

How ethnic minorities became poor and stay poor in Bangladesh: a qualitative enquiry

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1. Introduction

Little has been written about the experiences of ethnic minorities in contemporary Bangladesh. This working paper reflects on the status of ethnic minorities in both the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and plain lands, examining the ways in which their identities are situated in the nation, experiences of poverty and in particular relationships to land. The power dynamics underlying the relationships between these communities and Bengalees are often neglected, and it is all the more important to focus on these given that development agencies often ignore issues of power and politics.

In Bangladesh there is a disagreement between government statistics and indigenous leaders about the number and size of the ethnic minority population. The exact number of ethnic minorities in Bangladesh is unknown. Officially the Bangladesh Government recognizes 27 ethnic minorities in the Small Ethnic Minority Cultural Institute Act of 2010. However different rights based organizations claim that more than 45 ethnic minorities lived in Bangladesh before Independence in 1971 (Barman and Neo, 2014). There are also disagreements over the size of the ethnic population. The latest population survey in 2011 shows that ethnic minorities represent 1.10 percent of the population in Bangladesh, in other words a total of 1,586,141 citizens. However, ethnic minorities claim that the exact number is closer to 2 million (Barman and Neo, 2014). Not only are there differences in statistical estimations but the latest censuses actually exclude questions about ethnic minorities. In other words, we have no updates on the ethnic population since 1991. Without basic demographic information, it is far easier to ignore the presence and concerns of ethnic minorities. The Government's budget allocation of BDT 160 million for the estimated two million indigenous people of the plains was heavily criticized and described as a "*mockery towards the indigenous people by the state*" and "unjust" (Saha, 2014).

In this paper we explore the nature of the relationship between the Bangladeshi state and the multiple non-Bengalee ethnic minorities¹, using primary qualitative data. The first section provides evidence of a phenomenon of exacerbated extreme poverty affecting non-Bengali

¹ Some ethnic minorities identify as Bengalees, but are not considered as such by the dominant Bengalee population. Determining whether or not a certain population 'belong' to the Bengalee culture and identity is beyond the scope of this paper. Ethnic minority is therefore used to refer to groups which the dominant population identify as 'minority groups'. It is also important to acknowledge from the outset that in writing of ethnicity, power and poverty at such a broad level we inevitably cannot do justice to the specific histories and contextual relationships between specific ethnic groups and wider 'outsiders'.

ethnic groups. The second section presents a typology of the state's hegemonic nation-identity discourse. The third section gives details about the primary data collected from Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and plain land-based ethnic groups and secondary data used for this study. The fourth section argues that livelihood improvements are constrained by relational politics of ethnicity. The fifth section looks at the implications of the Bengalee domination for non-Bengalee extreme poor's interaction with the state and their access to services.

2. The complex status of ethnic minorities in Bangladesh

a. Entrenched extreme poverty

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in regard to reducing extreme poverty. In 2010 the percentage of extreme poor in the total population was 17.6 against 13.1 in 2013 and 12.4 in 2014 (Sen and Ali, 2015). This success was however only partly shared with ethnic minorities². Government data on ethnicity and poverty is scarce.

Barkat et al, (2009 a, b) conducted important analyses on CHT and plain land ethnic minorities, which identify an achievement gap between national poverty reduction and other ethnic groups' experiences. Overall, studies find that low economic opportunities, specific geographic locations, exclusion, deprivation and dispossession of lands are the main drivers of poverty among the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh (Barkat et al., 2009 a. b.; Adnan, 2004; Kamal et al., 2006). Sen and Ali (2015) argue that non-income poverty is also widespread in the CHT, particularly education and health indicators, due to geographic conditions. Barkat et al. (2009a) using the Direct Calorie Intake³ (DCI) method found that among ten plain land ethnic communities in Greater Sylhet and Mymensingh 60 percent of the indigenous people were absolute poor compared to only 39.5 percent of rural Bengalees. Hardcore poverty among plain land indigenous peoples is also significantly higher (24.6 percent) than the hardcore poverty (17.9 percent) in rural Bangladesh (Barkat et al. 2009a). Using a similar method, Barkat et al. (2009b) found in the CHT about 62 percent of households in the CHT region, irrespective of ethnicity, live below the absolute poverty line (below 2,122 k.cal), while about 36 percent are hardcore poor (below 1,805 k.cal) (Barkat et al. 2009b). Most importantly, the poverty status of women in the CHT is of greater concern as 94 percent of them live below the absolute poverty line and about 85 percent below the hardcore poverty line based on the DCI method (Barkat et al., 2009b). UNDP Bangladesh also published the MDG acceleration report in 2013, covering the whole of the country including the CHT. The GED and UNDP (2013) report also shows the highest percentage of population below the national upper poverty line (defined as 2,122 k.cal) was found in Khagrachari district (50.5 percent) followed by Bandarban (41.1 percent) and then

² Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are used synonymously in the text

³ Food intake or direct calorie intake is used as the threshold to measure poverty. A daily intake of less than 2,122 calories equates to absolute poor, while a food intake less than 1,805 a day equates to hardcore poor.

Rangamati district (33.2 percent) compared to the national average of 31.5 percent (UNDP 2013:121).

Poverty levels vary amongst ethnic groups too, with the Oraon, Santal, Pahan and Khasia communities in the plain land suffering from more severe forms of poverty than the Hajong, Garo and Rakhain communities among the plain land ethnic minorities (Barkat et al, 2009a). On the other hand, high poverty incidence can be found among the marginalised ethnic minorities particularly the Lushais, the Bawms, the Chaks, the Khyangs, and the Pangkhuas in the Chittagong hill tract ethnic minorities (Barkat et al, 2009b). The well-being status of plain land ethnic minorities has been documented by Barkat et al. (2009) using the deprivation index. According to this index, Patro ethnic minorities are the most deprived in the plain land, with a score of 3.7 points (on a scale of “0” to “8” with “0” being the most deprived). They are followed by Santal-3.9 points, Pahan-4.2 points, Oraon-4.3 points, Dalu-4.4 points, Hajong-4.6 points, Khasia-4.7 points, Garo-5.4 points, Rakhain-5.1 points, and Mahato-5.6 points.

