

POLICY BRIEF

SOUTH ASIA WATCH ON TRADE, ECONOMICS & ENVIRONMENT

No. 3

Year. 2002

MOUNTAIN ISSUES AND COMMUNITIES IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS OF BANGLADESH

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a flat delta, has a limited stretch of hilly areas spread over its northern and south-eastern region. The important hilly areas, extension of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) belt, are located in the southeast. The area known as Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is different in some respects from other regions of the HKH and other areas of the country. The region comprises 13,295 sq. km. of land strip, basically hilly, forested area wrapping about nine percent of the total area of the country which is 1,47,570 sq. km. With a circuitry of rivers and streams, fed by heavy monsoon and washed by frequent floods, the whole territory is a crowded green mass of wild growth containing a variety of plants, creepers and trees that account for about 52 percent of the forestlands of the country. The forests of CHT are broadly of three kinds: tropical evergreen forests; tropical semi-evergreen forests; and tropical moist deciduous forests.

The population of CHT is almost equally divided between the hill people and migrants from the plain. The area is also home to more than a dozen ethnic groups speaking different languages or dialects. They practise both plough and slash-and-burn (*jhum*) cultivation for horticulture and agriculture. Apart from traditional *jhum* cultivation, the hill people, both valley folk and ridge dwellers, have a number of traits in common.

BRIEF HISTORY

The region was almost secluded until about the fifteenth century and the inhabitants had no large-scale contact with the outside world. Most of the tribal people moved to this area from Myanmar. The tribes belonging to the Kuki group were earliest settlers. Chakmas came much later. The Chakma chiefs opened CHT to Mughal rulers with a commercial motive, but later yielded to superior Mughal authority.

The East India Company, the front runner of the British colonists, took control of the region in 1760 from Mir Qasim Ali Khan, Nawab of Bengal. Before the take-over, the area was divided into two territories - north and south. The north was under the jurisdiction of the Chakma Raja (King) while the south was under the Bomang Raja. Owing to the abundance of cotton, the region earned the epithet 'Cotton Block' from its colonial masters.

After the First Indian War of Independence in 1857, the British government took over control of the East Indian Colonies including the CHT region. The Rajas were then placed under, and made accountable, to the Chittagong district administration. The British colonial rulers created the district of CHT in 1860 by separating the hill and forest areas of the greater Chittagong district. However, with the annexation of Lushai hill, the CHT was demoted from the status of a district



to that of a sub-division. Raids by the Kuki tribes compelled the British administration to implement some administrative reforms that resulted in the enforcement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900, later commonly referred to as the Hill Tracts Manual.

The Basic Democracy Order enforced in 1959 in the then Pakistan contributed to the militarisation of the CHT. Formulation of the new constitution of Pakistan in 1962 also lessened the traditional power of the ethnic leadership, and a systematic but covert colonisation of the hills by Bengalis began. In 1964 the 'special status' of the CHT was abolished. Since then the Hill Tracts Manual has enjoyed a peculiar status. It is not recognised under the constitution, but it has never been annulled. It was the instrument of administration until 1989 and, in essence, still effective in May 1998.

The Regulation gave the CHT a special status so far the administration was concerned. As a result, most national policies had no direct bearings for CHT either in terms of enactment or participation in the policymaking processes. The situation has apparently changed with the signing of the Peace Agreement with the leaders of the *Parbatya Chattagram Janasanghati Samity* (popularly known as *Shantibahini*, a Chakma dominated organisation) on 2 December 1997.

GEOGRAPHY

The area is situated between 21° 25' and 23° 40' North latitude and 91° 55' and 92° 45' East longitude. Because of geographical location, having close proximity to India and China, some of the academics call it a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. The CHT is different from the rest of the country in surface and soil conditions. The area has four main valleys which are considered the oldest geological formation in Bangladesh. The valleys are *Changi*, *Maini*, *Rainkhiang*, and *Sangu* valley formed by the rivers *Feni*, *Karnaphuli*, *Sangu*, *Matamuhari* and their tributaries. Some of these valleys are up to 80 km. long and 10 km. wide. The height of the hill ranges varies from a few hundred metres to over 1000 m.

Monsoon induced rainfall averages 250 cm. a year. The summer stretches from March to June, with an average temperature of 30° C and occasionally going up to 40°-42° C. Winter runs between November and February with an average temperature of 20° C and occasionally falling to 4°-5° C. The valleys are highly suitable for agricultural and horticultural farming. As the rivers of the area flow through steep slopes with powerful currents, they are potential source of hydro-electricity.

