

# The Position of Bengali Settlers in Development Dynamics: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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## Abstract

The paper portrays the positioning of Bengali settlers within the development dynamics of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The development ventures counteract several contested questions, such as land disputes, concerns related to the resettlement of Bengalis, the economic and political challenges facing ethnic minorities, the biased access to trade and tourism, and the unfriendly sociocultural relations. Besides, the inclusion of Bengali settlers as unwelcome guests through the resettlement program creates a counterproductive conflict and displacement politics between the government and the Pahari political groups, which situates the settlers in a disadvantaged position. The findings recognised that the social, political, and economic circumstances of the Bengali settlers are more subpar than those of their counterparts. The state and its agencies' mandates are a potential source of contention in terms of resettling internally displaced settlers in CHT. Since the settlers represent nearly a quarter of the marginalised communities, they seek equitable development initiatives that benefit all. The article theoretically examines the politics of development through the lens of the motives and the rationalisations of resettlement. Based on empirical research, the study employed an integrated approach to explore the everyday experiences of Bengali settlers living in the CHT, utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods to support the findings with empirical evidence.

**Keywords:** Settler Bengalis, Resettlement, *Pahari* ethnic minorities, Development policies, Marginality, CHT

## Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (Henceforth the CHT) is a region of diverse cultures and conflicting histories, where this picturesque landscape has become a frontline for deep-rooted tensions of the land distribution between the indigenous *Pahari* communities and the movements of Bengali settlers. Apart from the long-lasting conflict between the state and indigenous troops for identity and recognition, the local ethnic minorities, as well as permanent Bengalis, have currently been confronting a new readjustment of the resettlement scheme as part of development initiatives. The region, inhabited by eleven distinct ethnic groups collectively known as the *Pahari*, has undergone significant changes in its demographic composition, led by state-sponsored resettlement projects. These projects directly relocated a large number of poor Bengali-speaking Muslims from various

districts to the CHT to promote socioeconomic development for the marginalised and to adopt Bengali nationalism (Mohsin, 1997). Currently, there are three primary categories of people residing in the CHT: the *Pahari* ethnic minorities, the Adi Bengali communities, and the Bengali settlers. However, these arrivals of poor settlers have often instigated long-lasting conflicts of land disputes and resource distribution. Scholars on CHT issues (Shelley, 1992; Mohsin, 1997; Arens, 1997; Barua, 2001; Adnan, 2004; Siraj & Bal, 2017; Uddin, 2024) have noted that the outcomes of these settlement schemes by different ruling parties have destabilised the traditional social arrangement, intensifying tensions in

the coexistence of the *Adi Bengali*<sup>1</sup> and *Pahari* ethnic communities. These tensions have led to settlers being perceived as ‘unwelcome guests’ in the CHT. Few studies on Bengali settlers have shown that many Bengali settlers have become victims of the entire development process, particularly those in the Bengali Cluster Villages<sup>2</sup>. As citizens of the country, they have equal rights; however, they are often treated as second-class citizens in the CHT. In recent years, the government policies and most of the development projects of the International Donor Agencies & NGOs in CHT have been based on ethnic minorities. In contrast, they turn a blind eye towards the settlers’ plight. However, the Bengali settlers have been going through various forms of struggles, ranging from economic hardship to the politics of existence in the CHT due to ethnic tensions and armed conflict between the state and ethnic armed troops. Given the context, the study explores the development dynamics and the positioning of Bengali settlers in CHT. The paper also attempts to identify the types of development initiatives undertaken by development agencies and the primary beneficiaries of these processes. It is evident that, following the ‘CHT Peace Accord,’ successive governments and international agencies have provided financial support for the betterment of ethnic minorities in the name of CHT development. The question of a one-sided development process has been raised by the humanitarian agencies, political parties, and permanent and settler Bengalis, creating ‘two antagonistic categories’ (Siraj & Bal, 2017). The ongoing tension between ethnic minorities and Bengalis breeds a palpable tension that not only stirs conflict but also destabilises the community as a whole. This strained relationship highlights the urgent need for

understanding and collaboration, as unresolved issues can escalate into significant challenges that impact everyone’s well-being. Addressing these tensions is essential for creating a harmonious and stable environment where all groups can thrive. Furthermore, the study aims to address the recurring state of Bengali settlers within the broader socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of the *Pahari* ethnic groups in CHT. This paper also examines the Pahari perceptions of Bengali settlers, while exploring how these settlers view other ethnic groups, thereby shedding light on the complexities of inter-ethnic relations in the region.

