

## Changes in Language, Communication and Thought:

### A Study on Linguistic Discrimination against the Indigenous People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** The Chittagong Hill Tracts that situated in the southeastern part of Bangladesh bordering Burma and India has been known as a conflict zone in South Asia. The conflicting situation between the indigenous peoples and Bengalis was worsened due to immigration of Bengalis, displacement of the indigenous peoples, and military intervention in the Hill Tracts. Putting an end of the two- and half-decade-long bloody conflict, an agreement (“peace agreement”) was signed in December 02, 1997; nonetheless, still the region is neither a peaceful nor a secured region to its inhabitants. However, in the conflicting situation that began in the 1970s, the indigenous minorities are to adopt with the mainstream society and culture. This paper attempts to explore the ‘cope mechanism’ in which the indigenous peoples are communicating with the mainstream Bengalis, focusing on (the situations of) the indigenous languages among other resources of culture. Here ‘cope mechanism’ is not only to manage their fear, and conflict in Chittagong Hill Tracts, but also to negotiate the cultural dimension, in which the Hill culture is schematized both in the Bengalis views toward Hill culture and the indigenous peoples views on their own culture.

**Key words:** Indigenous; Conflict; Displacement; Pahari; Bangali; Bangla Language; Assimilation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns about the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts<sup>2</sup>— the only extensive hilly

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, in this thesis Hill Tracts will be interchangeably used for Chittagong Hill Tracts.

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area located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh comprising 5,089 square miles<sup>3</sup> and the hill ranges contain limited cultivable land (3.2 percent)<sup>4</sup>, most of it of low quality, in contrast to the fertile multi-cropped alluvial plains of Bangladesh. The Hill Tracts hosts about 11 different indigenous communities<sup>5</sup> (Paharis<sup>6</sup>) who are divided into nearly a hundred different sects. These mongoloid populations of this region differ significantly from the mainstream Bengali populations (Bangalis) in terms of physical appearance, language, religion, economy and socio-cultural organizations. It is one of the Asia's most ignored mountainous belts where Southeast Asian meets South Asia, which forms a bridge between Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar) and India (Schendel 2000: 1).

This region has been the site of much contestation between the Paharis or "tribes" of the Hill Tracts and the state or central administration since the British colonial period (1757–1947), continuing after the creation of Pakistan (1947) and independence of Bangladesh (1971). The Pahari people of Hill Tracts seek to preserve their exclusive "indigenoussness" since the British period what has been for them a period of transition from relative isolation to increasing incorporation (Ahmed 1993: 32). After its annexation into the Pakistan in 1947, the Pakistani Muslim rulers were not only indifferent about the preservation of the ethnic diversity; they were also hostile against the "primitive" and "savage" custom and culture of the Paharis. After passing the 'ignored' quarter century under the Pakistan regime the Pahari people hoped that the newly independent "secular" Bangladesh would understand their social customs and realities but were refused constitutional recognition of their separate identity.

Moreover, Bangali culture and Bangla language-based nationalism of Bangladesh has been applied to achieve national integration in its very unitary nature where non-Bangali culture, language and identity was not integrated. Gradually, cultural homogeneity, ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony and state hostility against the Paharis of the multi-ethnic setting have turned the region into a conflict zone from the mid-1970s onward. During 1979–1984, about half a million Bangali people migrated into Hill Tracts under a government sponsored population transfer program. This demographic shift eventually distorted the traditional social structure of this region and displaced thousands of Paharis from their own home and nurtured land.

Given the situation, the Paharis have been involved in a struggle for the self-determination which has been termed as "insurgency" and "secession" by the state, and in the name of counter-insurgency, huge military forces was deployed throughout the region who eventually committed massive violations of human rights. However, after a couple of failed meetings, an agreement was signed in December 02, 1997 between the state and the JSS (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti [The Chittagong Hill Tracts United Peoples' Party], locally known as JSS— the sole political platform of the Paharis until 1997).

The agreement or the 'political negotiation' which has been popularly known as Shanti Chukti ("peace agreement") allowed both sides to claim victory for few years, while leaving the future in doubt.<sup>7</sup> On one hand, a breakaway faction of Pahari students and youth groups, hitherto allied to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ten percent of the total land area of Bangladesh, but population is about one percent (1.5 million out of 150 million). The region comprises three districts: Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari.

<sup>4</sup> According to data contained in the report of a soil survey conducted in Hill Tracts in 1964-66, only 3.1 per cent of the total Hill Tracts lands were found to be suitable for "all-purpose agriculture" as against 72.9 % that was found suitable only for "forestry".