PEOPLE

The population of the area, according to the just published results of 2001 census, stands at 1.06 mio, which is 0.14 per cent of the national population of 129.25 mio. Over a period of 50 years, the density of population in the area has gone up from 22 per sq. km. in 1951 to 78 in 2001, marking an increase of 354.54 percent. The following table gives a picture of the population situation of the area.

Indicators	Bangladesh	CHT
Total population (mio)	129.25	1.06
Density of population/sq.km.	876	78
Tribal people (mio)	1.20	0.51
Sex ratio (M/F)	106	112
Family size	5.6	5.2
Urban population (% of total)	19.6	33.3
Literacy rate (both sexes)	32.4	29.9
Literacy: M/F	38.9/25.5	38.7/19.2

There are conflicting claims about the size of the population as the ethnic groups are not ready to accept settlers as part of their population. They claim that a regular flow of new settlers, mainly landless rural people from other parts of the country, has created an imbalance in the composition of population. Also, because of low density of population, administrators argue that there is land available. Tribal people and others reject this argument, as cultivable lands especially for the country's staple food rice, are minimal in the hill districts compared with other districts of the country.

ADMINISTRATIVE SET UP

The CHT now consists of three districts, namely: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. Rangamati, the biggest of the three hill districts, has an area of 6,116 sq. km. The thanas of the district are Rangamati Sadar, Kawkhali, Naniarchar, Langdu, Baghaichari, Barkal, Jurachari, Rajasthali, Bilaichari, and Kaptai. It has 49 unions and 136 *moujas*. The tribes of the district include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tangchangya, Lushai, Pankho, Khiang, and Murong.

Khagrachari has an area of 2,700 sq. km. The thanas of the district are Khagrachari Sadar, Dighinala, Paanchari, Mahalchari, Matiranga, Manikchari, Ramgarh, and Lakhmichari. It has 34 unions and 127 *moujas*. The tribes of this district include Chakma, Marma, and Tripura.

Bandarban has an area of 4,479 sq. km. The *thanas* of the district are Bandarban Sadar, Ruma, Roangchari, Thansi, Naikhangchari, Alikadam, and Lama. It has an equal number of unions and *moujas* - 93. The tribes of the district include Marma, Murong, Tripura, Tangchangya, Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khiang, Khumi, Lushai, and Pankho.

ECONOMY

The economy of the CHT is agriculture-based. Its topography and climatic conditions make the people fall back upon agri-

culture for their livelihood. There are two types of visible land tenure in CHT, private (freehold) and usufruct (leasehold). The table below gives the basic information about agriculture in the region.

Indicators	Bangladesh	CHT
Total cultivated area (mio.acres)	17.77	0.46
Cultivated area/farm (acres)	1.5	3.3
Cropping intensity	175	139
Total holdings (mio)	17.82	0.19
Non-farm holdings (mio)	6.29	0.04
Farm holdings (mio)	11.79	0.014
Agricultural labour (mio)	6.40	0.053
Area with irrigation facilities (% of net cultivated area)	48.3	9.9
Bovine animals (mio)	22.29	0.25
Bovine animals/holding (mio)	1.25	0.60

The village economy in the region functions at a subsistence level. The local communities produce commodities to satisfy their needs. Besides agriculture, they engage in certain types of art and craft work that account for other day-to-day needs of life. They build their own houses, make their own looms, weave their own dresses, make their baskets, and manufacture their household utensils, agricultural implements and beverages. Paddy (*Oryza sativa*), cotton (*Gossypium herbaceum*), sesame (*Sesamum indicum*), nozelle (*Hibiscus sabdarifa*), cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*), string beans (*Vigna sinensis*), maize (*Zea mays*), sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*), yam (*Dioscorea alata*), holy basil (*Ocimum sanctum*), Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), squash (*Cucurbita pepo condensa*), sweet pumpkin (*Cucurbita pepo ovifera*), vegetables, bamboo, wood and herbal medicines are grown in *jhum* cultivated lands. Besides, ginger, radish, water melon, potato, mustard, tobacco, rice, beans, bottle gourd, turmeric, taro, five-faced taro, banana, jackfruit, lemon, tamarind, wood-apple, mango, blackberry, coconut, betelnut, pineapple, star apple, and guava are produced in non-*jhum* and orchard areas. The table below gives the distribution of land and production of different major crops.