During the nineteenth century, only tribal chiefs had their own land, and the Bengalis became sharecroppers. In the wake of the division of British India in 1947 on religious lines, the refugees from India were settled in higher proportions in the CHT. In addition, the Government of Pakistan pursued a heavy-handed policy of mainstreaming the region through economic and development programs for the country as a whole (Shelley, 1992). The government set up several industrial plants (e.g., Karnaphuli Paper Mill) in the region without considering their downsides. Many non-Paharis from outside the region were hired to run the plants. As a result of these policies, the period experienced a substantial increase in Bengali migration to the CHT (Rafi & Chowdhury, 2001). Moreover, the abolition of special status as an ‘excluded area’ according to the 1900 manual opened up the CHT for outsiders in 1964 (Adnan, 2004). Eight years after Bangladesh’s independence, President Ziaur Rahman presided over a secret meeting in mid-1979 and decided to settle 30,000 Bangladeshi families during the following year (Adnan, 2004). The government launched a policy for the first time, which might be

<sup>1</sup> By *Adi Bengali*, I mean here the Bengali population living in the CHT long before the migration initiated in the 80s.

<sup>2</sup> By the term ‘Cluster Village’, I have referred to the place where Bengali settlers were living. The Cluster Villages were formulated by the military during the insurgency period. Most of the cluster villages were constructed during 1979-1983 when conflicts between the military and Shanti Bhahini (SB) were peak in position. When the military saw that, there were many

Bengalis who were killed by the bloodshed suffering sudden attacks by SB, and there were no alternatives without returning them to a safe zone. The military created Cluster Village as a safe zone for the Bengalis. All the Bengali settlers were gathered into these Cluster Villages with many other Bengalis. The military increased its forces around the Cluster Villages. In that process, the cluster villages were formulated for the Bengali settlers.

described as ‘internal colonisation’ on a limited scale, by settling non-tribal Muslim families in the area. The then Government provided them with rations of rice, *Khas* land,<sup>3</sup> Money, and shelter (Arens, 1997; Anti-Slavery Society, 1984). The second phase was initiated in August 1980. Under the second phase of the plan, each family received either five acres of hill land, four acres of mixed plain and bumpy land, or 2.5 acres of wet rice land<sup>4</sup> (Arens, 1997). In July 1982, the third phase of settlement was authorised, under which an additional 250,000 Bengalis were relocated to the area (Mohsin, 1997). These numbers reflect the ongoing commitment to demographic management throughout different political contexts. However, in 1947, the Pahari peoples constituted 98 percent of the total population of CHT, whereas the Bengalis were less than 2 percent, and this proportion increased to 51 percent by 2022 (Barua, 2001; B.B.S, 2022).

Regardless of the total population of Bengali settlers in the CHT, it is essential to acknowledge that the settlement plan presented a valuable opportunity for these individuals, who were facing economic challenges in the plains and were motivated to seek a new and improved life in a different environment. This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental motives behind resettlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and examines the subsequent impacts, thereby unveiling a paradox inherent in development initiatives.

## Literature review

### Resettlement within the paradox of development

The literature on resettlement and the development paradox in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh delineates the complex interplay of

historical, political, and socio-economic tensions that have significantly influenced the region’s dynamics since colonial times. This paper theoretically examines the paradox of development through the lens of the motives and rationalizations of resettlement. It seeks to conceptualize how development discourses (Escobar, 1995; Crush, 1996) counteract the lived experiences of human resettlement issues within ethnic communities. Additionally, it explores the role of the resettlement program as a tool for political and economic restructuring in the CHT. Furthermore, the leading literature on the CHT (Shelley, 1992; Mohsin, 1997; Arens, 1997; Barua, 2001; Adnan, 2004; Chowdhury, 2016; Datta, 2018; Siraj & Bal, 2017; Uddin, 2024) merely concentrated on the Bengali resettlement as part of state policy aimed at marginalising the Pahari inhabitants of the CHT, neglecting the rights and entitlements pertaining to the people’s mobility, settlement, and resettlement within the boundaries of Bangladesh. Additionally, within the broader scope of local development processes, the settlement of Bengali populations has consistently been portrayed with a notably negative connotation, thereby restricting the development dynamics of the CHT. These studies highlight an interesting paradox: while resettlement programs are typically seen as tools for development and fostering national unity, they often lead to unexpected issues like displacement, inequality, and conflicts. The existing research also shows a clear need for more detailed studies to better understand what influences Bengali settlement patterns and how development unfolds in the area. To address this, a thorough review of various studies was carried out, aiming to explore and shed light on these important questions. For instance, *Ethnicity and National Integration in Bangladesh: A Study of the Chittagong*