<sup>5</sup> Recognized eleven ethnic groups are recognized in Hill Tracts: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchangya, Bawm, Pangkhao, Chak, Kheyang, Khumi, and Lushai. There are also two unrecognized ethnic groups: Gurkha and Assamese who have been living in Hill Tracts since the British period. The mainstream populations Bangalis have been joined by transmigrations arriving since the late 1970s; together they now form the largest ethnic group in the Chittagong hills (more than 50 percent).

<sup>6</sup> Since the British period, nearby Bengalis have been calling the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts as Pahari (residents of hill [pahar]), and thus all ethnic groups have usually been referred as Paharis.

<sup>7</sup> Until 2001 when BNP came to rule the country, both parties (Awami League and JSS) claimed the agreement as a success amid protestation from some sectors. Though till now, the Awami League (the ruling party in 1997) has been mentioned the CHT agreement as a landmark victory of their party and claimed that "95 percent" of the Agreement

JSS— unequivocally condemned the agreement as a “sell-out” to “reactionaries” (Roy 2003: 100). In protest of the agreement and aiming to pursuing full autonomy of the Hill Tracts they formed a new political party, United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF), in December 26, 1998. Other than the JSS, and the UPDF, a number of Paharis also discourse that the agreement was not signed with due spirit and consultation with the locals. They have been suspicious about the goodwill of the government toward implementation of the agreement according to the agreement. The then main opposition parties of Bangladesh (BNP, Jamaat)<sup>8</sup> also protested the “unconstitutional” and “anti-state” agreement. They even called strike to cancel the agreement. In the same manner, Bangali settlers have been against the agreement from the very beginning. They have not only been protesting the agreement as unconstitutional; they also demonstrated to withdraw it.

However, the agreement which has been popularly known as “peace agreement” though opened a window for peace; it failed to resolve conflict and violence between the Paharis and Bangalis. Moreover, it pushed the Paharis to fight against the Paharis (JSS– UPDF). Many vital clauses are yet to be implemented. As a result, to the locals, the post-agreement Hill Tracts is “neither secured nor peaceful”. Except few official and infrastructural changes, the said “peace agreement” indeed has no significant impact toward peace and communal harmony.

However, in this situation, in what follows, I discuss the linguistic discrimination against the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts by the state policies. For a wider understanding of the critical issue, I first discussed the overview of the Hill Tracts politics in introduction part. Following that the ‘entangled relationship’ of the indigenous people with the state and Bangalis (with some interrelated issues) are depicted in the following sections. Finally the paper shows how the indigenous peoples’ languages have been assimilating into the dominant state language (Bangla), while we will see that the linguistic discrimination leads the assimilation of indigenous languages into the dominant language over the years that go side by side with the conflicting situation that not only displaced the indigenous Paharis from their traditional life-ways, also forced them to integrate into the outwards.

## **2. PARTITION 1947 AND DISPLACING THE ‘DISTRESSED’ PAHARIS**

In 1900, the British colonial rulers<sup>9</sup> introduced the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900—a “safeguard” for the indigenous tribes; however, it was also the British who arbitrarily annexed<sup>10</sup> the Hill

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has been implemented; the JSS, however, maintained that, “only five percent” of the Agreement has been implemented though the most vital land issues remained unresolved notwithstanding the agreement has passed its thirteen years of signing. See also Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2002 [1997]).

<sup>8</sup> BNP□ Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jamaat□ Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh and other Islamist parties.

<sup>9</sup> Bengal region was ruled by the British from 1757 to 1947. Although there was a sharp physiological and cultural gap between the Paharis and Bangalis, geographically the region was close to the Bengal region. Until 1860, it was a part of Chittagong district (Shelley 1992:76). Realizing the distinct culture of the region, British rulers created an autonomous administrative district known as “Chittagong Hill Tracts” within the undivided British Bengal in 1860. They introduced the most important administrative reform– the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900 (in short, Regulation) in 1900 to “protect” the Paharis from economic exploitation of the outsiders and to preserve their traditional socio-cultural and political institutions. Throughout the British colonial period, the Regulation functioned as a “safeguard” for the Paharis prohibiting land ownership and migrations of outsiders into CHT. It also provided full local autonomy to the Paharis in respect to their practice of customary laws, traditional ways of life and land rights.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Cyril Radcliffe was the head of the Bengal Boundary Commission that demarcated borders between East Pakistan and adjacent areas of India. The CHT intellectuals popularly allege that Radcliffe took away the capital of Bengal, Calcutta, from East Bengal and, in return, gave the CHT to [East] Pakistan at the time of the partition. Kalam Shahed writes, the much talked about the Radcliffe’s ‘gift’ of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to East Pakistan in

Tracts into the Pakistan in 1947; when, Pakistan was separated from the undivided British India based on religion-based two-nation theory of Jinnah; though, being a Non-Muslim population, the Paharis wanted to be a part of India.<sup>11</sup> However, within next year, the Paharis had realized that their life would never be peaceful in Pakistan regime when Pakistan government annulled the Hill Tracts Police Regulation in 1948, and abolished the indigenous police force which was formed in 1881 considering the unique cultural setting of Hill Tracts and its preservation.