On the other hand, in rural CHT poverty is about 1.6 times higher than other parts of rural Bangladesh and is the most socially deprived region in Bangladesh (BBS, 2013). Within the CHT Bandarban is the only district that systematically scores below the national average in many socio-economic indicators. BBS report (2013) also showed that Bandarban and Khagrachari had the poorest types of housing, (with most people live in Kutcha⁴ houses) with Bandarban also had the highest proportion of households lacking access to sanitation and electricity. More importantly, 6 out of 7 upazila’s of Bandarban, and 6 out of 10 upazilas of Rangamati are considered deprived using the composite deprivation index⁵. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable data that disaggregates poverty indicators by ethnic group.

b. Infrastructures (Hill tracts)

The CHTs have a history distinct from that of the Bangladesh ‘plain land’. The CHT were a self-governed and independent territory until 1860 and then annexed to the province of British Bengal in 1860 as a “district” (Roy, 2002; Roy, 2000; Barkat et al., 2009b). However, the process of colonization had started during the period of East India Company in 1770 after the defeat of the Mughal emperor and Bengal ruler at the Battle of Buxar (Roy, 2004; Ishaq, 1975). Then the CHT administration changed (Roy, 2000) and in 1884 three administrative circles namely the Chakma, the Bohmong and the Mong were formed and divided into three territorial boundaries. A superintendent of hill tribes was appointed by the British to observe the administration of the chiefs and traditional clan chief and *Headman* (Roy, 2000; Roy, 2004).

⁴ “Kutcha” refers to... includes ‘jhupri’ structures as well, which constitute only 2.9 per cent of all structures for the country as a whole.

⁵Population below 18 years, female teenage (15-19 years) married population, children (age 6-10 years) out of school in primary education, children aged 11-15 years not attending secondary school, female (aged 15 years and above) who are illiterate, child workers aged 10-14 years who are not in school and are engaged in paid work, households without access to sanitary toilet and households without electricity connection.

In 1900 the CHT manual act was adopted. The manual was popularly known as the 1900 Regulations or the Hill Tracts Manual for the protection of ethnic minorities culture and traditional livelihoods. This regulation provided a special identity for CHT indigenous people as well as a homeland and declared the CHT area as an 'excluded' one, thus restricting the entry of people from outside (Roy, 2000; Roy, 2004). Rule 52 of the original Regulations stated that:

“Save as hereinafter provided, no person other than a Chakma, Mogh or a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Lushai Hills, the Arakan Hill Tracts, or the State of Tripura shall enter or reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner at his discretion.”

The Deputy Commissioner (DC) is the highest decision-taking authority in all matters relating to the CHT and has discretionary power (Roy, 2000) as per the CHT regulation act of 1900. Since the Act, non-indigenous people have occupied the DC role and other senior executive posts. Section 7 of Regulation 1 of 1900 states:

“Chittagong Hill Tracts to be a district under the Deputy Commissioner. The Chittagong Hill Tracts shall constitute a district for the purpose of criminal and Civil jurisdiction and for revenue and general purposes, the Deputy Commissioner shall be the District Magistrate, and subject to any orders passed by the Local Government under Section 6, the general administration of the said Tracts, in criminal, civil, revenue and all other matters shall be vested in the Deputy Commissioner.”

Successive governments have amended the CHT regulation 1900 act several times and the traditional leadership (*Raja, Headman, Karbari*) gradually lost control over land. The 1900 Regulation still remains active law for legal and administrative system in the CHT (Roy, 2004; Barkat et al. 2009).

After independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, CHT fell under Pakistan (East Pakistan). The people living in the CHT were ethnic minorities and constituted about 98 percent of the population (Barkat et al. 2009). Since East Pakistan period (1947-1970), CHT people have lost their traditional land and their culture through different external interventions (Roy, 2004). For examples the construction of the Kaptai dam in 1960 meant that about 100,000 ethnic minority people had to be displaced from their ancestral land, and resulted in the loss of about 54,000 acres of productive arable land (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Chakma, 2010). In 1964, the government withdrew the special status of the CHT people by amending the CHT act. This amendment allowed the entry of 'external' people into the CHT (Roy, 2000; Roy, 2004).

After independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the trends of land dispossession and the entry of external populations continued, and at the same time the rights of the CHT people were largely ignored in the constitution of 1972. In 1976 the CHT development Board act (repealed in 2014)

was created during General Zia ur Rahman rule. However the main intention of the act was to settle Bengali farmers within the CHT by redistributing indigenous people's land (Faiz and Mohaiemen, 1997). In 1989, three Hill District Councils (Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban) were created with a view to improve the socio-economic conditions of the CHT people. This move was enacted in the Local Government Councils Bills Acts 19, 20 and 21 of 1989. In 1997, a peace accord was signed between the Awami league Government and PCJSS (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti⁶), which ended 25 years protracted armed conflict between government and PCJSS. The CHT was officially recognized as a “tribal-inhabited area” through the peace accord (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Roy, 2004; Barkat et al. 2009).

