

# The Chaks

## Life on the Fringe



Editing and Photography **Philip Gain**

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The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a non-profit Bangladeshi organization, was founded in 1993 to promote investigative reporting, engage in action-oriented research and assist people to think and speak out. *The Chaks: Life on the Fringe* is a monograph that contains a survey report on the socio-economic conditions of the Chaks and analytical articles and reports on different aspects of their life, culture, and struggle.

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## Preface

One of the very tiny indigenous communities—with less than 3,000 people—living on the fringe of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is the Chaks, concentrated in Naikhongchhari Upazila in Bandarban Hill District. Another four to five thousand of them live in Myanmar. There is no confirmed record of these beautiful people anywhere else in the world. No matter how small the Chak community is, they are distinct people with a language of their own and a gentle lifestyle. Walking through their villages you will not miss their smiling faces and the unique look of the elderly women who are distinguished by their large earrings that stretch and distort their earlobes.

Distinctively different from other ethnic communities in Bangladesh, this tiny Chak community used to live for centuries in remote forest villages undisturbed and satisfied with their traditional *jum* agriculture. But for the past few decades many changes, detrimental to their survival, have occurred around them. The Bangalis settled in their areas and others coming from neighboring localities have grabbed their land, cleared jungle, and introduced plantation economy that has put insurmountable pressure on them.

The biggest ever pressure on the Chaks and the resources they access come from the invasion of rubber and tobacco monoculture. Much of what used to be their traditional domain is now covered by rubber monoculture and tobacco. Land for rubber has been leased mostly to the outsiders who have little or no understanding or respect for the local ecology and people. Tobacco has been introduced into the precious pieces of flat land that the Chaks used for growing vegetables and other much needed winter crops. The consequences have been fatal for the Chaks. Their ecology has been damaged and social security threatened.

An example of the severe threat of eviction to the Chaks due to introduction of plantation economy is the Longodujhiri (Khal)

Chak Para. Under pressure from outsiders, the Chaks of this remote forest village had to abandon their homes. The Chaks of a few other villages are apprehensive about the same threat of eviction from their homes, land, and traditional agriculture.

We, at SEHD, came to know about the Chaks in our attempt to investigate the rubber cultivation and out of our predilection for the peoples indigenous to the CHT. We were stunned to see human induced disasters to nature around the Chaks habitation. We found the Chaks, their daily life, and their cuisine very unique and interesting. We found a small “nation” in the Chaks within Bangladesh. Then we decided to do a baseline survey on the entire Chak community to record their socio-economic conditions. However, in addition to the baseline information on the Chaks contained in this report, one will also find additional facts, anecdotes, and qualitative information to better understand the ecological disasters, their underlying factors, and threats to the Chaks. We hope this reports turns out to be beneficial to the environmentalists, human rights activists and readers in general.

Philip Gain  
Editor

## Acknowledgements

We are deeply indebted to the Chak community for making this publication possible. For years the Chak people of different villages have assisted us in collecting primary information and conducting a survey on their socio-economic conditions for which we had to visit the doorsteps of every Chak household. Everytime we visited their villages they warmly welcomed us in their homes, gave us protection, and entertained us with their unique cuisine.

While it is just not enough to thank the beautiful Chak community, we must mention a few names of individuals with gratitude without whom we would just be unable to know the community, conduct our investigations and complete the survey and this publication. These individuals include Dhung Cha Aung Chak, Mong Mong Chak, Ching Chala Chak, Ucha May Chak, Emong Chak, Hla Krain Chak, Mong Kew Ching Chak, Mong Chanu Chak, Cha Kra Mong, Thowai Cha U, Chaida Mong, Mong Cha Thowai Chak, AA Ching Chak, Vagoy Chak, Athweey Chak, and Yonai Chak.

For the household survey we relied on a group of young Chak who included Mong Fo Ching, Shagowy Chak, Uba Chai Chak, Mong Ku Che, Mong A Ching Chak, Thoai Cha Mong, Mawang Chak, and Chai Da Mong.

The SEHD staff who took the courage to travel to the Chak inhabited areas, some being quite remote and risky, are Lucille Sircar, Partha Shankar Saha, Shekhar Kanti Ray, and FMA Salam who also assisted the editor in checking facts, translating, organizing the photography exhibition and formulating the Chak declaration.

Jemma Harding and Brother Jarlath D'Souza are particularly thanked for their language edition assistance. Sabrina Miti Gain, a student of BRAC university, is thanked for translating the survey report in English.

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# The Chaks

A socio-economic survey of a tiny indigenous  
community of the CHT

*Report prepared by*

Khadiza Khanam and Partha Shankar Saha  
with Philip Gain

*Field surveyors:* Mong Fo Ching, Shagowy Chak, Uba Chai Chak, Mong Ku Che, Mong A Ching Chak, Thoai Cha Mong, Mawang Chak, Chai Da Mong, and Dung Cha Aung

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# The Chaks: Life on the Fringe

One of the very tiny indigenous communities, the Chaks—with less than 3,000 people—live on the fringe of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). They are concentrated in Naikhongchhari upazila in Bandarban Hill District. Distinctively different from other ethnic communities in Bangladesh, the Chaks have lived in remote forest villages for centuries undisturbed and satisfied with their traditional jum agriculture. But for the past few decades many changes detrimental to their survival have occurred around them. The Bangalis have been settled on their traditional land. These settlers and others coming from neighboring areas have invaded the land that they traditionally and freely used.

This monograph contains findings of a baseline survey on the socio-economic conditions of the entire Chak community and also facts, anecdotes, and qualitative information for a deeper understanding of their life, struggle, and ecological disasters on the fringe.



**SEHD**

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