The situation became worsened in the later years. In 1950s and 1960s, violating the provisions of the Regulation, Muslim refugees from India were settled in Hill Tracts. Although the constitutions of 1955 and 1962 preserved the status of Hill Tracts as an 'excluded area,' but a constitutional amendment abolished this status in 1963. Furthermore, Pakistan government constructed a hydro-electric dam (popularly known as Kaptai dam) in the heart of Hill Tracts (Rangamati) in 1960s without consultation with the local people, which not only submerged about 54,000 acres of best cultivable land (40 percent) in the hill region, it displaced almost 100 thousand Paharis (mostly Chakmas) from their lands and hearths. As a result, approximately 40 thousand Paharis had to emigrate ("great exodus") into India and another 20 thousand in Burma (Sopher 1963:103). These displaced Paharis had to lead an expatriate vagabond exile time facing serious identity crisis till 1997.

### **3. MAKING THE PAHARIS MINORITY IN THEIR OWN LAND**

Historically the ecological, cultural, linguistic and economic links of Hill Tracts with the mountains to the east and south (India, Burma, China, and Thailand) have been more significant than those with the plain districts of Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> However, during the liberation war of Bangladesh (1971) against Pakistan, Pahari leaders including M. N. Larma, *Mong Raja* (Mong circle chief) took part in the liberation war for Bangladesh (East Pakistan). The Chakma chief Raja Tridiv Roy<sup>13</sup> (along with his few supporters) was somehow managed to support the Pakistan. Although some Paharis could not think that Bangladesh would win against the Pakistan that had a powerful military force, being absolutely non-Muslim, the majority of the Paharis was against the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and hoped for a secular country; hoped for political recognition and some form of autonomy within the sovereignty of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the Paharis were identified as "collaborator of Pakistani" by the local Bangalis since Chakma Raja was pro-Pakistani and thusly all Paharis were scapegoated. Eventually, many Paharis were killed by the Bangali *Mukti Bahini* (*liberation forces*) and their houses were burned down and looted as well.

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1947, in exchange for Calcutta which fell to India, has, in fact, little basis since the area never belonged to the northeastern province of Assam or to West Bengal, in *Ethnic Movements and Hegemony in South Asia* (Hakkani Publishers, Bangladesh, 2002):207.

<sup>11</sup> From the beginning the Paharis were branded as 'pro-Indian'. This indeed was fallacious. It is true that a group of Paharis led by Sneha Kumar Chakma had hoisted the Indian flag in Rangamati. But the Chakma Raja had eventually decided to accept the Radcliffe Award. It is also important to note that the Burmese flag too had been hoisted in Bandarban yet they were not branded as 'pro-Burmese'. This categorization therefore has to be understood in the context of the politics of the period, which was marked by intense India-Pakistan rivalry (Mohsin 1999: 37).

<sup>12</sup> Partly for this reason, within Bangladesh, the region has been seen as marginal, remote and irrelevant. It tends to be overlooked whenever generalizations are made about Bangladesh (see, Schendel 2000:2).

<sup>13</sup> Chakma Raja was awarded Honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Governor-General; the only one from East Pakistan ever to receive this dual distinction in 1953. In 1952 Raja Tridiv Roy was made an honorary magistrate. In fact, during the whole existence of East Pakistan no one was made an honorary ADC to the Governor General or President. Raja Tridiv Roy has been served as honorary Minister in Pakistan till recently. See Raja Tridiv Roy, *The Departed Melody* (Memoires) (PPA: Islamabad, 2003):141-146.

Likewise, following the liberation war, Bangladesh was projected as a homogenous Bangali nationalist, with no recognition of non-Bangalis in the liberation war; and so as non-Bangalis' rights was protected in the constitution of Bangladesh (1972). No separate status or identity was thought for 'other' citizens of Bangladesh. However, disappointed by the attitude of the Bangladesh state, M. N. Larma (Pahari leader, Member of Parliament) demanded for a special space in the constitution, but disappointedly his appeal was not only rejected by the first prime minister of Bangladesh, he also called the Paharis to become Bangali forgetting their own identity. In the parliament, although M. N. Larma made sustained argument against such "assimilationist" policy of the government and pointed out the cultural differences of the Pahari people from that of the Bangalis, all of his efforts went fruitless.

