

## Impacts of Government Policies on Ecology and Tribal Community of Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh A Case Study

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***Abstract:** The environmental and social changes in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh is influenced by different government policies over the last 400 years. The pattern of government views and interests shaped the pattern of environmental and social changes in this area. The pre colonial government's interest was to ensure revenue and control over the land whiles the post colonial governments policies, including control and revenue, added some development thirst. None of these government policies successfully addressed the capability of local tribal communities' capacity to keep the ecological balance as well as to ensure development needs. As a result, the region witnessed a continuous deterioration of the tribal life style as well as ecological degradation.*

### Introduction:

Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh has gone through various political and administrative changes extending over several centuries. The importance of this region to political governments was reflected through different government policies. This paper will focus on the impacts of these policies on the local tribal people and the environment.

### Location of the Case Study:

CHT is located at the southeastern part of Bangladesh. It covers an area of 13,183 square kilometres, around 75% of which is heavily forested and largely inaccessible mountains (Levene, 1999; Rasul, 2007). It is surrounded by two Indian states, namely Tripura and Mizoram, at the north and north east; Myanmar at the south east; and Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts of Bangladesh at the west and south west. Two third land area of CHT is suitable only for forests, 15% for horticulture and only 3% for intensive terraced agriculture (Rasul, 2007; Mohsin, 2003). Twelve tribal groups (Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Bawm, Tanchangya, Kheyang, Pankhu, Chak, Lushai, Khumi and

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Rakhain) comprise the majority population in the area (Mohsin, 2003; Islam, 2003b; Rasul, 2007). These tribal communities live in forests; depend heavily on forest resources for their food and wellbeing (Mohsin, 2003).

#### Government Policies at Different Political Periods and Impacts:

Forest management system of CHT experienced changes at different political periods. Considering the major political shifts in this region, forest management can be viewed through four political periods. These are the Pre-colonial period (before 1760), Colonial Period (1760-1947), Pakistan Period (1947-1970) and Bangladesh period (1971- now on).

Pre-colonial period (before 1760): CHT was either ruled by the Arakans or by the Hill Tripura until 1666. The Mughals controlled the area from 1666 to 1760 (Islam, 2003b; Pearn, 1944). Whatever the regime, the mountain forests were under the authority of local tribal communities before 1760 (Edmunds & Wollenberg 2001). During this period land rights were based on customs and usage, and the forest resources were held in common by communities as a whole. Individual community members had specific rights on forest and land use whereas the community as a whole exercised the rights of access and use of common lands (Roy 1996). Individuals were allowed to collect firewood, fodder, timber and non-timber forest products. They had the rights of building home, hunting, fishing, raising livestock at the forests and grazing cattle on common lands (Mohsin, 2003; Guha 2001). Shifting cultivation (locally known as *jhum*), was the major way of producing crops at the available arable lands. They practiced slash and burn method in producing crops. However, when a particular plot of land was no longer in use (for example an old *jhum* or abandoned house), land rights were automatically transferred back to the community (Roy 1996; Khan & Khisha, 1970). Forest was managed under mutual understanding among the communities, which protected the forest from the encroachment of outsiders (Thapa & Rasul 2006).

Impacts: The adverse impacts of traditional tribal culture on forest before colonial era are not evident in literatures. It can only be assumed that the practices of shifting cultivation through slash and burn process could have some impact on the environment. But, while *jhuming*, the tribal people never cut the important tree species (Rasul, 2007). The intensity of human settlement was also small and isolated. Timber had no

commercial value due to lack of transportation and trading facilities. Moreover, the value of forest to the tribal community was huge as forest was a part of their life (Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007). CHT is believed to be a densely covered forest area before colonization (Lewin, 1869 cited in Rasul 2007).