In accordance with the peace accord, the Hill District council acts were amended in 1998, and in 1998 the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council was formed, followed by the CHT land commission in 2001. Apart from these, one specific ministry called the “Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs” was created based on the peace accord. The am of the Ministry was to regulate the above-mentioned institutions. As a result, the CHT have three different governance systems namely: the traditional government (three Circle Chiefs), the central government system (deputy commissioner office), and self-rule government system (hill district council and CHT regional council). The Ministry of CHT Affairs (MoCHTA) is responsible for supervision of all activities in CHT. 17 years after it was signed, the CHT peace accord is still to be fully implemented, and the land commission remains largely inefficient (Faruque, 2014).

3. State policy and discourse

a. Tribal? Paharees? Upajatis? Jummas? Adivasis?

Ethnic minorities living in Bangladesh have been struggling to have their identity recognized by the state even since independence in 1971. Ethnic minorities can be categorized into two groups: plains land ethnic minorities and those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts regarded as Hilly land ethnic minorities (Dhamai, 2014). Ethnic minorities are located mainly in the border regions in the northwest (Rajshahi-Dinajpur), central north (Mymensingh - Tangail), northeast (Greater Sylhet), south and southeast (Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Greater Barisal).

There is a sharp discrepancy between indigenous leaders and Bangladesh government on the issue of identity (Roy, 2009). In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, PCJSS introduced the termed “Jumma” as a collective name for the twelve different ethnic groups referring to the traditional jhum (swidden) cultivation practiced in the hills (Arens and Chakma, 2002). Ethnic minority groups in the CHT are also popularly known as “Pahari” (meaning hill people) (Roy, 2009). On the other hand, plain land indigenous groups particularly those in the north-western greater Rajshahi region used to be known as “Adivasi,” meaning aboriginal or indigenous. The term

⁶ the only political organization, formed in 1972 representing eleven multilingual indigenous groups living in the CHT.

“adivasi” or “indigenous” received little attention from other parts of Bangladesh until 1990 (Roy, 2009). However, after the declaration of the *International Year of the Indigenous Peoples* by the United Nations in 1992, most of the indigenous peoples from CHT and plain referring themselves as *Indigenous* in English and as *Adivasi* in Bengali meaning (Roy, 2009).

The Bangladesh Government ratified the ILO convention (convention no. 107 of 1957) in 1972 just after independence regarding the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples (Roy, 2009). This convention is the only international law on the rights indigenous and tribal populations, and covers a wide range of issues, including land, recruitment and conditions of employment, vocational training, handicrafts and rural industries, social security and health, administration, education and means of communication (Roy, 2009; ILO). Roy, (2009) argues that despite having opportunities for dialogue on development needs and strategies for indigenous and tribal populations in the country, the Bangladesh government and the ILO have not taken proper affirmative action since 1972.

The Bangladesh Government has declared that there are no indigenous peoples (Bengali: Adivasi) in the country and has preferred to use terms such as “tribe” and “tribal” (“upajati” in Bengali) instead of “indigenous” (Roy, 2009). However different names have been used in different legislations. For example, a finance law in 1995 uses the term “indigenous hillmen”; the East Bengal State Acquisition & Tenancy Act of 1950 uses the term “aboriginal castes or tribes”; the National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper adopted by the Government of Bangladesh in 2005 (“PRSP-I”) uses “adivasis/ethnic minorities”; and the 2008 PRSP-II uses “indigenous communities” and “indigenous people” (Roy, 2009).

The debate between indigenous and non-indigenous came into further focus following the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples by the United Nations on 13 September 2007. This is regarded as a major breakthrough in terms of indigenous peoples’ rights, and highlighted (i) the right to self-determination; (ii) the right to be recognized as distinct peoples; (iii) the right to free, prior and informed consent; and (iv) the right to be free of discrimination. Regarding the Indigenous issue in Bangladesh, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues of the United Nations published several reports discussed indigenous issues in Bangladesh in 2011 (UNPFII, 2011). In response, the Bangladesh Government declared that it would not use the term “indigenous” in the country, claiming that there are no indigenous people (cited by The Daily Star, 2011). The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010 also mentions the phrase “*khudro nrigoshthhi*” (small ethnic groups) to refer to indigenous peoples. However, the term Adivasi was used in the definitions section to refer to “*khudro nrigoshthhi*”. Finally, the government also refers to the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh as “tribes”, “minor races” and “ethnic sects and communities” in the 15th amendment of the constitution in 2011 (Dhamai, 2014). On the other hand, it declares that “the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis” in Article 6.2 of the amended Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Act of 2011. This infers that the government can impose upon ethnic minorities the use of a Bengali identity rather than accept

their right to an ethnic identity as well as their rights to self-determination (Dhamai, 2014). The ethnic minorities prefer collectively to use the term “indigenous” in English and “Adivasi” in Bengali.

ILO Convention No. 107

Article 1

1. This convention applies to:

(a) members of tribal or semi-tribal populations in independent countries whose social and economic conditions are at a less advanced stage than the stage reached by the other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;

(b) members of tribal or semi-tribal populations in independent countries which are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation and which, irrespective of their legal status, live more in conformity with the social, economic and cultural institutions of that time than with the institutions of the nation to which they belong.

2. For the purposes of this Convention, the term *semi-tribal* includes groups and persons who, although they are in the process of losing their tribal characteristics, are not yet integrated into the national community.

