



The Chittagong Hill Tracts
Life and Nature at Risk

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Amena Mohsin
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Philip Gain

Photography and Editing
Philip Gain

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The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing public understanding of ethnic issues, environment, development, multilateral development banks (MDBs) and human rights. Founded in 1993, the organization has researched and reported on forests, ethnic communities, human rights and contemporary environmental issues in Bangladesh. It has published a number of books, survey reports, monographs, other materials and produced two documentary films. 'The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk' provides insights on the people and nature in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Price: Taka 500 US\$ 20

Preface

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the southeast of Bangladesh and the only mountainous region of the country is unique and attractive. From the plains one is amazed to see the picturesque mountain landscapes. The hill indigenous people who are divided into at least 12 groups exhibit distinct and different cultures. With distinct cultural features these amazing, amusing, honest and always smiling people seem to be part of Nature.

But this mountainous region and its original inhabitants have undergone enormous assault and sufferings due to ill-conceived development initiatives and human greed. This book, **The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk** presents information, analysis and photographs to argue how the land, life and nature in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are at risk today.

The first article by Philip Gain gives an overview of the geography, people, land, economy, forest and human rights condition in the CHT. He describes how incidents throughout the past half-century have changed the CHT to such a great extent that it no longer remains in its original shape. Most of the hills, once covered with thick forests, lie denuded or covered with bushes and small trees. To many it is no more than a hill park. It is man who has caused enormous damage to this beautiful region. The Kaptai Lake and the polluted waters therein, the exotic species in the hills, the artificial villages of Bengalis, the shaved mountains and the military camps on them all tell the story of human interference which has broken the chain of nature and put life at risk. One can still be charmed by the spectacular scenic beauty of the Kaptai Lake and the mountain landscapes but this beauty cannot hide the catastrophe caused to the hill people.

Raja Devasish Roy, the chief of the Chakma, presents a precise description of the unique legal and administrative system that has no parallel in other parts of Bangladesh. Many laws that apply to the rest of the country have no manner of application in the region, and conversely, there are many laws that apply only to the CHT. His article will be of help for those who are yet to clearly understand how the CHT is administered.

Amena Mohsin, a long time researcher on the CHT tells how in the nation-state of Pakistan, the hill people were marginalized and remained alienated from the mainstream politics. In Bangladesh their efforts to establish constitutional safeguards—both peacefully and through arms struggle—have also failed. This is a reality full of agony and anger of the hill people.

Hill Women of the CHT are frank, humorous and publicly visible in contrast to their Bengali counterparts. They contribute enormously to the building of their families and communities. Meghna Guhathakurta, a careful monitor of the CHT, tells the story of women's vulnerability and suffering. The ethnic women, despite their contribution in building communities, are much less fortunate in possessing property. They are defenseless against various kinds of human rights abuse including rape.

Proshanta Tripura makes his point that 'development' in the CHT has always meant dislocation, disruption and destruction of life and nature. It is time for the development agents to understand the dynamics of culture and identity of the CHT people. His advice that attention to 'indigenous knowledge systems' is imperative for development of the hill people is worth heeding by the development agents.

One special feature of this book is use of photographs. There are not many books on the Chittagong Hill Tracts which contain images of people and nature. Fascinating photographs of people and landscapes of the CHT that exist have been taken mostly by the foreign photographers. However, not enough photographs exist on land use and change in landscapes. Photographs used in this book may be inspiring particularly for the local photographers.

This book intends to provide basic information on the Chittagong Hill Tracts and stimulate discussion around critical issues. The peace accord is a step forward for resolution of the situation, which had resulted in destruction and dislocation of life and nature. However, it will be a tough struggle to reconstruct the CHT and the faith of the hill indigenous people. Besides, new threats to land and life are in the making due to internal and external factors. We believe this book will be of some use in understanding those threats.

This book has been possible due to hospitality and assistance from the contributors, numerous hill people and generous support from Inter Pares of Canada and CORDAID of the Netherlands. Rumana Siddique deserves special thanks for her special assistance in editing language. Special thanks is also extended to Snigdha Emelda Tigga for her editorial assistance and patient proofreading.

We are aware that a careful reader will find many mistakes and inadequacies in this book. We will remain ever grateful to those who will send their remarks so that we can avoid repeating the mistakes in our future work on the CHT.

Philip Gain
Editor



Contents

Life and Nature at Risk 1-41

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is a unique territory of Bangladesh with mountains and beautiful landscapes. The region is also home to 12 amazing indigenous communities of mongoloid races. Philip Gain writes how both nature and life in the CHT are at risk today.



Administration 43-57

The CHT has a unique legal and administrative system that has no parallel in other parts of Bangladesh. Many laws that apply to the rest of the country have no manner of application in the region, and conversely, there are many laws that apply only to the CHT. Raja Devasish Roy analyzes the CHT administration.



State Hegemony 59-77

In the nation-state of Pakistan, the hill people were marginalized and remained alienated from the mainstream politics. In Bangladesh their efforts to establish constitutional safeguards—both peacefully and through arms struggle—have also failed. This is a reality full of agony and anger of the hill people. Amena Mohsin writes on the state hegemony and the CHT.



Women's Survival and Resistance 79-95

Hill women of the CHT are frank, humorous and visible in contrast to their Bengali counterparts. They contribute enormously to the building of their families and communities. But they are without property and defenseless against human rights abuses including rape. Meghna Guhathakurta reflects on the sufferings and struggle of the hill women.



Culture, Identity and Development 97-105

'Development' in the CHT has always meant dislocation, disruption and destruction of life and nature. It is time for the development agents to understand the dynamics of culture and identity of the CHT people. Attention to 'indigenous knowledge systems' is also imperative. Prashanta Tripura presents thoughtful analysis on culture, identity and development in the CHT.

Facts that Count for the Chittagong Hill Tracts 107-120



The Chittagong Hill Tracts

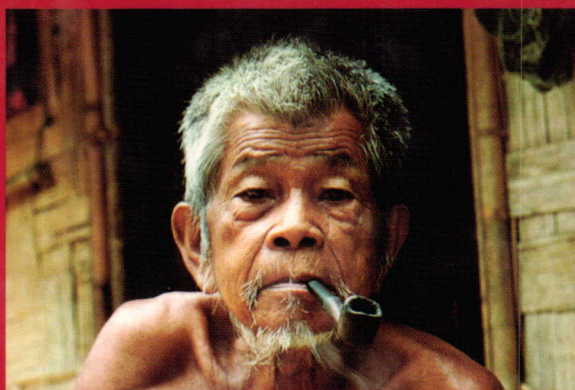
Life and Nature at Risk

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)—5,093 sq. miles in extent or 10% of Bangladesh—is a unique territory. While most of the country is flat and a few feet above the sea level, the CHT in the southeast is mountainous with beautiful landscapes. Its agricultural practices and soil conditions are completely different from the rest of Bangladesh.

However, once noted for its 'majestic natural beauty' the region has lost much of its original shape because of ill-conceived development initiatives and human greed. Most of the hills that were covered with thick forests, now lie denuded or covered with bushes and small trees. To many it is no more than a hill park. It is man who has caused such enormous damage to this beautiful region.

The region has also witnessed bloodshed, dislocation, disruption and destruction of life and nature in the name of 'development' because the hill indigenous people have asserted self-rule and control over local resources. The peace accord signed in 1997 has ended the bush war and has brought some relief to the region but the amazing, honest and always smiling hill people are still in a tough struggle to establish their legitimate rights. The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk presents information, analysis and photographs about how the land, life and nature in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are at risk.

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