Colonial period (1760-1947): The colonial period had two phases. From 1760 to 1860, CHT was ruled by the East India Company as representative of the British Queen. Company policy was only to collect taxes from the tribal chiefs. They did not bother about administration and forest management of this region (Levene, 1999; Serajuddin 1971). But to ensure control and regular flow of revenue income, they kept the region isolated through the policy of 'divide and rule', keeping the tribal people out of mainstream society and the economy (Barua 2001; Levene, 1999). In 1857, the British Government took over the direct administration of the Indian colonies from the Company. In 1860, the CHT was declared as a separate district (Mohsin 1997). The colonial government nationalized almost all the CHT forest in 1871. They divided the land areas in three categories; Reserve forest (RF) comprising of one third forest areas where all traditional rights of indigenous people were completely banned, remaining forest areas as Unclassified State forest (USF) and Khas land (government-owned fallow land). Forest Department controlled the RFs while the management of khas and USF land was under the responsibility of Deputy Commissioner (DC), representing the central government (GoB 1971; Roy 2002; Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007). The colonial government changed the traditional community controlled forest management by introducing 'Headman' system. Headman was selected jointly by DC and the Tribal King and was only accountable to its appointing authority (Rafi, 2001). Forest areas of CHT were commercially very important for the British rulers (Rasul, 2007). Forest extraction was encouraged to increase revenue from logging. Between 1862 to 1875, revenue earnings of the government from logging companies increased by 10 folds. To meet the growing demands of commercially important timber, government took initiative to plant teak trees in place of native trees and increase the areas of RF (Sivaramakrishnan 2000; Mohsin, 2003). Deforestation was also encouraged to meet the demand for wood for constructing railway tracts (Khan 1998; Damadoran 2005, Mohsin, 2003). Moreover, tea and tobacco plantation was introduced and patronised by the government during this period (Rasul, 2007).

Impacts: Changes in the forest management system during the colonial era broke the traditional practices of the tribal communities. The highly centralised system kept no room for local tribal people to exercise their rights on forests. The state became the absolute owner of land and forests. Their traditional forest rights were converted into privileges and were controlled and determined at the discretion of government officials (Islam, 2003a; Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007). As a result, indigenous people's traditional conservation responsibility started to disappear (Rasul, 2007). The forest became open to the outsiders. Loosing the rights, local people started to invade into the RF, uprooted the teak plants, and started illegal poaching and logging. Moreover, the flow of non tribal population started to increase in this region. As the tribal people were isolated from the mainstream culture and economy, local Bengali traders took the chance of getting close to the government officials for initiating timber business and thus started to live in these hilly region.

Teak tree plantation had an adverse impact on the forest ecology. Large forested areas covered with indigenous trees were deforested to plant teak tree (Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007). Although teak tree produced good commercial timber, it could not hold soil like the local trees and thus exposed the soil to sun and rain which ultimately caused soil erosion. Indigenous trees were not suitable for commercial timber but were a good source of food, firewood and medicine for the local tribal people. Moreover, the ecological value of these trees was enormous. Shrubby areas of the forest were cleared for tea and tobacco plantation, resulting further ecological damage to the forest. The dense forest lost important tree species which was important for its multi-purpose use to the local tribes (Thapa & Rasul, 2006).

Pakistan Period (1947-1970): The Pakistani government followed the same management policies they inherited from the British (Mohsin, 2003). In the name of integrating the region with the mainstream, migration of mainland people to this region was encouraged through different government policies. In the 1960s, the government abolished the special status of the CHT, thereby prompting a large-scale inflow of mainland people. Due to the importance of the forest resources of CHT; industries like paper, rayon, timber, pulp, plywood and match manufacturing were built in this region. Roads were constructed to facilitate extraction of raw materials from the remote forests. Moreover,

government built a dam across the river Karnafuli at Kaptai in the early 1960s to ensure electricity to these industries (Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007).

Impacts: The major ecological and economic disaster occurred in this region after the building of Kaptai dam. 40% of the cultivable low land was inundated; 100,000 people became homeless- losing their valuable land (Mohsin, 2003; Islam, 2003a). Kaptai dam failed to meet the energy requirements of this region but its adverse impacts still remains (Mohsin, 2003). Even the tribal people were not compensated for this loss (Levene, M, 1999; Islam, 2003a). Having no other alternative, jhuming was intensified at the forest lands causing huge amount of forest areas degraded. As the hilly lands were not suitable for sustainable jhuming, food production was adversely affected. Under the special status, immigration of outsiders was protected. But abolition of the status encouraged the flow of mainland Bengalis to this region. The population of the non tribal people jumped from 25000 to 120,000, between 1951 to 1961 (Adnan 2004; Islam 2003a).

The local tribal people were neither benefited from the industrialisation in terms of employment opportunity to non-agricultural sector, nor got the scope of trading. The Bengali traders controlled the supply chain of raw materials to the industries (Mohsin, 2003; Islam, 2003a). Some tribal people worked as labour under the Bengali businessmen; although most of the labour force was dominated by the Bengali workers. The industries used bamboo and soft wood as raw material (Mohsin, 2003) which were not commercially important during the colonial era. Extraction of such new products gave a new dimension to forest degradation.