Comprehending through deprivations and disappointments, the Paharis, however, gradually became conscious about their identity immediately since the end of Pakistan period under the leadership of M. N. Larma who later founded the JSS (in 1972) to actualize the rights of Paharis through the democratic ways. Following the partition (1947), the limited self-rule of the Hill Tracts gradually wiped out in the process of nation-building initially in Pakistan and then, in Bangladesh after 1971 (Chakma 2008:98). Consequently, Larma's pursuit of regional autonomy through constitutional means ended in 1975, when a military coup had changed the political set up of Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup> Following the coup, Larma went underground and organized an armed resistance force, *Shanti Bahini* (Peace Force) to pursue regional autonomy. Accordingly, being categorically refused to create any space or account any recognition to the Paharis by the state, to obtain recognition of their identities through democratic pathway gradually drifted the Shanti Bahinis toward adopting non-democratic means since 1976.

However, to control and outnumber the Paharis in Hill Tracts, the land that was nurtured and inhabited by the Paharis, successive governments took several devastating programs; for example, settlement of the Muslims refugees (from India), informal settlement program, displacing the Paharis, afforestation program and the like. Furthermore, following the devastation caused by the Kaptai dam (1960s) and refusal of recognition of the Paharis' identity (1970s), a secret government sponsored population transfer program<sup>15</sup> (between 1979– 1984) brought more than 400,000 Bangalis into the Hill Tracts, an area in which there was already a scarcity of cultivable land following the construction of Kaptai dam, which has been considered as a crucial factor that eventually caused face-to-face conflict in this region. Consequently, the original inhabitants (Paharis) of the land rapidly became minority in their own land outnumbered by the Bangali settlers within only two decades.

#### **4. DISPLACING THE PAHARIS FROM THEIR LAND AND HEARTH**

Traditionally Pahari people owned a large part of land, especially, the hillside land, which is used for their traditional *jum* (shifting) cultivation from the time immemorial. Land ownership of the Paharis was mainly protected under the Regulation that prohibited the transfer of land to the non-Pahari people. During the post-colonial Pakistan regime, the Hill Tracts saw the beginning of a process of large-scale and systematic displacement of the Paharis that emerged with the construction of the Kaptai dam

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<sup>14</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 had been regulated and controlled by the military.

<sup>15</sup> In 1979, Zia chaired a 'national conference on CHT'. Its proceedings were classified but the blueprint for a long-term answer to CHT's troubles was unveiled. It was decided to settle 30,000 landless Bangali families on government-owned 'Khas' land in CHT the following year and Tk 60 million was allotted for the project. From Feb 1980 on, settlers began arriving by truckload. General Ershad's military government continued the policy that it had inherited. According to an estimate, 300,00 to 400,000 Bangalis had been settled in CHT by 1984. For details, see, S Mahmud Ali, *The Fearful State: Power, People and Internal War in South Asia* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

(1957–1961). Following the devastation caused by the Kaptai dam government sponsored population transfer program (1979– 1984) brought more than 400,000 Bangalis into the region. The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) spent a large amount of money for this program from the foreign aid funds allotted for the Hill Tracts development projects. Although the Bangali settlers were given “legal” land ownership and cash money by the state; a large number of settlers had taken illegal possession of lands, through steady encroachment and outright grabbing. The Paharis had been resisted such influx and land grabbing along with the Shanti Bahini. The situation was thus exposed to explode into a large-scale physical confrontation between the Paharis and Bangalis. These three incidents largely pushed about 200 thousand Paharis into India and Burma as refugee, while some other Paharis remained internal refugee in Hill Tracts.

## **5. MILITARIZATION, MASSACRES AND EVERYDAY INTERVENTIONS**

Since the late second-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hill Tracts has been militarized to control many revolts,<sup>16</sup> was intensified in post-colonial states considering geographic location, as it is a borderland sharing with India and Burma. Besides, from 1976 onward JSS’s armed wing, Shanti Bahini, started guerrilla attacks against the security forces in Hill Tracts, and then successive governments deployed a huge number of military forces in the name of “national security” and “counter-insurgency” who allegedly have been violating the human rights that include, killing, attacks, sexual violence, and the like. Therefore, for a long time, the Paharis have been passing a fearful coexistence in the Hill Tracts.

Land related conflicts between the Paharis and the Bangalis represented a source of conflict between the security forces<sup>17</sup> and the Shanti Bahini, as military solution was chosen by the GOB led to violence since the early 1980s. Violent operations by the security forces of Bangladesh and Shanti Bahini began with the crisis caused by the transmigration. Official figures indicate that more than 8,500 rebels, soldiers and civilians have been killed during two decades of insurgency. The number of civilians killed estimated at 2,500.<sup>18</sup> However, there have been several “bloodbaths” in the Hill Tracts between the Bangalis and Paharis; between the security forces and Shanti Bahini since 1980. A very brief account of the major massacres is given below:

Kaukhali Massacre (March 25, 1980): At least fifty Paharis were gunned down by the pre-planned attack of Bangladesh military.

