

# three the peoples of the CHT

## Demographic Profile

The majority of the population of the CHT belong to eleven indigenous groups, the Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Marma, Mru (Mro), Pankhua, Tanchangya, and Tripura, and hence the region is formally classified by law as a ‘tribal-inhabited area’ (CHT Regional Council Act, 1998). Until 1964 it was constitutionally recognised as a ‘tribal area’ with a separate administrative and political status.<sup>3</sup> Each of the indigenous or ‘hill’ peoples has its own language, customs, and cultures. Together, the indigenous people were estimated in the 1991 official census to make up about 51% of the population of the region.



*Raja Devasish Roy*

Usui (Tripura) women

<sup>3</sup> Under the Government of India Act, 1919, the CHT was classified as a ‘backward tract’. The Act of India, 1935 changed this to ‘wholly excluded area’, which was retained in the 1956 Constitution of Pakistan. The 1962 Constitution of Pakistan changed the status to ‘tribal area’, but the CHT was removed from the list of tribal areas by the Constitution (First Amendment) Act of 1963.

Table 1: **Ethnic Composition of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Population (1991 Census)**

	Population in CHT	% of Total CHT Population	% of Total Indigenous CHT Pop.
<i>Bawm</i>	6,431	0.65	1.28
Chak	1,681	0.17	0.33
Chakma	239,417	24.60	47.92
Khyang	1,980	0.20	0.39
Khumi	1,241	0.12	0.24
Lushai	662	0.10	0.13
Marma	142,342	14.60	28.49
Mru	22,167	2.27	4.43
Pankhua	3,227	0.33	0.64
Tanchangya	19,217	1.97	3.84
Tripura	61,174	6.27	12.24
<b>Total Indigenous</b>	<b>499,539</b>	<b>51.30</b>	
Bengali	473,275	48.60	
Others	584	0.10	
<b>Total</b>	<b>974,445</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Revised estimate of 1991 Census from records of the Hill District Council, Comilla

Table 2: **Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts 1872 - 1991**

Census Year	1872	1901	1951	1981	1991
Indigenous	61,957 (98%)	116,000 (93%)	261,538 (91%)	441,776 (59%)	501,144 (51%)
Non-Indigenous	1,097 (2%)	8,762 (7%)	26,150 (9%)	304,873 (41%)	473,301 (49%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>63,054</b>	<b>124,762</b>	<b>287,688</b>	<b>746,649</b>	<b>974,445</b>

Adapted from Sukrawanby (1995, p. 35)

are believed to have excluded the refugees who at that time were sheltering in India. Leaders of various peoples, especially the Mru and Tanchangya, believe that their actual population is more than twice the figure mentioned in the census.<sup>4</sup> The electoral register suggests that this is more than likely to be true.

In terms of the topographical settings in which the majority of the people live traditionally, we may divide the hill peoples into two groups: the 'ridge-dwellers', namely, the Bawm, Khumi, Lushai, Mru, and Pankhua, and the 'valley-dwellers', the Chak, Chakma, Khyang, Marma, Tanchangya, and Tripura (Sopher 1964, pp112, 114). However, this is only a general trend. For example, different communities of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, today live in the uplands and highlands as well, while some Pankhua live at lower altitudes near river banks.

Bengali people first began to migrate to the region permanently in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their number has increased greatly since then, especially with the government-sponsored immigration from 1979 to the 80s. Table 1 shows the official figures for the CHT population by ethnic group in 1991 (1991 Census), and Table 2 the ratio between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations from census year 1872 to census year 1991. Table 2 clearly shows the phenomenal growth of the non-indigenous (overwhelmingly Bengali) population of the region.

The figures cited in Table 1 need to be treated with caution. In the opinion of various indigenous leaders, the figures for the indigenous population given in the 1991 census are a substantial under-estimate of the actual population. The Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s survey of 2000 came to the same conclusion. The figures for Chakma, Marma and Tripura

<sup>4</sup> This is based upon several talks in 2000 and 2001 with Sudatta Bikash Tanchangya, General Secretary, Tanchangya Welfare Association and Ranglai Murung, President, Mru Social Council.