Crops	Bangladesh (% of total cultivated area)	CHT (% of total cultivated area)	CHT yield/acre (Mt.)
Rice	87.35	43.3	0.90
Wheat	8.3	2.0	0.83
Groundnut	0.4	6.4	0.55
Tobacco	0.3	0.5	0.43
Banana	0.4	4.2	6.43
Pineapple	0.3	2.8	3.74
Jackfruit	0.2	2.0	3.33

The forest cover of the area and a small number of population have contributed to the calculation of resource which shows that the area contributes significantly to the gross domestic product (GDP). At 1998-99 market price, the per capita contribution to GDP from CHT stood at Taka 49,832 as against national figure of Taka 13,467. The following table gives the per capita contribution to GDP from different sectors and services.

Sector/ services	Bangladesh (Taka)	CHT (Taka)
Crops	289,195	4,174
Forestry	62,214	32,140
Livestock	66,665	888
Fisheries	78,916	442
Industry	156,744	2,460
Trade services	155,774	9,283
Banking & Insurance	32,832	442
Housing services	161,575	1,241
Professional services	290,360	2,700
Public administration & defence	103,133	941

Most of the industries in the region are forestry resources oriented. The two largest industrial units of the area are Karnaphuly Paper and Karnaphuly Rayon Mills employing about six thousand people. Besides there are five medium sized units including a cigarette factory, a textile factory, a match factory, a woodwork factory and a plywood factory. There are also some cottage industries.

MAINSTREAMING INITIATIVES

The people of the CHT region are disadvantaged compared with people in other areas of the country. Their disadvantages result from geographical location followed by ethnic psyche. The long process of domination over the area has created a sense of alienation and mistrust among the people of the area. The first of the arguably two most serious blows to the life, culture and economy of the population of the region was the construction of Kaptai Hydroelectric dam in Rangamati in 1960. With the commissioning of the dam the best agricultural land of the area went under the waters of the artificially created 655 sq. km. lake and uprooted as many as 100,000 people from their ancestral homes. The second threat came in independent Bangladesh when their status as ethnic minority was denied in the Constitution, which gave birth to armed insurgency in the region.

The face of the CHT began to change with massive development programmes initiated with the formation of the CHT Development Board (CHTDB) in January 1976. The Board first took up a multi-sectoral five year (1979-84) programme for the development of the area and its people at a cost of US \$ 172.90 mio. The major activities included agriculture, water supply and rural electrification, industry and power distribution, physical infrastructure and socio-economic development.

Despite massive development programmes, 22.2 percent of the households in the area are landless. The statistical profile of the area also points to the following realities:

- Poverty is quite visible everywhere.
- Lack of information is one of the basic disadvantages of the hill peoples.
- Most of the households suffer degrees of poverty and do not have access to education.
- Small and medium farm households are mainly engaged in cultivation.
- Price of agricultural products is unreasonably low. Producers have no control over the market nor have the leverage to bargain or to negotiate with the wholesale buyers.
- Income opportunity to rural households is very limited.
- Rates of unemployment and underemployment are very high.
- The women are visibly involved in economic activities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Because of the regulation giving CHT a special status, most national policies do not have any direct implications for the area. Nevertheless, some of the national policies like the National Environmental Strategies and Environmental Action Plan, Forest Policy, Wildlife Conservation Policy, Agricultural Policy, development projects and property regimes, and tenure and tenancy are reshaping the social dynamics in the area.

THE ISSUE OF COMPETITIVENESS

The competitiveness of the CHT region, *per se*, is a distant possibility for the present as the national economy is yet to be competitive in the global perspective. The products and services offered by the CHT region are still in a very primary stage. There is no proven estimate yet of availability of any natural resource in the region except natural gas. Agricultural products have a possibility to offer a better competitiveness provided the development policies are put into operation involving the people of the area. The area can produce cotton and different fruits, which can effectively contribute to growth of the national economy. The fruit production will have to be supported by canning facilities. Medicinal plant is another important product of the area that needs patronisation.