Banraibari-Beltali-Belchari Massacre (June 26, 1981): In an attack by Bangali settlers killed many Paharis and occupied their villages and farmlands.

Barkal Massacre (May 31, 1984): About 100 settlers were killed, their homes burned by *Shanti Bahini*. To the reprisals taken against the Paharis by the security forces and settlers, killed more than 100 Pahari people, and some women were gang raped and later shot dead.

Panchari Massacre (May 1, 1986): In a reprisal attack security forces together with settlers, killed about 100 Paharis.

Matiranga Massacre (May 1986): About 70 Paharis were killed by the security forces.

Comillatialla-Taindong Massacre (May 18–19, 1986): About 150 Paharis were killed by the security

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<sup>16</sup> For example, British administration had invited the Second Gurkha Regiment from Nepal to crush the Lushai Expedition in late 19th century. See, Thomas H. Lewin, *A Fly on the Wheel, or How I Helped to Govern India* (Constable, London, 1912), 255-290.

<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh military forces, police, Bangladesh Rifles, and other armed forces.

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, *Bangladesh- Human Rights in Chittagong Hill Tracts* (February 2000).

forces.

Hirachar-Sarbotali-Khagrachari-Pablakhali Massacre (August 8–10, 1988): The Bangladesh army and settlers killed more than 100 Paharis. Some women were gang raped by the security personnel and settlers.

Longadu Massacre (May 04, 1989): In a reprisal attack security forces and settlers killed about 40 Paharis whose dead bodies never returned to their relatives.

Malya Massacre (February 2, 1992): More than 30 Paharis were killed by the armed settlers.

Logang Massacre (April 10, 1992): Over 400 Paharis were killed by the security forces and settlers. More than 2000 Paharis fled across the border to Tripura following the massacre.

Naniachar Massacre (November 17, 1993): About 30 Paharis were killed and more than a hundred wounded (Mohsin 1997: 184).

Although the “peace agreement” has formally ended the violence between the Paharis and the Bangalis, there have been conflict and violence in Hill Tracts between the Paharis and the Bangalis and among the Paharis as well. Very recently, in February 19-20, 2010 amid a massacre in Baghaihat, Rangamati between the Paharis (JSS, UPDF and general people) and security forces (mainly army and Bangali settler) at least two Paharis were killed and 200-300 Paharis’ houses were burnt down.

Besides and along with the massacre, attack and reprisal attack, Paharis have been experienced arrest, torture, judicial and extrajudicial torture, killing, rape, sexual violence, forced religious conversion, forced marriage, and abduction. In addition, army intervention is everyday company to Paharis life, and thus check is a name of pain to the Pahari people. Every bus, truck, car have been checked by the security forces many times in a way. “*The security personnel find nothing from us, but they always check our bags, we cannot bear a shopping bag without checking.*” Particularly, relatives and family members of a JSS or UPDF activist are always under observation. “*In the name of search they actually harass us, this one kind of torture against us. The life in Hill Tracts has been alike jail especially for the youth and university students*” – a Chakma says.

A college going Pahari also says,

“We cannot gather any place. If some 8-10 Paharis gather in a place suddenly the security forces’ car would reached there, and we would be asked what we were talking about” – local say. Since 1980s they have been experiencing such interventions. “Intervention in everyday life has been our life partner.”

In a group discussion they expressed that, when someone was coming from school or college, on the way to home he/she would be checked, his/her books, bags would be checked, sometimes he/she would be taken to a camp for further interrogation. The security forces know which toothpaste a Pahari use and which chairman or member is in Rangamati or Bandarban or Chittagong; because, beyond their knowledge no one can move in Hill Tracts. In Dhaka or Chittagong they are free; they can do anything they like at their apartment. But in Hill Tracts, they face intervention in everywhere, everything they like to do. During the state of emergency (2007–08) when I was in Rangamati (2008), I saw the district headquarter was even calm and quiet after around 6–7 pm; very few people were seen in the street. It is only during the festival time when the Paharis can enjoy limited freedom at their localities.

## **6. LANGUAGE AND CREOLE CULTURE IN THE FEARFUL HILL TRACTS**

Language is one of the most basic elements of nation and society. A language is a dynamic set of sensory symbols of communication and the elements used to manipulate them. It is also a core element of culture and most powerful instrument of preserving and developing tangible and intangible heritage of human. Language, though words, its importance cannot express through only verbal words. It has very

intertwined relations with the society and culture; it is the mirror of a society. Anyone who wishes to gain an insight into the conditions of life of a society, the language is the first considering thing for study and investigation. It represents thought, culture and heritage of a society. A culture of peace can only flourish where people enjoy the right to use their mother language fully and freely in all various situations of their lives.

