


Land and Forest Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Raja Devasish Roy



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Raja Devasish Roy

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Preface

The ongoing debate on land and forest rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region adds to the growing empirical evidence of the intrinsic linkage between livelihoods, natural resources, and conflicts in mountain areas. The unfortunate history of conflict, its outcome, and the decades of suffering borne by the indigenous people of this region in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas remain largely undocumented. The peace accord of 1997 provides new opportunities to redress the past and to make a new beginning based on principles of equity and social justice.

ICIMOD has recognised the importance of culture, equity, and governance and has placed renewed and increased focus on this area by including the promotion of equality and empowerment of vulnerable mountain peoples to facilitate social security and reduced conflict as a major thematic programme area in its future strategic planning framework.

The proposed programme domain will address issues of gender mainstreaming, rights and access for marginalised people, cultural diversity and heritage, and the role of indigenous knowledge. We remain confident that these initiatives will enable us to make a significant contribution to achieving our institutional vision of prosperous and secure mountain communities committed to peace, equity, and environmental sustainability.

That this paper is being published during the International Year of the Mountains, which has recognised that conflicts in mountain regions have been showing an alarming increase, is timely. We hope that it will make a modest contribution to highlighting the issues and to providing a framework for the future that can bring peace and sustainable development to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

Anupam Bhatia

Summary

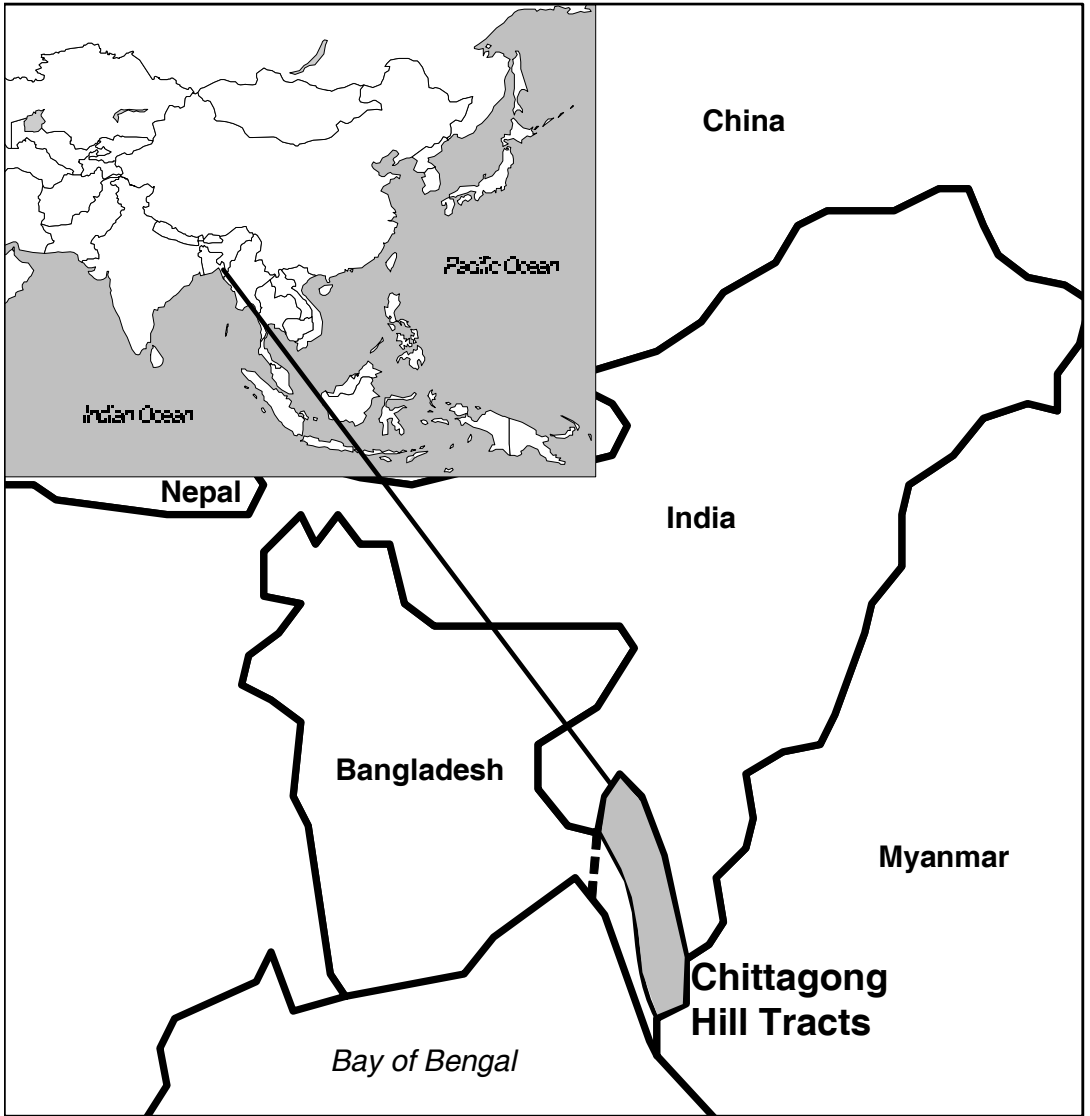
This discussion paper provides a sharp focus on competing claims and differentiated interpretations to land and forest rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The paper provides a historical perspective of the fallout of armed conflict on people and natural resources, and moves to capture the opportunities made available by the peace accord of 1997 in Bangladesh and the implications for competing interests related to livelihood-based resources that are manifested in the region in conflicts over land and forest rights. The author concludes that a comprehensive policy related to land and natural resources is imperative to ensure equitable and environmentally sound resource use practices in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BFD	Bangladesh Forest Department
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
DC	Deputy Commissioner
FDO	forest department official
HDC	Hill District Council
HKH	Hindu Kush-Himalayas
IDP	internally displaced people
ILO	International Labour Organization
JSS	'Jana Samhati Sami', largest party of indigenous CHT people, signed the Peace Accord of 1997
MOEF	Ministry of Environment and Forest
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PF	protected forest
PRF	private forest
RDC	Research and Development Collective, a research-oriented voluntary organisation based in Dhaka
RF	reserved forest
SAFHR	South Asia Forum for Human Rights, a research and advocacy-based voluntary organisation based in Kathmandu
SEHD	Society for Environment and Human Development, an environmental NGO based in Dhaka
SRDI	Soil Resources Development Institute
UPDF	United People's Democratic Front, party of indigenous CHT people which opposes the 1997 Peace Accord as being too weak on hill people's rights
USF	unclassified state forest

