indian and utilized it against any Pahari people at any matter. In the subsequent years their anger turned violent, demanding an autonomous state of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Within only next one year the Pahari people realized that their life would never be peaceful in Pakistan. In 1948 Pakistan government annulled the CHT Police Regulation and abolished the indigenous police force which was formed in 1881 considering the unique cultural setting of CHT and its preservation. The situation was becoming worsened in the later years. But in 1950s and 1960s in violation of the provisions of the Hill Tracts Manual Bangali Muslim refugees from India were settled in CHT. The constitutions of 1955 and 1962 preserved the status as an ‘excluded area’, but a constitutional amendment in 1963 abolished this status. This gradual erosion of limited self-rule brought forth the issue of ethnic identity in the CHT that took a decisive shape in independent Bangladesh. In 1960s the then Pakistan government constructed a hydro-electric dam (popularly known as Kaptai dam) in the central of CHT without any kind of consultation with the local people, which not only submerged nearly 54,000 acres of best cultivable land (40%) in the hilly region; it displaced almost 100,000 people from their hearths and homes. Approximately 40,000 "environmental refugees" migrated to India and another 20,000 migrated to Burma (Sopher 1963). Those displaced ethnic people had to lead an expatriate and vagabond exile time in India facing serious identity crisis. They lived in the Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India being citizens neither of India, nor of Bangladesh and without citizenship rights in either country.

Deprivation by the Pakistan government through Kaptai dam strongly motivated them to be educated for alternative income-oriented jobs given that they lost their traditional hill economy by the dam. However, the hill people became conscious of their position just at the end of Pakistan period under the leadership of M. N. Larma who founded the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samity- PCJSS\ JSS to establish the rights of Pahari in CHT. In fact, after 1947, the limited self-rule of the CHT gradually wiped out in the process of nation-building initially in Pakistan and then, after 1971, in Bangladesh (Chakma 2008).

## **Bangladesh Period (1971- 1997): displacing from self-esteem and ethnic identity**

### **Liberation War and scapegoating the Paharis**

During the liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 against Pakistan, senior leaders including M. N. Larma, Mong circle Chief Mong Prue Chai Chowdhury took part in the liberation war for Bangladesh (East Pakistan). The Chakma circle Chief Tridiv Roy (along with his few supporters) was somehow managed to support the Pakistan. Being absolutely non-Muslim the majority of the Pahari was against the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and hoped for a secular independent country and joined with the freedom fighters of Bangladesh under the supreme leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman- the unanimous great leader of Bangladesh who became the Father of the nation after the independence of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the local Bangali leaders and government officials who had joined the Liberation War identified the hill people as pro-Pakistani at that time. On the other hand, Pakistani forces had been used by other Bangali Muslims against the hill people at the village areas by identifying Pahari people as supporters of the Liberation Force and pro-Indian and took the advantage of looting their houses and occupying their lands.

### **Movement for Autonomy of CHT**

After the emergence of sovereign Bangladesh in 1971, Bangladesh was projected as a homogenous Bangali nationalism, with no recognition of non-Bangali in the liberation war; and so as non-Bangalis' rights was protected in the constitution of Bangladesh which was adopted in 1972. No separate status or identity was thought for 'other' citizens of Bangladesh. However, disappointed by the character of the Bangladesh state, M N Larma (the leader of the Pahari, also was a Parliament Member from CHT) demanded for the special space in the constitution, but disappointingly his appeal had not only been rejected by the First Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but the Prime Minister also called upon the Pahari people to become Bangali forgetting their own identity. In the National Assembly, M. N. Larma made sustained argument against the assimilationist policy of the government. He pointed out to the cultural differences of the hill people from that of the Bangalis. But all of his efforts went in vein. Larma's pursuit of regional autonomy through constitutional means ended in 1975 when a military coup changed the political set up of the country<sup>11</sup> and the military retime suspended the constitution. After the coup, Larma went underground and organized an armed resistance force, *Shanti Bahini* (SB, or Peace Force) to pursue regional autonomy (Chakma 2008). Being categorically refused to create any space or account any recognition to the minorities by the Bangali hegemonic state, to obtain recognition of their identities through constitutional pathway gradually drifted the *Shanti Bahini* (armed wing of *Parbartya*

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<sup>11</sup> After the assassination of the First Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1975 by the military forces the overall situation of Bangladesh became restless; people's security and rights were controlled by the military.

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*Chattagram Jana Samhitya* or PCJSS [United Peoples' Organization of Chittagong Hill Tracts, hereafter JSS as is popularly known]) towards adopting non-constitutional means since 1976.

However, immediately after the change in 1975, the whole CHT was militarized and brought under military control by undermining the local civil administration. The establishment of Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB) in 1976 for the CHT development deeply strengthened military occupation and development of military infrastructure in the CHT. The Chairmanship of the CHTDB is the General Officer Commanding (G.O.C) of Chittagong Cantonment (till 1997) who holds overall military command in the CHT. Since then, the military has been in charge of implementing all development projects in the CHT and also controlling the fund that came from the international aid agencies and donor countries for the CHTDB development projects. However, a close examination of the CHTDB development projects reveals that more than 80% of the CHTDB development budgets are spent on building a military infrastructure through construction of military camps, roads and bridges, office buildings, sports complexes (stadiums), mosques, cluster villages for Pahari and Bengali settlers. In the mid of 1970s the Government of Bangladesh deployed more than 80,000 security personnel in the CHT in the name of "development and security reasons". In fact, it was intended to "protect" Bengali settlers and to carry out counter insurgency operation against the Paharis.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT AND MASSIVE DESTRUCTION IN CHT**

Another crucial factor in the conflict is the government policy of changing the demographic character of the CHT through transmigration of Bengalis by displacing the Paharis. During 1979 - 1984 alone about half a million Bengalis have been settled into the CHT through the government sponsored settlement programs. Thus for Bengali settlers, the government also spends a large amount of money from the foreign aid funds allotted for the CHT development Projects. The new settlers have been given legal land ownership by the state. In addition, a large number of Bengali settlers have taken illegal possession of lands, through steady encroachment and outright grabbing. The military encourage and help settlers directly or indirectly to occupy the lands of the Pahari and force the Pahari to leave their ancestral lands and villages. The situation is threatening to explode into a large-scale violent physical confrontation between the dominant community and the Pahari.