<sup>3</sup> *Khas* land refers to the Government’s own land. The government has in its possession vast areas of land in the CHT. These were called *khas* land, as were huge areas of land, originally belonging to government estates. However, Paharis seemed to think that the lands are common land or community land in CHT.

<sup>4</sup> three categories of land existed in CHT. Category 1: Plain land or wet rice land, Category 2: Plain and bumpy mixed land, Category 3: Hilly land. The government

offered land to the landless Bengali households who would like to settle in CHT that they would get different categories of land according to their choice. If a selected household was given a choice for first category land, then the household would get 2.5 acres of land; if the choice was for category 2, then it is for 4.00 acres of land and given the choice for Category 3, it ultimately meant for 5.00 acres of land, which was the distribution system of land for the Bengali settlers.

*Hill Tracts* is a renowned research book by Barua (2001). In this book, the author attempts to explore real-life scenarios of the ethnic groups, as well as the Bengali settlement and internal colonization process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In his survey among a cross-section of ethnic minorities-students, teachers, intellectuals, professionals and political activists-reveals the following major obstacles in the way of national integration in the CHT: non tribal settlement, deployment of army and its atrocities, denial of political rights and economic interests, threat to their religion, culture and language, and splitting of CHT into three districts. He also focused on Ethnicity and National Integration, where he mentioned that ‘how to integrate the ethnic minorities peacefully into the mainstream of national life without resorting to further violence’ is a vital question. His work has attempted to answer this question. Barua also explained the socio-economic conditions of ethnic groups, including their population, practices, and rituals, as well as their political system and the actual conditions of both settlers and minority groups. ‘Towards an Alternative Idea of Nation’ Amena Mohsin’s landmark work (1997) attempts to explain this concept in her well-known and frequently cited book-*The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. She notes that, initially, there is no single or universally accepted definition of a nation. This idea has evolving connotations; therefore, to make it functional, it must be recognized and redefined from the start. However, Amena Mohsin’s 1997 book is a pioneering work for understanding the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its people, politics, land disputes, relations between the Pahari and Bengali communities, and nationalism. Additionally, one of the main analyses in her book is the politics of development and Bengali settlement in the CHT, where she explains the pattern, process, and historical background of Bengali settlement. ‘Understanding of human rights violations in the CHT’ is a key aspect of Mohsin’s writings. She has analyzed that, in addition to the militarization and complete control of CHT, the military has also committed serious human rights violations in the region. The book was beneficial for understanding the government’s stance on the Bengali settlement in CHT, land distribution among settlers, the concept of

Khas land, and the total land in CHT. *Counting the Hills: Assessing Development in Chittagong Hill Tracts*. This book is edited by Rafi and Chowdhury (2001). One of the authors, Mohammad Rafi, has provided an introduction to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, offering extensive information on its geographical location, topography, climate, administrative system, religion, literacy, and socio-cultural activities among the selected Pahari groups. In this book, the authors have focused on Immigration and political development history, Land ownership and Cultivation, Water and sanitation, health-seeking behavior, and other related issues of CHT. Of course, some studies on the economic problems and changing trends in the region were also conducted during this period. Finally, after the liberation of Bangladesh, studies on the politics and culture of the region have been carried out. Mohammad Rafi mentioned that their study was considered different from the initial ones in two distinct ways. First, it adopted a survey method that covered the necessary extent to provide a representative picture of the societies in the region. Second, the study compared the ethnic groups in terms of social, demographic, educational, economic, health, and environmental variables, thus estimating the relative status of different ethnic groups in the region. Nasreen (2017) has presented some important issues in her Ph.D. thesis, entitled “*The Indigeneity Question: State Violence, Forced Displacement, and Women’s Narratives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.” In her research, Nasreen has discussed how indigeneity is conceived and shaped by academics and scholars in different countries and by international agencies. In Bangladesh, this discourse has been a part of a colonial legacy and semantic politics. However, she has examined the experiences of forced displacement arising out of decades of militarization and land grabbing perpetrated by the Bangladesh Army and Bengali settlers on the indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Her research findings have provided an opportunity for the present study to determine the notion of violence against the hill women and state violence and forced displacement due to violence.