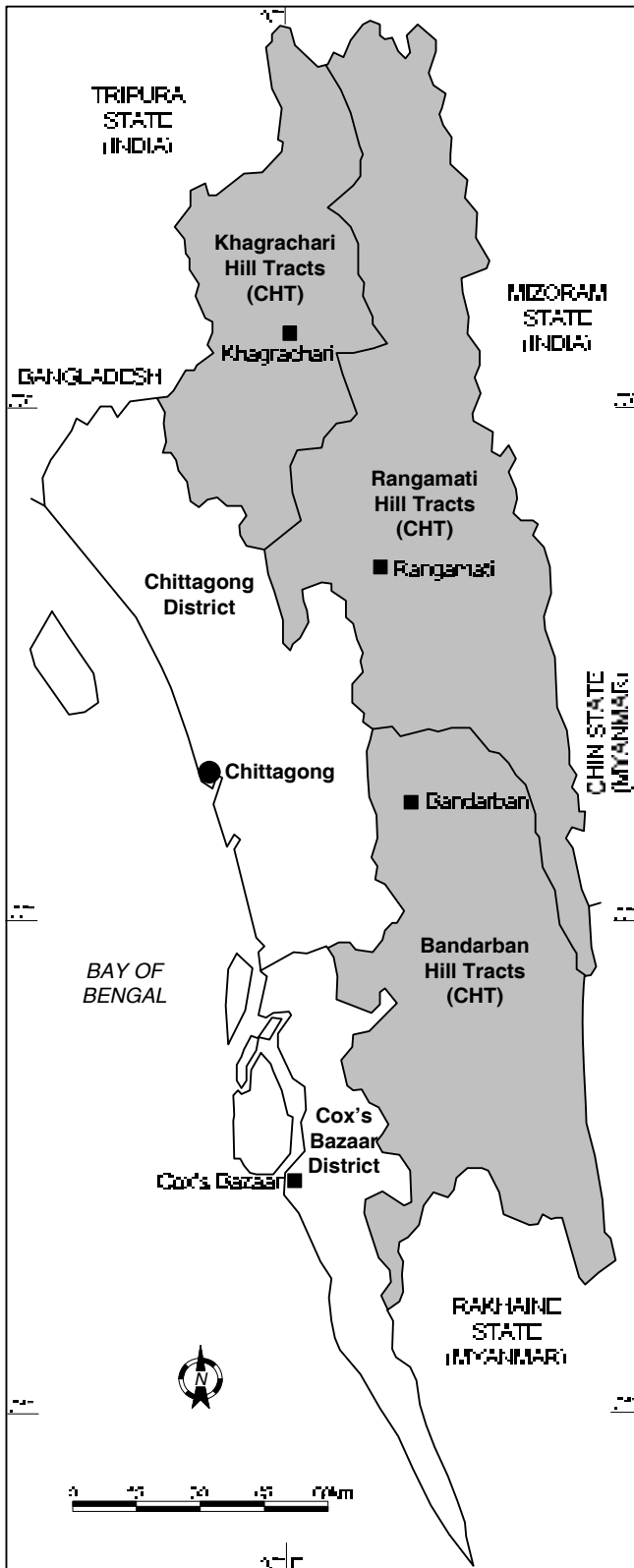
Glossary

jhum	Local term in the eastern Himalayas for swidden cultivation, also known as 'slash and burn' cultivation or 'shifting cultivation.' In south-east Asia, one of its variants is known as 'rotational agriculture'. It involves the cutting down and burning of vegetation. Planting is done by 'dibbling' a small hole with a blunt knife or dibble stick. Ploughing or hoeing, which loosens the soil and leads to soil erosion, is avoided. The crops are fed by rainwater and there is no irrigation.
khas	Public lands not registered in the name of any individual or corporate body, regarded by land administration officials as belonging to the state
mauza reserves	Village common forests outside of the reserved forests
swidden	Common term for slash and burn cultivation, particularly in SE Asia
protected forest	Administered by district collectorates; forest resources controlled and managed by the Forest Department; entry and use permitted unless expressly forbidden
reserved forest	Owned and administered by the Forest Department; no rights of entry or use unless specifically allowed
taungya	An innovative form of agro-forestry based upon the swidden or jhum method of cultivation, whereby "the forest service proposes to farmers that they use forest plots to grow seasonal crops in association with trees during the first years of a plantations' existence" (Kiriinya 1994). The plantation then reverts to the forest service (Forest Department), while the taungya farmers move on to other plots.
unclassed state forest	Partly forested land under the control of district collectorates, considered by indigenous peoples as their own forest and swidden commons



Location of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Districts



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Usui (Tripura) woman and child