4. Methodological discussion and data analysis

The study attempts to provide precise in-depth accounts of the processes that underpin the poverty experienced by ethnic groups in Bangladesh. Fieldwork was conducted in Bandarban Sadar upazila (in Bandarban district), Kaptai and Kawkhali upazila (in Rangamati district) with extreme poor ethnic minority beneficiaries from the Green Hill⁷ project, including Chakma, Marma and Mro ethnic groups. Representatives from the Oraon, the Mahali, the Santal and the Karmakar were also included in the research. These are all beneficiaries of NETZ⁸ project in Rajshahi district. Representatives from the Garo and Barmon communities were also selected for

⁷ Since 2013, Green Hill has been implementing a extreme poverty project named SHAILEE funded by GOB, UKaid, SDC and SHIREE with a view to support 7,500 extreme poor households in the CHT through conditional cash transfer along with life skill training

⁸ Since 2009, Netz has been working with 18,000 extreme poor households through its AMADER Project (mainly asset transfer) again funded by GOB, UKaid, SDC and SHIREE.

the study from Tangail district. This allowed us to include a broad range of ethnic minority representation.

A total of 12 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted, including six from the CHT and six from the plain land from October 2014 until December 2014. Data from the FGDs were recorded and subsequently analysed using coding procedures. During our interviews with extreme poor ethnic minority beneficiaries in the CHT, Rajshahi and Tangail districts we asked participants to comment on the challenges they faced in trying to improve their livelihoods and access services particularly access to land, economic opportunities, education, product marketing, health services, credit and information. Twelve key informant interviews (KII) (six from CHT and six from plain land) were also taken to get additional information on access to livelihoods and services. The KIIs involved community leaders, teachers, and development and rights activists.

Secondary data was collected on previous socio-economic studies and human rights data in the context of ethnic minorities both in the Chittagong hill tracts and in other parts of Bangladesh. The latest Bangladesh poverty maps and the Child equity atlas were also studied for poverty and deprivation analysis. We also examined Shiree's change monitoring survey data (see www.shiree.org) including the qualitative tracking studies (CMS5) and Shiree's lesson learning reports to compare the nature and extent of extreme poor ethnic minorities' poverty graduation. Data from CMS-5 gave us access to 12 life histories and 12 reflections on interventions of beneficiaries from ethnic minorities in the CHT. Published reports, journal articles and working papers were also studied to compare the data and statements.

5. Politics of land: Dispossession of CHT land

Historically important political factors related to land can explain the relative impoverishment of minorities in the CHT and the plain land (Barkat et al. 2009a, b). These processes have resulted in ethnic minorities being excluded from development intervention, facing ethnic violence, and suffer land dispossession (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Barkat et al. 2009). However the way in which ethnic groups in the CHT and the plain land lost their lands, differs. In this section we examine this difference and argue that land dispossession is both a result of poverty (notably for plain land ethnic groups) and a cause of poverty (notably in CHTs). We find that while plain land ethnic minorities lost their land because local Bengalees took possession of it, in the CHT land dispossession was by and large undertaken by the government and supervised by military forces and elites (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011).

Nationalism and multi-ethnic conflict in the CHT

The population of Bangladesh is largely homogeneous – about 99 percent speak Bengali, the country's state language, and almost 90 percent are Muslims (Caf Dowlah, 2013). As a result, more than 45 ethnic minorities represent less than 2 percent of the total population. The principle of homogeneity is reflected in the country's constitution. Article 9 states

“The unity and solidarity of Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangalee nationalism.”

Manobendra Narayan Larma, a leader from the Hill people of CHT, rejected this hegemonic imposition and walked out of discussions in protest (Mohsin, 2000). In 1974, Larma told the Bangladesh parliament, *“You cannot impose your national identity on others. I am a Chakma, not a Bangalee. I am a citizen of Bangladesh – Bangladeshi . . . [Jummas] can never be Bangalee”* (cited in Caf Dowlah, 2013: 775). His claim was simple: the Constitution ignored the more than 45 different ethnic communities as well as their culture, language and histories despite the fact that they had participated and made sacrifices for the liberation of Bangladesh (Mohsin 2000; Dhamai, 2014). Mohsin (1997) also argued that the assertion that *“The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation”* ensured Bengali domination over all political and cultural life within the state as well as the imposition of single nationality over all the citizens of Bangladesh.

Notwithstanding the above, the Bangladesh government has in other moments recognized the status of ethnic minorities. The 15th amendment of the constitution passed by the parliament on 30th June 2011 states that *“the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities”*. There was no distinct recognition that ethnic minorities existed in Bangladesh before the 15th amendment of the Bangladesh constitution other than references to *“backward section of citizens”* in article 28 (4) of the Constitution.

Why does the government give more attention to the CHT community people than to other ethnic minorities live in plan land? There are several reasons to be considered. First, the CHT has had a movement for self-determination and enjoys constitutional identity as well as regional autonomy. Second, the CHT covers one tenth of the total land of the country and yet the CHT ethnic groups constitute less than 2 percent of the population (Adnan and Dasdidar, 2011). Third, the Chittagong Hill tracts is strategically important for Bangladesh because it is located in the south-eastern part of the country, bordering the Tripura and Mizoram states of India and the Arakan and Chin states of Myanmar (Roy, 2006). Fourth, the majority of the CHT people are non-Muslim and home to 11 ethnic groups, namely: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Khiyang, Khumi, Mro, Lusai, Pankhoya, Bawm, Chak and Tanchangya (Barkat et al. 2009b). The groups are of Sino-Tibetan descent and belong to the Mongoloid group (Barkat et al., 2009b). They have separate languages, cultures, customs, traditions and livelihoods which are distinct from the rest of Bangladesh.

