

Chapter 1

Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Profile

1.1 Introduction

This Bangladesh country report is an outcome of research on land policy, land management, and degradation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the south-eastern extension of the Hindu Kush–Himalayan (HKH) region, commissioned by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in May 1998. The study looks at how policies have influenced land utilisation and management practices and to what extent such practices have contributed to land degradation.

Since the CHTs are different in some important ways from other regions of the HKH, the choice of four main areas of policy that affect land management posed some problems. As one enters into the complex reality of land use and management in the CHTs, it becomes increasingly clear how irresponsible development policies distort the traditional land management and land-use practices of a population group that is a minority on the national demographic map.

The other important exception one needs to take into account is the special characteristics of the CHTs with a distinct duality in many respects. The region is both hills and plains with forest and agricultural lands, inhabited almost equally by recently settled migrants from the plain and the hill people. They speak different languages and practise both plough and swidden cultivation for horticulture and agriculture. However, the most important element that distinguished CHT so long from the rest of the country is the Regulation of 1900 that was the instrument of administration until 1989 and, in essence, still effective in May 1998. What it actually means for CHT policy processes is a special status for the region. It also means that most national policies do not have any relevance for CHTs either in terms of enactment or participation in the policy-making processes.

For this work, the research team adopted a broad interpretation of land policy to include any policy taken by the state and other institutions that affected use and management of land directly or indirectly. Keeping the limitations in mind, five main policy

areas are discussed in the relationship between policy and outcome with regard to land use and land management in the CHT region in order to suggest improvements in land policy-making in the HKH region.

The report is organized as follows. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the geography, demography, and history of the CHT region. It is intended to highlight the specific reality of the CHTs within the nation state of Bangladesh. Chapter 2 presents the five key issues selected: property regimes and entitlements; forestry; agriculture; wildlife and national parks; and development projects; displacement, and resettlements. Chapter 3 deals with the overall national framework for directing development efforts with emphasis on sustainability and maintenance of the environment. Chapter 4 is a detailed discussion of people's property and the entitlement structure. Forest policy is discussed in Chapter 5. Wildlife and national parks are discussed in Chapter 6 and agriculture in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 deals with development projects, displacement, and resettlement of the hill people, while Chapter 9 deals with the issue of land degradation. Chapter 10 pulls together the main conclusions.

1.2 Geography

The eastern branch of the Himalayas, turning south and southeast through Assam and the Tripura states of India, enters the greater Chittagong district across the Feni River leaving a wide plain to the west to the sea coast in line with the eastern boundary of Noakhali district. The plain is wide in the north and becomes narrow towards the south. The ranges are covered with dense forest in successive waves of hills and hillocks; as they move east, a straight narrow range runs southward parallel to the coast with a wide plateau in between the two. The hill and forest areas of the greater Chittagong district were separated in 1860, and the district

of Chittagong Hill Tracts was created. The eastern range, which is an offshoot of the Himalayan branch, extends further east to Assam in India and the Myanmar border. This is now the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) district of Bangladesh. Its total area is 13,295 sq. km. (BBS 1995). The CHTs consist of three districts, namely: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. It lies between latitude 21° 25' and 23° 40' N and longitude 91° 55' and 92° 45' E. The CHTs are a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, with close proximity to India and China. They are also home to more than a dozen ethnic groups.

Geophysically, the CHT contain four major valleys formed by the rivers Feni, Karnaphuli, Sangu, Matamuhari, and their tributaries. These are the Changi Valley, Maini Valley, Rainkhiang Valley, and Sangu Valley. These valleys are 30–80 km in length and 2–10 km wide. They run parallel to the hill ranges stretching from north to south. The height of the hill ranges varies between a few hundred metres to over 1000 m. They are the oldest geological formation in Bangladesh. The rivers mostly flow over the basins and valleys in between the hills from north to south and at the final stage bend towards the west and empty into the Bay of Bengal. The valleys are highly suitable for agricultural and horticultural activities. Some flourishing trading and industrial towns have developed in the river basins. As the rivers of the area flow through steep slopes with powerful currents, they are good sources for generation of hydroelectricity.

Climatically the CHTs are situated in the humid tropical, evergreen rainforest zone. Rainfall induced by the monsoon averages 250 cm per year. The summer season stretches from March to June, and the average summer temperature is 30° C. Winter is between November and February with an average temperature of 20° C.

However, summer temperatures may rise to 40–42° C and winter temperatures may fall to 4–5° C.

Geographically, and in surface and soil condition, the hill districts are completely different from the rest of the country. When the country was divided into 19 districts, the CHTs used to be the largest district of the country (recently the country was divided into 64 districts).

1.2.1 Rangamati

Rangamati, the biggest of the three hill districts, has an area of 6,089 sq. km. The tribes of this district include the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tangchangya, Lusai, Pankoo, Khiang, and Murong. Khagrachari is in the north of the CHTs, with Bandarban in the south, Chittagong in the west, and Mizoram State of India in the east. The district has 2,318 sq. km. of reserve forest and 2,271 sq. km. of unclassified forest. The *thana(s)*¹ of the district are Rangamati Sadar, Kawkhali, Naniarchar, Langdu, Baghaichari, Barkal, Rajasthali, Bilaichari, and Kaptai. It has 49 unions and 164 *mouja(s)*².