Haque (1998) has conducted one of the most significant studies on the crises of national identity and the integrity of selected ethnic groups in Bangladesh, Sri

Lanka, and India. In *‘Ethnic Insurgency and National Integration: A Study of Selected Ethnic Problems in South Asia,’* Mahfuzul describes the organizational structure of these groups and their struggles for self-determination, along with other relevant issues. Willem et al. (2001) have described the Chittagong Hill Tracts as an out-of-the-way, unusual, and little-known district of Bangladesh. The idea behind this book was to take a serious look at its photographic record and to demonstrate how helpful photographs can be in constructing long-term historical accounts of the area. The stories suggested by the material in this book are, however, of much wider interest than local. They show that there is more to the history of the people living in Bangladesh than the two state-centered, nationalist narratives that have dominated the scene for so long. These narratives, which we have dubbed ‘the struggle for Bengali nationhood’ and ‘the emancipation of the Muslim’, have covered up a multitude of alternative histories. Moreover, they have discussed the ethnic traditional administration as well as the colonial aristocracy in CHT. Pictographic presentation was an additional dimension of their book *“The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland”*. They presented many interesting aspects, including the religions of the hill people, the destruction of nature, and the implementation of development on the hill. Additionally, they provided an overview of the state’s stance regarding the hill people. Overall, the authors’ findings provide valuable insights for the present study. Eriksen (1993) attempted to develop a clear conception of ethnicity in his book *‘Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives’*. An attempt has been made to draw connections and interrelations among the concepts of ethnicity, race, nation-state, nationalism, and class. He has clarified that ethnicity refers to aspects of gain and loss in interaction and in the creation of identity. Thus, in addressing this issue, it is understandable that ethnicity has both political, organizational, and symbolic aspects. Ericson has reduced this concept to the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders, but these distinctions are again constituted through social contact. Another significant issue is ethnic stigma, where it is a fact that many interethnic relations are highly

asymmetrical regarding access to political power and economic resources. He also explained the ethnic relations and ethnic identities, which helped to understand the Pahari-Bengali relationship and their identity in the CHT. Gain (2000) has edited the writings of several scholars in his edited book, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk*. In this book, Gain gives an overview of the geography, people, land, economy, forest, and human rights conditions in the CHT. He describes how incidents throughout the past half-century have altered the CHT to such an extent that it no longer retains its original shape. Most of the hills, once covered with thick forests, are now denuded or covered with bushes and small trees. To many, it is no more than a hill park. It is man who has caused enormous damage to this beautiful region. The Kaptai Lake and its polluted waters, the exotic species in the hills, the artificial villages of Bengalis, the shaved mountains, and the military camps on them all tell the story of human interference that has disrupted the natural balance and put life at risk. Raja Devasish Roy has presented a precise description of the unique legal and administrative system that has no parallel in other parts of Bangladesh. In his writings, many laws that apply to the rest of the country have no manner of application in the region, and conversely, there are many laws that apply only to the CHT. His article has helped clarify how the CHT is administered in the present study. Tripura (1992) raised important issues in his article titled *“The Colonial Foundation of Pahari Ethnicity,”* published in *“The Journal of Social Studies”* at the University of Dhaka. He explained the concept of the development of the hill people. In this context, he posed several questions, such as the meaning of development for different individuals, groups, or institutions; the appropriate development approach for the people of the CHT; and how and by whom these development projects should be planned and carried out. In the study, he emphasized the need for the ‘local’ people to be involved in all stages of the development process carried out by the government, local NGOs, international funding agencies, and others. While this was important, his study highlights the need to understand the concept of development, yet he did not pay enough attention to the resulting displacement. Mahmud (2015) has explored the dynamics of interrelationships among the different