Since independence, the country has had a number of different government regimes including military government. These changes have had an impact upon different settlements introduced in the CHT. Following the denial of their constitutional identity as well as regional autonomy for

the preservation of ethnic minorities in CHT, the ethnic community formed a peace force demanding autonomy. Manobendra Narayan Larma (a lawyer representative from the CHT people) had attempted to have the collective identity and cultural preservation of CHT people included in the Constitution but this was refused by the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In a speech during a tour of CHT, Mujib reportedly said: “*From today there are no tribal sub-groups in Bangladesh; everyone is a Bengali*” (cited in Faiz and Mohaiemen, 1997:27). Following Mujib’s stance, the *Parbatya Chottogram Jana Samhati Samiti* (PCJSS) was formed in 1972. The aim of PCJSS was to ensure the recognition of ethnic minority identity and the protection of their rights. An armed wing of the PCJSS was also formed it was known as *Shanti Bahini* (peace force) (Dowlah, 2013). Successive Governments introduced initiatives to try and control the CHT including the resettlement programme as well as extensive military deployment. The CHT was officially put under military control from 1977 (Mohsin, 1999), and subsequently, the military was accused of unleashing a reign of terror in the area that included accusations of rape, killings, detentions without trial, forced dislocations and so forth. The relationship between the indigenous people and the army further deteriorated following the statement of Major General Manzur, the Officer of Command, Chittagong Division Branch in 1977: “*We want the land and not the People*” (Mohsin, 1999).

In 1980, CHT turned into military region, with about 115,000 military personal deployed i.e. one soldier for five to six hill persons (Levene, 1999:354). Following the militarisation of the region, various human rights violations were reported including the massacre of Mubachari in 1979, the first large scale killing in the CHT (Samad, 1980), the Kaukhali massacre in 1980 where 200-300 people were killed. From 1979 until 1993, 11 massacres took place in the CHT (Chakma, 2010), massacres which coincided with the transfer plain land citizens to the CHT.

Historically, there are no records of communal violence between ethnic minorities and Bengali peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from the British period through to the Pakistan period. The first genocidal incident was recorded in 1980 which as indicated earlier, coincided with the government sponsored transfer of Bengali populations to the CHT. Subsequently, several genocide incidents occurred in 1988, 1989 and 1992 (Chakma, 2010). According to an Amnesty International report (2013), land-grabbing and displacement are the main threat to the ethnic minorities living in the CHT. Displacement programmes have changed the demographic situation in the CHT (see Table 1). According to the literature, 400,000 Bengalis were settled in the CHT between 1980 and 1984 (Chakma, 2010; Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Barkat et al. 2009). Each Bengali settler family received 5 acres of hilly land or 4 acres of mixed land or 2.5 acres of paddy land (Shelly, 1992). Inevitably with resettlements came tension and violence. Chakma (2010:110) argues that the “*Bengali settlement not only altered the demographic of CHT, it also expedited process of ethnic cleansing*”. Some authors have gone on to associate settlement with poverty. Adnan (2004) for example suggests that the levels of poverty and destitution observed in the CHT are related to the alienation of ethnic minorities from their the common and private lands.

Table 1: Demographic trend and ethnic composition in CHT

Census Year	Ethnic composition of CHT population				
	% of ethnic population	% of Bengali population	Ethnic population	Bengali population	Total population
1941	97.06	2.94	239783	7270	247053
1951	93.71	6.29	269177	18070	287247
1961	88.23	11.77	339757	45322	385079
1981	58.51	41.49	441744	313188	754932
1991	51.43	48.57	501144	473301	974445
2001	54.86	45.14	736682	606058	1342740
2011	52.90	47.10	845541	752690	1598231

Source: Dhamai, 2014

Although a peace accord was signed in 1997 and this brought to an end the protracted conflict between the Bangladesh government and indigenous peoples, there have been continuing reports of human rights violations in the CHT. For example in 2013, there are reports of 46 arson attacks on the houses of ethnic minorities, 6 communal attacks, 3 temples ransacked, 275 houses looted, 82 tortures and assaults, and 1,219 cases of ethnic families fleeing to safe places (Barman and Neo, 2014). The level of persecution and encroachment shows no sign of abating. Indeed Chakma (2014: 64) argues that, *“If the present trend continues, Indigenous peoples of the CHT are to become an absolute minority as well as scattered in their own territories in a few decades”*.

Historically CHT ethnic groups rely on agriculture, practicing subsistence *Jhum* (swidden) cultivation. Traditionally, land use was determined not by legal documents but by traditional customary oral laws. During the British colonial period however, land use systems were introduced, formalising land use through laws and policies. A central policy was the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation Act of 1900 (popularly known as the CHT manual), which in principle gave ethnic minorities unique access to the hilly land (Table 2). Gain (2005) highlights a key point of the Act:

“no person other than Chakma, Mogh or a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Lushai hills, the Arakan hill tracts or the state of Tripura shall enter or reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner.”

Table 2: Traditional land access of ethnic minorities in CHT

Natural resources	Right Holder	Regularity Law\ Custom	Regulating authority
Homestead lands	Indigenous family	Rule 50, CHT Regulation	Headman
Swidden (Jhum) land	Indigenous family	Rule 41, CHT Regulation	Headman, DC ⁹
Used Swidden land	Indigenous family	Traditional Customs	Headman
Forest produce	Mauza residents	Rule 41A, CHT Regulation	Headman & Karbaries
Grazing land	Mauza residents	Rule 45B, CHT Regulation	Headman& DC
Grasslands	Mauza residents	Rule 45, CHT Regulation	Headman& DC
Wild game	Indigenous residents	Traditional Customs	Headman& circle chief
Marine resources	Mauza residents	Undefined	Headman
Large water bodies	Mauza residents	Undefined	Headman
Smaller aquifers	Mauza residents	Undefined	Headman
Natural resources	Indigenous family	Standing orders of DC, HDC ¹⁰ (Amendment) Acts 1998	Headman& DC

Source: Roy, 2002

Later in 1927, the Forest Act was introduced however and reduced ethnic minorities' access to land as well as forest. The Act states that

“The [Government] may constitute any forest-land or waste-land [or any land suitable for afforestation] which is the property of Government, or over which the Government has proprietary rights, or to the whole or any part of the forest-produce of which the Government is entitled, a reserved forest in the manner hereinafter provided.”