As the area contains most forestlands in the country, different Forest Policies had different implications. During the Mughal period (1526-1700) forestland in the area was cleared for agriculture. With the passage of the first Indian Forest Act in 1865 came classification of forests. Two classes of forests were to be formed: reserve and district forests. The Forest Department was given authority over reserve forests while that of the district forests went to the Deputy Commissioner. After the British left India, the Government of Pakistan declared its Forest Policy in 1955, and it was amended in 1962. The Government of Bangladesh declared its first Forest Policy in 1979 and the current Policy in 1994. The salient statements of the National Forest Policy 1994 that are relevant to CHT include the following: Government and private initiatives would be taken for afforestation programmes in the denuded hilly areas. Participation and rehabilitation of *jhum* cultivators will be ensured; participatory arrangement and rubber plantation programme would be encouraged for afforestation programmes; all state-owned forests of natural origins and planted forests in the hills will be used for producing forest resources; attempts will be made to increase protected area in the region by 10 percent by the year 2015;

labour intensive forest resource-based small and cottage industries will be encouraged in rural areas; legal regimes for transportation of forest produce will be simplified and updated; ownership of certain amounts of land will be given to tribal people through the forest settlement process; women will be encouraged to participate in homestead and farm forestry; and



forests and wildlife-based eco-tourism will be promoted.

The issue of land degradation in the area has been linked to *jhum* cultivation resulting in large-scale clearing of forests. Over the years yield from *jhum* cultivation has decreased. But people of the region believe land degradation can be attributed to other factors like: steep slopes, unstable geology, flash floods, population increase, inappropriate land-use policies, land-ownership issues, poor soil management practices, improper forest harvesting and setting forest fires.

The CHT is a biodiversity rich area especially in terms of birds and mammals. But for problems mentioned earlier, the biodiversity of the area is facing threats. Besides, the local community does not have any participation in conserving biodiversity.

The CHT people are more malaria resistant than non-hill people



and have developed indigenous cures, for example, chewing *sinqona* (quinine) herbs that grow locally. The Marma women have their own herbal techniques for birth control but these have, however, been largely replaced because of increasing access to family planning clinics. The Marma women use *seneka* (paste made of a kind of wood) to protect their skin from the scorching sun as well as from insect bites in the jungle. Incidentally, there has been no serious attempt to record this traditional knowledge which forms a strong component of their intellectual property.

There has been no proper evaluation of natural resources in the area except that of water resources.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Mainstreaming mountain issues and communities, first in the national aspiration and then drawing it into global process is a stupendous task for countries like Bangladesh. The hill people, being minority in number, have a sense of deprivation and in most cases they were left behind the orbit of development. With a change in development paradigm bringing people at the centre of all activities, the issue of hill people has gained global momentum.

To mainstream CHT into national orbit, three actions need to be implemented on a priority basis. These are political integration, economic engagement, and cultural unity maintaining diversity. While political integration could be time consuming, the economic engagement is achievable provided the hill people are ensured the income for their economic activities.

For the development of the people of CHT it is necessary to improve their capacity by empowering them through methods and interventions such as:

- Sensitisation about rights and need for participation in national process
- Arrangements to eliminate mistrust and sense of deprivation
- Technological and managerial skill development training with a view to promoting collective endeavours
- Resource mobilisation
- Improved communications systems
- Employment generation
- Strengthening of all types of agricultural support services
- Promotion of hill-based cottage industries and services
- Establishment of agro-processing industries
- Availability of electricity
- Appropriate pricing, trade and macro-economic policies
- Removal of bottleneck in proper distribution of output

These measures are to be implemented through participatory process and should not be designed in the corridors of power.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Certain policy recommendations are to be considered, examined and implemented before mainstreaming the CHT area and its people into global trade negotiation. Following issues should be kept in mind before formulating any policy:

- Utilisation of the existing production potentialities with reference to agro-ecological and economic realities, and agricultural practices and management
- Ensuring availability and access to power and gas
- Making available agricultural inputs - seed, fertiliser, water, agricultural machinery and improved technology etc. and development of skill for higher agricultural production
- Measures for export potential and import substitution
- Consideration of the impact of climate change and mitigation measures
- Prioritising food security issues
- Documentation of indigenous knowledge on natural resource management, preparation of conservation guidelines for species and ecosystem management, development of sustainable use regimes for species and strengthening institutions for sustainable management of unclassified state forests through local communities.

South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), a network of social activists and media persons in the South Asia region, was launched in December 1994 by a group of NGOs from South Asia. Its objective is to create capacities in NGOs and media persons to enable citizens to "understand and cope with the processes of transition and equip them with information and the tools of advocacy to provide adequate safety nets for protection of the environment and consumers through enhanced regional and international cooperation."

SAWTEE

Post Box No. 19366, Block No. 254, Sahayog Marg, Anamnagar, Kathmandu, Nepal

Tel: 977-1-229759, Fax: 977-1-240491, E-mail: hqsawtee@wlink.com.np

Published with the support from Ford Foundation