## The Socioeconomic and Cultural Situation of the CHT Peoples

The indigenous peoples traditionally depended on swidden cultivation in conjunction with hunting, fishing, trapping, herding, and gathering for their livelihoods. Swidden cultivation, otherwise referred to as ‘slash-and-burn’ or shifting cultivation, is known as ‘jhum’ or ‘jum’ cultivation in Bangladesh and north-east India. In the swidden method, the land is cleared of all forms of vegetation except large trees, during mid to late winter. In the spring, the remains of the vegetation are set on fire. The ash acts as a fertiliser. With the onset of the first rains, small holes are dibbled into the ground and seeds of cotton, rice, pumpkin, melon, and other fruits and vegetables placed in them together. The time of harvest varies from seed to seed. As a soil conservation measure, especially on sloping lands, the soil is always dibbled and never hoed or ploughed. Swidden cultivation is also practised, especially by indigenous peoples, in various tropical or sub-tropical parts of Asia, Africa, and South America. Because of this tradition of swidden or jhum agriculture, which is shared by all the indigenous peoples of the CHT, some indigenous people of the region refer to the indigenous peoples together as Jumma. Then again, because these people live in a hilly region in contrast to the plains regions of Bangladesh, they are also called Pahari, hill people, or hillpeople (Roy 1996).

A growing section of the indigenous population has now taken to non-traditional economic activities such as sedentary agriculture with irrigation and mechanised and non-mechanised ploughing, market-oriented fruit and tree plantations, trading, fishing, and other vocations, including private and government jobs. High population growth, decreased access to lands due to the Kaptai Dam and government forestry programmes, educational progress, and growing integration with the market economy of the plains – and consequently the global economic system – is inducing



Jhum (swidden) field in Khagrachari district

Philip Grain



Raja Devasish Roy

Chilli peppers in a jhum (swidden) field

far-reaching occupational changes within indigenous society. There is a strong shift towards market-oriented occupations and increased instances of multiple-occupational patterns, a trend that is more than likely to continue in an accelerated manner in the near future (Roy 2000c, pp 101-105).

In addition to the hill peoples, a large number of Bengali people – who constitute the majority ethnic group in Bangladesh – also live in the region. The Bengalis were estimated to make up about 49% of the population of the region in 1991. They live almost exclusively in the river valley areas and avoid the uplands and highlands. Socially and economically, we may divide the Bengali population into three distinct groups, although there is some overlap between them. The older settlers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are predominantly wet-rice farmers or fisher people, with a few venturing into small trades; the vast majority of the descendants of the economic migrants of the last century are involved in trade and wage labour; and the government-sponsored settlers of the 1979-80s are largely plough farmers, fisher people, and wage labourers. Nowadays, the word ‘settler’ is generally used in the CHT to mean only the government-sponsored in-migrants of the 1979-80s, except by the group concerned.

In the lowlands of the region, most of the communities – both indigenous and Bengali – are settled agriculturists, engaging in wet-rice cultivation, wherever possible, along with fishing. In the lower uplands, plough agriculture is combined with swidden cultivation, tree farming, and horticulture, while the highlands are used almost exclusively for swidden cultivation, although tree farming is steadily growing, as is the market-orientation of the crops grown. Hunting, trapping, gathering, and animal-rearing is common for most indigenous communities in all parts of the CHT, although the herding of bison (*bos frontalis* or mithun) is restricted to the uplands and highlands (Roy 2000c, pp 81-87).

The indigenous communities of the highlands are generally more marginalised than those living in the valley regions in terms of access to land suitable for intensive cultivation and access to health, education, and other extension services. They also face more difficulties with regard to marketing of their farm produce and procuring commodities from market places. The spread of education has led to the growth of a political and economic elite that depends predominantly on jobs for its livelihood and lives mostly in the urban and peri-urban settlements. The impact of traditional customs is less marked among this section of the indigenous population. In the rural areas, village chiefs and elders are still influential among all the indigenous peoples of the CHT, although their influence is nowadays minimal in the towns and other urban and market centres. Most of the indigenous peoples in the CHT profess Buddhism, followed by Hinduism and Christianity. However, most of them retain various practices from their indigenous religions and faiths.



*Raja Devasish Roy*

Usui (Tripura) man, Reingkhong Reserved Forest

Women from the indigenous groups have far more social mobility than women in the plains districts, but that does not mean that their overall situation is less marginalised than that of plains women except with regard to social freedom. The workload of most rural indigenous women is extremely high as they have to tend to the farms, look after their children, and fetch water and firewood, often from far way as a result of deforestation and other ecological changes. Except in the case of some Marma, indigenous women do not inherit immovable property as of right. They are also severely under-represented in both the traditional systems and the formalised and elective regional and local government bodies, except in the case of union and municipality councils, where seats are reserved for them by law. Thus the situation of social, economic, and political disempowerment is a case for serious concern – both for Bengali and hill women (Halim 2002).



*Philip Grain*

A well stocked forest area in the Chittagong Hill Tracts