About 24 percent of the total CHT land areas was declared as reserve forests, which meant that permission was required in order to enter or access the forest. After being restricted from the forests, CHT communities began to cultivate plain land during the Pakistan period. However, the Pakistan government decided to construct a hydroelectric dam at Kaptai in Rangamati district, and as a result, 54,000 acres of land belonging to ethnic communities were submerged and 100,000 ethnic families were forced to migrate to India (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Barkat et al. 2009b; D’Costa, 2008).

⁹ Deputy Commissioner: The chief administrative and revenue officer of a district

¹⁰Hill District Council: Local Government institution in CHT

One of the challenges about CHT land status is that there are three major co-existing laws: (i) formal law which applies to the entire country (ii) formal laws that are specific to the CHT and its indigenous people (iii) customary laws of the IP. These laws overlap in places but are also inconsistent in others. The main land grabbing processes in the CHT identified by Adnan and Dastidar, (2011) are (i) state acquisition of private and common lands of the indigenous people, converting these into state owned lands; (ii) forcible occupation of private and common lands of *Paharis* by Bengali interest groups and agencies, resulting in the conversion of these into the private property of the latter; (iii) privatization of *Pahari* common lands by individual members of indigenous communities, converting these into their private property; and (iv) acquisition of the titled lands given to Bengali settlers during the counter-insurgency by influential Bengali interest groups based both inside and outside the CHT.

In order to manage different land related issues, the CHT land commission was formed in 2011 according to the CHT peace accord. According to the peace accord, the hill district council is the sole authority for any land related settlements or leasing, and for the sale or transfer of land. The council has the power to override the Deputy Commissioner as per the CHT regulation of 1900. However in reality, the District Commissioner offices have violated the law and continue to exercise its power over CHT land issues (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011). In part this is the result of inconsistent laws. For example, state acquisition of land in the CHT empowers the DC to exercise force to acquire designated lands without consultation with landowners. For this reason, some authors have highlighted that indigenous people have little political power to influence the top decision-making processes of the government in relation to land use (Chakma 2010).

Land dispossession and eviction are still common in the CHT. For this reason, a number of authors have argued that land is the single most important issue in the CHT. Thus Moshin notes: "To any observer of the CHT it is clear that peace in the CHT is largely dependent upon the resolution of the land issue" (cited in Roy, 2004: 2). Barman and Neo (2014) report that in 2013 the forest department, elites and even the security forces grabbed 3,992 acres of land. In 2011, there were 111 cases of houses being burnt down due to land related conflicts, followed by another 36 in 2013. In the CHT, 13 families were evicted from their ancestral land in 2012 and 26 families in 2013 (Barman and Neo, 2014). These occurred despite the peace accord (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011).

Neglect or patronage

In comparison with the CHT, there are actually very few laws relating to plain land ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. In many ways, the relation to plain land ethnic communities is governed by location and land dispossession (Barkat et al., 2009a). Thus the greater Mymensingh district in north-central Bangladesh was a partially excluded area until 1962 inhabited mostly by *Mandi* or *Garos*, *Hajongs*, *Kochs* and *Hadis*. Since 1950 the number of non-indigenous people living in the area has grown rapidly partly in response to government invitation or patronage (Roy, 2006). Now the majority of the plain land ethnic communities live in small pockets or enclaves scattered among a predominantly Bengali populated area and do not

have the electoral strength to elect an indigenous representative to local government bodies (Roy, 2006; Dhamai, 2014). The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 is the only major law for regulating the administration of land in the areas inhabited by the plain land ethnic minorities. Section 97 (1) (2) of the Act restricts the transfer of lands of “*aboriginal castes and tribes*” to any other than “*(aboriginals) domiciled or permanently residing in Bangladesh*” (Roy, 2006). The other law relating to plain land indigenous peoples is the Drugs and Alcoholic Substances Control Act, 1990 that exempts “tribals”-both in the plains and in the CHT-along with tea estate labourers and the castes of “Muchi” (cobbler), “Methor” (sweeper) and “Dom” (fisher-people or cremation ground cleaners) from criminal prosecution for consuming traditionally brewed or distilled alcoholic beverages.

However unlike the CHT, there is no substantive law for plain land ethnic communities that seek to protect their distinct culture, language or tradition. Plain land ethnic minorities have taken little political initiative to be provided specific support for the development and improvement of their livelihoods. According to Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC):

“The indigenous people of the plains are marginalised both in situation and in discussions. The government and donors have a lack of knowledge about them. The indigenous people of the hills are given priority over them” (cited by Saha at Prothom Alo, 2014).

It might be that plain land ethnic minorities have a weak political background or lack mobility because the population is more scattered than in the CHT. There is little doubt that the plain land ethnic minorities are more insecure in terms of land-grabbing, threats, evictions and killings. In most cases, these go unreported and are actually ‘invisible’ to different governmental and non-governmental agencies led usually by representatives of the majority Bengali population (Barkat et al, 2009a; Dhamai, 2014).

Land grabbing and dispossession against ethnic minorities is also common in the plain lands. Barkat et al. (2009a) estimate that in the plain lands, 202,164 acres of land were dispossessed from plain land ethnic minority groups including the Dalu, Garo, Hajong, Khasi, Mahato, Oraon, Patro, Pahan, Rakhain and Santal. They estimate that the value of this land comes to BDT62.7 billion (US \$ 0.9 billion) which is around 2 percent of Bangladesh’s GDP.