Mother language is what a child communicates in for the first time with his mother and father. It is a language a person never forgets, wherever that person lives. The mother language is a prism that determines first notions of the world to a child. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and thought is inseparable. It is the mother tongue that represents the thought, culture and heritage of an individual. Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called language “the body of thought”. This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

Language not only reflects the society, it is the language what can be the basis of nationhood too, for instance Bangla desh (country) and Bangali jati (nation). Bangla– the language of the Bangali jati living in Bangladesh, is not only the mother tongue, it is the basic of the Bangali nationalism that not only brought the independence of Bangladesh (based on Bangali nationalism). It also honored Bangladesh as the UNESCO declared the 21st February as the International Mother Language Day in 1999. It brought fresh glory and prestige to the Bangali nation and Bangladesh. The date chosen was in commemoration of the movement in which Bangali sacrificed their life on 21st February in 1952 defending recognition of Bangla as a state language of the former Pakistan. The international day has been observed in a befitting manner every year since February 2000 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism worldwide. This international honor bears also some responsibilities towards peace, progress and prosperity.

Bangla is the official language of Bangladesh. More than 98 percent of the total population speaks Bangla as a native language. English is also uncommonly spoken in major urban areas. Bangla, being a member of the Indo-Iranian languages, is derived from Sanskrit, and hence appears to be similar to Hindi. With more than 200 million native speakers it is the fourth most widely spoken language in the world (Gupta 2006:314). Culturally, Bangla is very close to the hearts of Bangladeshis, it is considered as the only means of recognizing Bangali culture and nationalism. The total population of Bangladesh is about 160 million, and among those about 98 percent people speaks in Bangla, and among them minorities are about 20 million (enumerated 2008). The GOB has no language policy for the ethno-linguistic group of Bangladesh, for the other two percent speakers, even though they speak in about 39 living languages.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, 11 ethnic communities have their own distinct languages. Although most of these ethnic languages do not have own alphabet, people can communicate with respective language. Like other elements of culture, each language is different from another. The Chakma community speaks a mixed language of Bangla, Pali, and Sanskrit written in Burmese script; the Marma community speaks Arakanese, a Burmese dialect and the Tripura community speaks a language of their own (Kokbrok). The rest of the tribal groups speak a mixed language of Assamese and Burmese origins.

**Table 1: Classification of Languages in Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Linguistic Family	Sub-Family	Ethnic groups
<i>Indo-European</i>	Indo-Aryan	Bangali, Chakma, and Tanchangya
<i>Sino-Tibetan</i>	Tibeto-Burman:	
	(i) Burmese family	Marma, Mro, and Chak
	(ii) Bodo (Kokbrok)	Tripua
	(iii) Kuki-Chin	Bawm, Pangkhao, Lushai, Kheyang and Khumi

In the prevailing education system, the indigenous children have no scope for getting education in their mother languages. From the very childhood they are to learn Bangla language to follow the national curriculum. The national curriculum of education is in Bangla and based on Bangali society and the



instructors are mostly from among the Bangalis. The students neither understand the instructions nor the contents due to their lacking in the alien (Bangla) language. Even the instructors do not understand the Pahari students and Pahari society. The contents (story, poem, social examples) of the books are also unfamiliar to the Pahari student. Therefore, they cannot get involved with the 'extraterrestrial' education system. The governments of Bangladesh, however, did not initiate a localized education system yet for the Paharis based on their societal system and distinct language so that they can conceptualize both the Pahari society and Bangali society. Since they do not feel interest in Bangla medium education, many Pahari students do not continue to the school.

Every year many Pahari students dropped out of school, because they can speak only in their respective languages and failed to cope with the lectures and textbooks in Bangla. A Pahari boy says, "I was a student of class IV at Longadu Government Primary School. I lost interest to go to the school because there was no opportunity for me to learn my mother tongue." Like him, many other Pahari children drop out of primary school every year due mainly to the lack of textbooks in their mother tongue. Another school girl says, "It is very difficult for me to remember school lesson. I cannot practice with my language at school, while Bangla taught by school teachers cannot practice at home,"

The dropout rate at primary level is very alarming in the Hill Tracts as indigenous language-based education system has yet to be introduced there. Although Bangla-speaking people fought and sacrificed lives for their mother tongue, no governments paid proper honor and provide to the indigenous languages. After half a century since the mother language movement (1952), ethnic students have yet to get textbooks in their own languages. Local educationists believe "this irony is the main reality behind the increasing dropout rates at primary level in the Hill Tracts." According to findings by Ethnic Children's Education Forum (ICEF), the dropout rate at early primary level is more than 33 percent<sup>19</sup> as the school children fail to understand, read or write Bangla and reluctant to attend classes in fear of that.