Bangladesh Period (1971 to now on): After liberation, CHT gained special interest from the Bangladeshi governments for its strategic and economic importance (Mohsin, 2003). The ongoing insurgency in the north-east Indian states and in Myanmar increased the importance of CHT to the military planners. Forest conservation also got priority. In 1992, the government declared about 50,000 ha of additional forest land as RF, and 42,000 ha of unclassified state forest land was leased out to private entrepreneurs for rubber plantation and horticulture. Under the forest conservation policy Government banned the extraction of timber from RFs. At the same time high tax was imposed on import of timber. Such policy initiatives increased the demand as well as price of timber in the country (Huq, 2000; Adnan, 2004). Although the forest policies

recognized the necessity of local people participation in afforestation and reforestation programmes; it did not provide sufficient incentives for participation. Instead of mustering support from local people to protect and manage forest resources, the government enhanced regulatory and punitive measures to protect forests (Rasul, 2007). The flow of Bengali settlers continued to increase in CHT (Rafi, 2001). In 1978, the Bangladeshi Government implemented a resettlement programme in the CHT. About 25000 Bengali families were resettled in CHT unclassified state forest areas (Barua 2001).

**Impacts:** The impact on the local tribal people due to the government policy of resettling non tribal people at this region was enormous. Huge migration of mainlanders affected the tribal identity of this region. Moreover, tribal people were not benefitted from the conservation policies of the government; rather the settlers exploited the facilities. Loosing rights, identity and failing to compete with the dominant mainlanders, tribal communities started to protest against government policies. Such protest turned to armed conflicts during the beginning of 80's resulted in more government control and military action. More than 50,000 tribal people were fled away to India due to the military actions during 80's (Mohsin, 2003; Rasul, 2007; Islam, 2003a).

The policy of leasing out community forest lands for rubber plantation and other purposes led to an acute shortage of land and forests. Although government policies focused on conservation of forest, illegal logging was continued. Bangladeshi traders, nexus with forest officials, cleared huge forest areas. Excessive logging had not only destroyed the forests, but also led to further ecological damage. Removing protective vegetation exposed the soil to the monsoon rains and eroded rapidly resulting in landslides and the sedimentation of streams, rivers and the reservoir (Van Schendel et al. 2001; Mohsin, 2003).

#### Findings:

The major changes in the forest management system of CHT and corresponding impacts on the environment and culture of the tribal people over the four political periods can be seen as an influence of three policies; conservation, development and political. Conservation of forests in this region was initiated due to the economic value of forest products, particularly timber. Exploitation of the resources of this region always got prominence in different government policies. The local communities conserved the nature for a long period of time before the British rulers

invaded the region. Their own communal policies restored the ecology as well as ensured livelihood. It is evident from the policy implications that no 'community' level partnership was ever developed to address the environmental and economic issues in this region. The political regimes could not understand or emphasized on the interests and ability of the tribal communities in managing forests.

Development policies like construction of roads, building dam and industries reflected the intention of the governments about this region. The worldwide trend of building dam could have influenced the central government to build Kaptai dam. Moreover the economic value of the resources drove the other two development activities. None of these activities involved the considerations of the local communities effectively. The ultimate victim of the effects of these development projects were both the ecology and the tribal people. Although some development policies incorporated the necessity of compensating local tribal communities; a little was reflected in the implementation process. Such broken promises increased the distance between the governments and the tribal people, raising conflicts.

Colonial governments separated the local people to fulfil their economic policies and played the political game of separating the tribal community from the mainlanders for establishing control. Thus, the increased gap between the tribal and mainland people limit the scopes of building trust and partnership. Post colonial governments tried to control the region for both economic and political purposes. The migration policies of the post colonial governments were driven by both population pressures at the mainlands and establishing control over the region. Misunderstanding the lifestyles of the local communities and their involvement in 'anti-conservation activities' increased further gap, which might have influenced migration policies.

These three different types of the policies marginalized the local tribes in their home land. Population pressure, increased jhuming, logging, invaded plant species, commercial agriculture affected the productivity of the hilly lands causing economic marginalization. The ultimate result was the ecological marginalization of the forests.

### Conclusion:

Blaikie & Brookfield (1987) remarked '...rhetoric of conservationists concerning destruction of the tropical rainforests should not be decried, despite its hyperbole, for rhetoric is the language of politics' (pp 164), which is also applicable in CHT context. The necessity of conserving the forests through community participation has been suggested in different research papers to be a major way of mitigating conflicts and sustaining ecology of this region. Although, in recent past some policies were prepared highlighting the rights of the local tribal community; still such policies may not fulfil the purpose and initiate further conflict if the non-tribal settlers' interests are excluded. Further research may contribute in finding the 'checks and balances' of participatory policy processes among tribal communities, government and the non-tribal settlers to ensure the greenness and peace in this region.



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