Plain land ethnic minorities were evicted from their ancestral lands in the late 1960s (Barkat et al. 2009a). As a result they now live in small pockets or enclaves dominated by Bengalis. Relations between the plain land minorities and the Bengalis tend to be discriminatory and exclusionary (Dhamai, 2014). Plain land ethnic minorities are also affected by Government policy (Roy, 2011). Prominent examples where the ethnic minorities have lost out because of some government directive include the “eco-park” project in the Garo/Mandi-inhabited Madhupur forest area, the “national park” project in the Khasi-inhabited parts of Maulvibazar

district, and the eviction of Santal people in Dinajpur district in the name of “social forestry” (Roy, 2011). Many ethnic minority households were forced to migrate to India because of the insecurity they felt. A total of 29 families in 2012 and 66 ethnic minority families in 2013 were attacked because of land related conflicts.

6. Livelihoods domination and agency

With historical and long-standing processes of land dispossession, ethnic minorities both in the hills and in the plain lands have had to adapt their livelihood strategies. Many relied on access to natural resources for their livelihoods. While plain land ethnic minorities mostly practiced wet-rice cultivation, those in the CHT mostly carried out *Jhum* cultivation. The more remote CHT ethnic minorities rely solely on *Jhum* cultivation as there are no other reliable cultivation options. During an interview one of the Green Hill beneficiaries from the CHT, said that *‘Jhum cultivation is the main income sources as there are very few other agricultural systems available in this region. Nevertheless, the forest gives us wood for fuel as well as wild food for survival’*.

Collecting forest products and selling them is another livelihood option for the extreme poor in the CHT. However, the decision to declare forests as reserve areas means that access to forests is strictly prohibited unless special permission is given. This brings minorities into dispute with the forest department. For example in 2005, the husband of Manu Ching, a Green Hill beneficiary and a participant of the Shiree CMS5 household tracking studies, was accused of cultivating *Jhum* in a reserve forests by the Forest Department. The accusation led to his arrest. Manu then had to take out a loan from a moneylender to pay the bail money that would secure his release.

Access to land is one of the major concerns for ethnic minorities to secure livelihoods. Although some ethnic minorities manage to negotiate access to land, most do not have a permanent land title. One of our respondents, a development activist in CHT, claimed, *“sustained livelihoods require permanent/regular land access as well as access to natural resources. Most of the extreme poor farmers of ethnic minorities do not have permanent land to cultivate”*. During one of our FGDs, one of the participants noted that *“now most of the extreme poor families rely on rich people to access the land and sometimes they have to pay for access”*. Shanti Ram Chakma, one of the ethnic Chakma community leader selected for a KII, said that *“the in-migration and external land acquisitions in CHT combined with a lack of cultivable land has reduced land access for extreme poor ethnic minorities.”* Access to land has become more problematic due to a combination of factors: the declaration of government reserved forests, the encroachment of land by the elite (both Bengalis and non-Bengalis), the implementation of commercial cultivation in the CHT, and the acquisition of land by the security forces (CHTC, 2000; Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; IWGIA, 2012).

When ethnic minority households have products to sell, their limited market access hinders their capacity to earn. In the CHT, remoteness and the lack of transportation facilities leads to an under-valuation of products, and forces the extreme poor to sell products at low prices to Bengali

middlemen. Rasul (2009) notes that these geographical issues are also compounded by a lack of business knowledge. This was reinforced in our FGDs. For example one participant, a Green Hill beneficiary, reported that he sold 6 bunches of bananas for only 600 Taka to the Bengali middleman in the nearest market. This means he received only 31 Taka per bunch. If he had sold the bananas in the nearby town, he would have received 200-300 Taka per bunch. The lack of knowledge co-exists with the fact that ethnic minorities do not control local market conditions:

“trade and commerce in the region are controlled almost exclusively by Bengali traders and merchants. Therefore the influence of the Bengali population has risen significantly over the years, commensurate to its growing numbers, economic clout, and its closer links with the social, economic and political elite in the capital city of Dhaka” (cited in Amnesty International report, 2013: 31).

Plain land ethnic minorities who are agricultural labourers but have sufficient homestead land in Rajshahi have a better livelihood than those who do not have sufficient homestead land (Ali and Roy, 2014). During a FGD conducted with eight Mahali plain ethnic minorities, many reported that they did not have access to agricultural land and that any homestead land was always under threat by Bengali land grabbers. One participant from Tanore (Rajshahi) said that her house was attacked by Bengali land grabbers in March 2014 because of some land conflict. However she was able to stop her eviction from her household with the help of other people (local Bengali community leader workers who supported plain land ethnic minorities).

FGD participants from the Oraon community in Tanore said that in recent times they had experienced less household attacks and land dispossessions. This contrasts with previous years when land dispossessions were more common. According to Barkat et al., (2009a) one third of all land dispossessions occurred in 1971 and 1980. And the same study notes that now there is very little, if any, land to possess. One of our FGD participants told us *“previously our community people were not aware about legal land documents and were often didn’t feel the need to record the land so that significant amounts of land were dispossessed. Now the community people are aware and take appropriate action if such incidents occur”*. This new awareness seems have its roots in NGO training and awareness raising.

Garo families also used to have access to land but have slowly lost it to Bengali private households. An example of this was provided by another FGD participant who claimed that he had leased out/mortgaged his 10 decimals of land on credit to a Bengali people. However, when he was unable to repay the money, ownership of the land went to the Bengali people. This seems to have been a common occurrence among the Garo. As another participant explained *“most of the homestead land went to the Bengali people on credit and they then cultivate banana and pineapple on the Garo land”*. There are also cases where Garo land has been dispossessed. One of the Garo village heads told us that he had one acre of agricultural land but about 30 decimals of this had been grabbed illegally. Barkat et al. (2009a) report that around 202,164 acres of land has been dispossessed from among ten plain land ethnic minority groups.