The academicians observe educational issues of access, quality, and inclusion for minorities often manifest themselves in the lack of cultural relevancy of the national curriculum, the need to respect language diversity, and unavailability of trained and qualified teachers from ethnic communities as well as rigidity in stipend providing criteria and geographical location. While ethnic children of the Hill Tracts have largely been deprived of the opportunity to participate in regular national education system, locals stress on introduction of indigenous languages to impart education at primary level and meet the target to ensure basic education for all. As locals state that, "Ethnic children should teach primary education in their own language and gradually ought to be turned into Bangla medium. This will help to reduce dropout rate among the ethnic children." They (parents) also opined education for their children in their own languages side by side with Bangla.

According to the Article-3 under Topsisil-1 of the Parbatya Zila Parishad (Hill District Council) Act-1989 and Article 33 of the agreement of 1997, all "tribal" children should get learn through their respective mother languages. Despite some progress in the last couple of years, ethnic people are still neglected and deprived in the education sector. Some non-government organizations in the Hill Tracts are now working to write textbooks in indigenous languages but at a very limited scale because of their limited budget, and because of the multi-languages in the Hill Tracts.

Primary education for ethnic children should be in their mother language. Since Pahari children are not getting primary education in their mother languages they usually do not feel interest on education. Few students try to continue their education through the existing difficulties. Those who left the school do not get enough Bangla knowledge, so they do not have easy access to the wider society of Bangladesh and, those, who try to continue schooling might keep away them from their own language and culture to an extent. To get jobs in Bangladesh one must have good command in Bangla and English. By default many Paharis cannot pronounce Bangla words accurately, many Bangali also cannot pronounce accurately. Bangali people usually do not suffer for the same lacking, but the Pahari people suffer a lot. For the language deficiency many Paharis do not get appropriate job. For the same reason, ethnic people

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<sup>19</sup> Suranjith Deabnath, "No Books in Mother Tongue, Ethnic kids drop out of schools," <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=24439> (Published on: 2008-02-22).

cannot perform well in cultural affairs, arts and literature too. Therefore, they can communicate well neither with their own society nor with the mainstream.

In official dealings, ethnic people experience insecurity and fear because of sole dominance of Bangla. Ethnic people, who still speak in their own language, and do not understand (read and write) Bangla, sometimes experience deprivations and deceptions as almost all office stuffs are Bangali. Hence ethnic people do not get justice by the Bangali officers who are responsible in very important departments/issues including land, law, law enforcing agencies and civil administration. We already know about the impact of Bangla language on the lives of Paharis while they engage with the Bangali dominated bazaar. Because of the lacking in Bangla language how they have been cheated and deprived by the Bangali traders. Therefore, Bangla is not only “other” (bijati-bhasha) language (since it is not their mother tongue); it is a language of “deprivation” to the Paharis. Therefore, while the whole world recognizes and praises the significance of language movement of Bangladesh and honors the sacrifice observing International Mother Language Day, ethnic people do not admit it since Bangladesh does not promote the ethnic languages which is also implied in the recognition of the international day.

In Bangladesh, most of the children from ethnic minority groups are disadvantaged by an education system that does not recognize their language, culture or future livelihood realities. Ethnic communities are hampered seriously due to the lack of smooth linguistic communication. A Chakma child does not know Bangla or English; a teacher does not know the Chakma language, and this is an instance of the real picture of education of the ethnic minorities. Not only are the ethnic children to take education in Bangla language, Bangla words replaced many ethnic words and terminologies. For example, the military forces have forcibly changed the name of some place in Bangla and new Bangali settlements have been newly named in Islamic forms/terminologies (Islamized); rename: ‘Naniar Char’ (previous name in Chakma dialect, ‘Nanyachar’); new Islamized name: ‘Islampur’, ‘Ahmedpur’ which are not merely naming/renaming, also threats to the ethnic existence. When there is a change in naming of a place or location, it is not only a matter of terminology, it is more than words; because it disavows and disregards the legend behind the traditional naming. Thus, local ethnic people lost their original words and terminologies and presently using many Bangla words in their daily life.

As language is the part and parcel of culture and identity, in some places in the world it is actually the defining feature of an ethnic identity. For example, in Mexico one may watch people on the news, with very dark, straight hair, dark eyes and brown skin who would not be defined as “Indians” by the population of Mexico, because they speak Spanish and they participate in the dominant Mexican society. Somebody who is living in a highland mountain village in Chiapas or in Oaxaca might be physically very similar to somebody who lives in downtown Mexico City, but one person is called an Indian and another person is not. The reason that is that this person speaks Maya or Zapotec or Miztec and this other person speaks only Spanish. So, the person who speaks Maya may also speak Spanish, but they were defined as an Indian because they speak Maya as well. It is only the person who does not speak Maya that is not defined as an Indian. So, it is very important in terms of identity.