The violence and the rapid militarization has deeply affected the conduct and thinking of the average persons. The massive poverty, accentuated by natural catastrophes, political instability, technological backwardness, high density of population, social ignorance and prejudice, are compelling for the Government to take the options which appear easy for that time being. The opening of the CHT even by force for settlement and exploitation by the landless millions from the plains must have appeared an easy option not only to the Government but also to the uncritical mind. However, the experience of the last two decades have proved it wrong. It has landed Bangladesh in a mess. The killing and mass destruction of the physical and the spiritual world have not taken the country anywhere near finding a solution to the decade old ethnic conflict.

The issue of destruction of rain forest and degradation of environment in the CHT has not yet been exposed to the outside world. What appeared at the turn of this century as the most inaccessible, impenetrable and unconquerable rainforest in the CHT may never be found today.

The Pahari people have inhabited this area for hundreds of years without degrading physical environment and depleting natural resources. The way they exploited and managed their environment and natural resources are quite sustainable. But over the last two decades, the military forces, traders, government officials, and settlers have ravaged the CHT rain forests through indiscriminate illegal logging, excessive timber, fire-wood and bamboo extraction for commercial and industrial purposes and pushed the Pahari people deeper into the countryside and to neighboring countries. Bulldozing their ancestral homeland, in search of rich natural resources using "national development" and "security" as an excuse, the remaining rain forests destroyed even after the massive environmental destruction and deforestation caused by hydro-dam flooding.

## **RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS**

Successive governments in Bangladesh moved from a military solution to eventually calling for a political solution in 1987 when General Ershad initiated the first of six rounds of peace talks. But the agreement of 1989 only provided for 'limited autonomy'. It was largely rejected and armed insurgency continued. The Pahari peoples have become targets of victims of policies of population transfer, land eviction, cultural assimilation and ethnic discrimination by successive regimes of Pakistan and then Bangladesh. In their two decade old struggle for autonomy, the Pahari peoples have been targets of massacres, extra judicial executions, rape, torture and forced relocation. Under the BNP and the Awami League, talks were resumed between a Committee representing all major parties in Parliament and the PCJSS. Eventually, the talks (BNP deliberately stayed out) resulted in the signing of a peace treaty on December 2, 1997 between the National Committee and the PCJSS in the presence of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. One of the elements of the Peace Accord was to recognize the rights of indigenous communities to land and other sovereign issues, which have yet to be fully realized and remain a source of tension in the CHT.

The accord divided into four parts: (A). General, (B). Hill District Local Government Councils, (C). The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council and (D). Rehabilitation, General Amnesty and Other Matters. The conflict, insecurity, and discrimination still functioning even after the historical Peace Accord has been signed in 1997. The Peace Accord recognizes CHT as a region inhabited by 'Tribal' people and also recognizes the need of preserving the characteristics of the region and development thereof. Though the CHT Peace Accord has recognized the special status of the hill people, eleven years after the signing of the CHT Peace Accord, the ethnic inhabitants of the area are still continuing to live in fear of attacks from Bangali (Mainstream Bangladeshi People) settlers often carried out with the apparent connivance of army personnel. Vital clauses that have remained unimplemented by the last two political governments, and remained in a stage of stagnation present time, therefore the post peace accord situation in CHT is still neither peaceful nor secure (Mohsin 2002). Because merely political peace accord cannot solve the problem as it is deeply rooted with cultural phenomenon.

## **CONCLUSION**

Neither of the successive governments was sincere about the implementation of the accord, none of the four parts of the accord has implemented properly. The CHT is still a Bangali dominated region; there is no possibility of restoring the characteristics of the region. Furthermore, the Pahari culture is going to be disappearing in the near future from CHT. There is no guarantee of life or the rehabilitation for the former combatants of JSS who had returned to normal life after surrendering arms in 1998, and refugees. The Hill District Council and the Regional Council may get some clerical responsibilities but the supreme power in CHT is still under the absolute control of the military forces.

Eleven years after the signing the peace accord between the Bangladesh government and the Pahari peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, hundreds of military and paramilitary camps remain in the region. The camps were supposed to have been dismantled and soldiers withdrawn following the accords. Still military forces are the supreme authority in CHT; although there are some other administrative units (i.e., regional council, district council, deputy commission, etc.) military control everything in CHT. Everyday life of Pahari people still have been interfering by the military forces. They not only are intervening Paharis' everyday deeds, Bangali settlements have been going on with their direct and indirect support. Before 1997, they controlled the CHT in the name of counter-insurgency what was also called operation dabanol (forest fire); after 1997 their dominant existence in CHT is called operation uttoron (rise).

Fifty years ago, the twelve Pahari people were almost the sole inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but over the years they are not only outnumbered by Bangali settlers, indigenous distinct culture are also assimilating into the majority. Taking in to account of all factors, one should not perceive the CHT crisis merely as a problem of the Pahari people, essentially the CHT problem must be recognized as a national problem of Bangladesh because of its close linkages to the social, economic, political, ethnic, cultural and national integration and development issues of Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh should pay sincere attention to resolve the crisis with holistic approach to establish communal harmony in CHT.

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