Although during our FGDs, Garo participants reported that they received the same pay as their Bengali counterparts, Kamal et al. (2005) reported significant salary inequalities between ethnic groups and Bengalis. Other respondents from other minority groups indicated that they were the victims of discrimination, especially in relation to agricultural wages. In our research, we found that the CHT ethnic minorities were better paid than the plain land ethnic minorities. This could be the effect of location since daily wage rates are not the same across the country. It could also reflect different labour opportunities. Thus where ethnic minorities are able to cultivate their own agricultural crops, there tends to be a lower supply of labour looking for daily wage work. Many of the plain land ethnic minorities do not have agricultural land access and this forces them to take on wage labour. This in turn increases supply and competition, which enables employers to pay workers less. Finally it is important to note that higher agricultural wages in the CHT might also be one of the reasons Bengalis migrate to the CHT.

7. State-citizen relationships

The data collected from the different ethnic groups show that compared to other extreme poor Bengali households, extreme poor ethnic minorities face significant socio-economic barriers in trying to access social protection, health services and educational services. This gap in service provision may contribute to further entrenching and marginalising these communities socially and economically and makes the transmission of extreme poverty across generations more likely.

7.1 Social protection

Ethnic minorities living in Bangladesh are vulnerable and excluded. Plain land ethnic minorities have less chance to be included in social safety nets programme as they live near Bengali dominating areas. As there are only a limited number of social safety nets, preference is given to the extreme poor Bengalees. For example, during an interview with Mahali ethnic minorities at Tanore Upazila, one respondent said that *“despite being extreme poor I never received social safety nets from anyone as I am from an ethnic minority group. However, NETZ Bangladesh supports us to move out of extreme poverty”*. Gain (2011: 24) argues that ethnic minority people are “economically deprived, have less access to resources, are progressively losing their common land and other properties, and are falling victim to social, cultural and political exploitation, discrimination and harassment, and are constantly struggling for their survival”. Hossain (2011) identifies three key challenges for plain land minorities seeking to access social safety nets: (i) they are excluded from information, (ii) they are not considered politically important, and (iii) they suffer from an on-going cultural labeling as Adivasis and as such as “undeserving”.

7.2 The real cost of ill-health

Access to health services is easier in the plain land than the hilly land due to better communication facilities. Lack of access to health services has created higher health costs in the CHT. When interviewed, one Green Hill beneficiary told us *“I had to spend 2,000 taka for*

diarrhoea treatment for children. The diarrhoea started at midnight and we had to bring a local doctor for treatment from another village due to lack of adjacent hospitals/clinic or local village doctors”.

Findings from CHT ethnic minorities who were tracked in CMS5 revealed that poor facilities and remoteness, a lack of awareness of public health issues, an inability to meet treatment costs and a reliance on traditional medicine are the main causes of a deteriorating in the health status of CHT residents. Besides access, the lack of knowledge about health is also a major challenge. In the CHT many untreated illnesses lead to death. For example, one of our respondents told us his fifth daughter died at the age of 3 due to untreated worm infection. A year later his sixth daughter died after just 5 months for unknown but also untreated condition. It is unsurprising therefore that maternal and child mortality are high in the CHT, malaria is also endemic, and the availability of safe drinking water is scarce (CHTDF, 2014, Sayem, n.d). Plain land ethnic minorities have better access to health services than the CHT ethnic minorities because communication is easier and because there are a larger number of missionary hospitals in the plain land. FGD participants from Garo people said that they did not have problems accessing health services because of the support offered by missionaries.

7.3 Access to education

The lack of access to education is exacerbated by the fact that ethnic minority households have such vulnerable livelihood options. It is well-documented that there are high illiteracy rates in the CHT compared to the national average (Barkat et al, 2009b). According to the BBS (2011), the average literacy rate in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is 43.9 percent compared to the 51.8 percent national average. The Bandarban district has the lowest literacy rate (35.9 percent) compared to the other two hill districts (Rangamati at 49.7 percent, and Khagrachari at 46.1 percent). One elderly participant of a key informant interview said that years ago there were very few schools available, and those that did exist were located miles away from their home village. Nowadays school enrolment of children aged 5-16 years in the CHT is about 82%, but the dropout rate is as high as 65 percent (Barkat et al, 2009b). A lack of money as well as the remoteness of schools are the two main reasons that lead to dropout.

Access to education for the plain land ethnic minorities is easier than the CHT ethnic minorities. However, educational access varies across the country and it became clear during FGDs that Garo people living in Madhupur have greater educational facilities than other ethnic minorities living in Tanore Upazila. Again the availability of schools is a key factor as is the support offered in some places by missionaries.

8. Conclusion

This study analysed the experiences of ethnic minorities of Bangladesh. It depicts narratives of land dispossession, land related violence, reduced livelihood options, and narrow access to key social services. At the same time, it anchors the challenges faced by extreme poor minorities in broader political economy questions around identity and political recognition. As many ethnic minorities are not officially recognized as such, they face multiple discriminations. The study also reveals different experiences between CHT-based ethnic groups and plain land ethnic minorities. The CHT history has meant that it is now governed by a specific Ministry and a number of laws and political directives. This is not the case for plain land ethnic minorities who find themselves more surrounded by Bengalis and more easily slip off the policy radar. The conclusion of our analysis takes two forms. On the one hand, there is no doubt that there needs to be strong political will and Government commitment to improve the well-being of ethnic minorities across the country. Second, given the diversity of ethnic minority experiences, it is also important that the specific vulnerabilities of each ethnic minority are identified and suitable policy responses are formed.

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