The above situation is very relevant in the case of the Hill Tracts. Ethnic people living in the Hill Tracts are originated from mongoloid race, therefore almost all 11 ethnic groups look alike; their physical appearance is almost the same. One cannot identify a Chakma or a Marma if they do not talk in their own language. Although Bangali people usually term all natives of the Hill Tracts as Chakmas and having similar physique and socio-economy, they all are not belongs to a single ethnic group; they have 11 distinct ancestral history. Therefore, the only factor that can be symbol of their self-identity is their own language. But being assimilated into the majority some of these ethnic groups may soon not only lose their own words, their existence might be missing through the death of languages.

In this situation people of a community communicate with other ethnic community through Bangla language in their everyday life; for example, Chakma cannot speak the language of Marma and vice-versa. Therefore, the ethnic people essentially speak in Bangla when they talk either with other ethnic Pahari or Bangali. Thus Bangla becomes the lingua-franca in Hill Tracts. Since Bangladesh does not promote indigenous languages, over the years, like other disappearing elements of culture, the indigenous languages are also on the way to death. The ethnic community realized that their languages are in danger.

Their new generations of the Paharis not only cannot fluently speak in Bangla, they mixed also many Bangla words while they talk in their own language among own ethnic group. The Paharis therefore are worried about their educated sections; because, they are adopted with the Bangla language very much, and thus they are afraid of assimilation of their languages into Bangla. Although including social structure many elements of their culture have integrated into the mainstream, they are intensely anxious about the linguistic assimilation. Because, they said, "Once we lose our language we will lose everything, nothing will be possible to resilience without our own languages."

Ending a two-decade-long armed insurgency, the agreement of 1997, however, having ambiguities within the agreement and the indifference to implement many of its crucial elements, the situation of the Hill Tracts is still far from peace. Nonetheless, the agreement has opened up many avenues for developmental initiatives in the area. In the post-agreement Hill Tracts, many national and international organizations are working for the "betterment" of the people of this region. These organizations recruit a huge number of natives who are educated in mainstream curriculum. Not only is the Hill Tracts, the rest of Bangladesh also comparatively somewhat open these days for ethnic people. So, there is a big job market for the Pahari educated people whose knowhow is good in both Bangla and English. But the orientation and socialization of the mainstream education system and the criteria for getting a job in the mainstream institution is not in favor of indigenous culture and language.

Not only the unequal education system but also the existing job market are the discriminating the ethnic people. Through many dimensions of development activities (development from the above), ethnic people are becoming isolated from their community; they are becoming individualistic and fond of mainstream and world culture. Skill in Bangla and English signifies the quality and efficiency of an employee. As a result, a self-centric and ambitious ethnic educated segment is ignoring their distinct languages which indicate also the indirect gradual assimilation. A Chakma states in this regard,

"Notwithstanding there exist a number of educational institutions in the Hill Tracts, the education system serves first and foremost the purpose of 'acculturation' of the Paharis into the mainstream Bangla culture as part of the counter-insurgency strategy."

## **7. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Given that the governments has no initiative for the Paharis to survive and revive neither the traditions of language nor their culture, few non-government organizations are working to teach the ethnic children in their own languages, though these are not sufficient. The region is a very hilly area, so it is difficult to go everywhere to offer the service by private sectors. Without governmental initiatives, the ethnic people have no way to save their own languages and/or culture in the near future. Although the agreement recognized the Hill Tracts (first clause) "as a region inhabited by tribal people and also recognizes the need of preserving the characteristics of the region and development thereof," the irony is that the ethnic culture and languages are assimilating and disappearing gradually with the national and international development initiatives taken in the name of "advancement" of quality of ethnic life in the aftermath of the agreement. There is no code of conduct for post-agreement activities in the Hill Tracts to uphold the ethnic characteristics so that the first clause of the agreement can be implemented without cultural clash.

When there is a language shift, children are unable to communicate with their grand-parents. This really is the breakdown of a family that people worry about so much. Within the family if such breakdown happens, the grand-parents cannot talk to the grand-children, and then they really cannot transmit these ideas. For example, urban Paharis cannot talk to their own grand-parents because the language shift has happened so quickly, and they have spent all their day in school with their Bangla-English speaking friends, and less time speaking their parents' language at home results a big communication gap even within the same generation.

Other consequences of losing a language include the loss of diversity of linguistic structures. Local knowledge (ethno-medicinal, ethno-botanical) can be lost; because, in a language there is a completely classificatory system for all the plants and animals that exist in the natural environment which is absent

in the dominant language of the state. They might come to exist in Chakma (for example), but if there is a quick transition between the indigenous and state dominant language, then there may not be time for all of those things to be translated, and a lot of terms are not going to be passed on. Thus, people not just lose the words but the knowledge behind the words.

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