1.2.2 Khagrachari

Khagrachari has an area of 2,590 sq. km. with reserve forest spread over 103 sq. km. and unclassified forest over 1,094 sq. km. Tripura State of India is to the north, while Chittagong and Rangamati are on the south, Mizoram State of India in the east and Chittagong and Tripura State in the west. The *thana(s)* of the district are Khagrachari Sadar, Dighinala, Paanchari, Mahalchari, Matiranga, Manikchari, Ramgarh, and Lakhmichari. It has 35 unions and 118 *mouja(s)*. The tribes of this district include the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura.

1.2.3 Bandarban

Bandarban has an area of 4,502 sq. km. consisting of 751 sq. km. of reserve forest and 2,125 sq. km. of unclassified forest. The *thana(s)* of the district are Bandarban Sadar, Ruma, Roangchari, Thansi, Naikhangchari, Alikadam, and Lama. It has 28 unions and 96 *mouja(s)*. Rangamati district is to the north, while Myanmar is in the south and east, and Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar are in the west. The tribes of the district are the Marma, Murong, Tripura, Tangchangya, Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khiang, Khumi, Lusai, and Panko.

1.3 Brief History

In 1760, Mir Qasim Ali Khan, the Nawab of Bengal, ceded the CHTs to the East India Company. The East India Company adopted a policy of non-interference with the internal affairs of the tribals, as it was satisfied with the taxes paid. However, in 1777, Chief Sher Daulat Khan, stopped paying taxes. The East India Company reacted by sending troops and a war of attrition continued until Jan Bax Khan, son of Sher Daulat Khan, yielded to Warren Hastings in 1785. Jan Bax Khan, at one stage of the conflict prohibited the entry of people from the plains, but the measure proved counter productive as the British rulers retaliated by stopping supplies of necessities from the plains. Jan Bax Khan was compelled to submit to the British authorities. During the tenure of Rani Kalindi (1832-1837), the British started interfering in the internal affairs of the tribals. As the British felt it expedient for administrative purposes, the area was separated from Chittagong in 1860 and named the Chittagong Hill Tracts' District. However, with the annexation of Lushai hill, the CHTs were demoted from the status of a district to the status of a subdivision. Raids by the Kuki tribes com-

¹ A *thana* is a sub-district

² A *mouja* is a revenue unit. It may or may not conform to an actual village.

pelled the British administration to bring in some administrative reforms and resulted in the enforcement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' Regulation of 1900.

The development and changes that followed the partition of India in 1947 have had serious implications for the hill people, particularly in the areas of land dis-possession and disturbance to their economic and cultural life.

In 1959, the indigenous police force was disbanded and officers were scattered. The Basic Democracy Order enforced in 1959 contributed to the militarisation of the CHTs. Formulation of the new constitution of Pakistan in 1962 also lessened the traditional power of the ethnic leadership, and a systematic but clandestine colonisation of the hills by Bengalis began. In 1964, president Ayub Khan of Pakistan abolished the 'special status' of the CHTs. Since then Regulation 1 of the 1900 Regulation—better known as the Hill Tracts' Manual—has enjoyed a peculiar status. It is not recognised under the constitution, but it has never been annulled. Between 1900 and 1964, the Regulation left customary tribal

laws and lesser civil and criminal powers with the chiefs and headmen. Among other things they could settle land disputes. With the abolishing of the 'special status', the ethnic leadership lost control over land, among other things. Since then, the land rights' situation in the CHTs has deteriorated with large-scale Bengali settlement, and the presence and power of the military increased.

1.4 People

According to the census of 1981, the population was 784,000. In the 1991 census the population was estimated at 974,200; an increase of 23.3 per cent. Of the total population of 1981, about 60 per cent were local tribal people. The remainder were mainly from other parts of Bangladesh with a steady flow of new settlers, mainly land-less rural people. The statistical yearbook of 1990 shows in-migrants of 20,008 in 1951, 50,513 in 1961, 90,849 in 1974, and 9,998 in 1981. The ethnic composition of the population has been important in deciding various policy issues; Table 1.1 shows the ethnic distribution of population in CHTs in 1991.

Table 1.1: Distribution of Population in CHTs by Ethnic Groups (1991)

Ethnic group	Total population (approx.)	Percentage
Bengali	500,000	50
Chakma	240,000	24
Marma	143,000	14
Tripura	61,000	6
Murong	2,200	2.2
Tanchangya	1,900	1.9
Byom	700	0.7
Pankho	450	0.35
Chak	200	0.20
Khang	200	0.20
Khushi	200	0.20
Lushai	120	0.12
Mro	66	-

Note: 20 per cent of the Bengali population in CHTs is temporary.

CHTs have the lowest population density in the country; combined together the population density is 210 persons per square mile (81 persons per km²) as opposed to the national average of 1,917 persons per square mile (740 persons per km²). The low population density gives authorities reason to draw the conclusion that there is land available; a proposition rejected by CHT tribal people and others who know that cultivable lands (especially

for rice, which is the staple in Bangladesh) are minimal in the hill districts compared to other districts of the country.

The literacy rate in 1981 in CHTs was a little lower than the national average (18% in CHTs, 19.7% for Bangladesh). The female literacy is far lower than the national average (8.5% in CHTs, 13.2% for Bangladesh), while the difference in the male literacy is negligible.

Chapter 2 Key Policy Issues and Reasons for Prioritisation

2.1 National Environmental Strategy

The Ministry of the National Environment Conservation and Environmental Control has announced that the government will provide more resources to the forest department to protect the forest resources.

terraced; this is hardly 0.4 ha for every 10 people.

2.3 Forest Policy

The CHTs are overwhelmingly a forest region. The Bangladesh Forest Department manages most categories of forests in the country.