ethnic communities of the CHT in his Ph.D. dissertation, “Dynamics of Interrelations among the Bengali, Chakma, Marma, and Tripura Ethnic Communities of Chittagong Hill Tracts: Understanding the Nature of Ethnicity and Identity.” The primary concern of this research was to address the nature of ethnicity and identity of CHT people, and this has been displayed through their three aspects: i) religious, ritual, and cultural festivals, ii) political relations, and iii) economy and market sphere. Arif Mahmud has aptly pointed out that the history of the Bengali settlement in the study villages, as well as in the CHT, is complex. Historically, two factors have been identified as contributing to their settlement in the villages/paras (and also in the CHTs): the exchange of commercial materials and the development of Chittagong port, along with the expansion of the city to facilitate this exchange. Overall, Arif Mahmud’s findings have provided significant input to the present study, particularly in understanding the ethnicity and identity of the CHT people. In summary, existing literature offers a robust foundation for analyzing ethnic divisions and recognizes the common vulnerabilities experienced by all marginalized groups within the CHT. Key themes encompass the historical processes of internal migration and Bengali settlement, the dynamics of ethnic conflicts and land disputes, and an interpretation of resettlement as a complex and politicized process.

## Methodology

### Study area

The study was conducted in the Khagrachari Sadar and Panchhari upazila areas of Khagrachari district within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The region is distinguished by its ethnic, cultural, and ecological diversity and is situated in the southeastern part of Bangladesh. The total area of the CHT is approximately 13,184 square kilometers, constituting about one-tenth of Bangladesh’s total landmass (Rafi & Chowdhury, 2001). It comprises three districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. Geographically, the CHT can be categorized into two primary ecological zones: hilly valleys and agricultural plains. The Indian states of Tripura border the region to the north and Mizoram to the east. Myanmar lies to the south and east, while the Chittagong district borders it to the west. The CHT is inhabited by eleven ethnic groups alongside the Bengali

population. These groups include the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Pankhua, Khumi, Lusai, Mru, Tanchangya, Bawm, Khyang, and Chak. Each ethnic group exhibits distinct characteristics in language, customs, religious beliefs, and socio-political organizations. Nevertheless, the present study categorizes the inhabitants of the CHT into three broad groups: the first being minor ethnic groups, collectively known as Pahari. The second group comprises the Adi Bengalis, who have resided in the region for generations, originating during the British colonial period prior to the significant migration of Bengali families. The third group consists of Bengali settlers, who migrated from the plains in accordance with government policies and sponsorship programs.

There are eight important places (in terms of respondents) for conducting fieldwork, namely– Shalbon Gucha Gram, Comilla Tila Gucha Gram, Shaat Vaiya Para (Marma), Haduk Para (Tripura), Narayn Khaiya and Upali Para (Chakma), of Khagrachori sadar area, and Ultha Chari, Zia Nagar of Panchari Upazila areas. The selection criteria for the specific paras and villages in this study were based on several key factors. First, these areas host the target population, including many Bengali settlers. Second, the sites are identified as ‘Cluster Villages’ and are located within the Khagrachari Sadar and Panchari Upazila regions. This strategic choice allows for direct community engagement and enables the research to explore the vibrant social and cultural dynamics in these densely populated areas.

### Methods applied and justification

This study embraced a micro-scale empirical approach, enriched by thorough fieldwork. By effectively integrating both primary and secondary data sources, we employed a mixed-methods strategy that leveraged qualitative and quantitative techniques to ensure a robust analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This intertwining of methodologies enhances the depth and reliability of the findings, paving the way for insightful conclusions. The methods employed with the respondents in the field were carefully selected to enhance understanding of the inter-ethnic relations. I conducted unstructured interviews, organised focus group discussions (FGDs), explored life histories, analysed case studies, and carried out key informant interviews. These approaches allowed

for a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the subject matter. Primary data were systematically collected from a diverse array of individuals and knowledgeable key informants regarding the Bengali settlers and ethnic groups in the CHT. To strengthen the overall findings, specific insights were supplemented through targeted case studies. The methodological framework was constructed around several critical issues, including settlement processes, cultural assimilation, development dynamics, behavioural patterns, cultural diversity, and a strong emphasis on ethical considerations throughout the field study. This comprehensive approach aims to enhance our understanding of the complex social landscape in the region.

In the current research, I employed the closed and intensive observation method, which involved observing subjects while they actively engaged in the situation and maintained close contact with the individuals being observed. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the local community. Conversely, during the field study, I recognized that a challenge of this method is the occasional resistance from the community that is observed. The research assistants from the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities successfully addressed this challenge through their expertise and collaboration. Throughout the fieldwork, meaningful interviews were conducted with individuals from five diverse communities, capturing their voices in various settings—including at home, in bustling tea stalls, at commercial territories, in vibrant marketplaces, and even in offices. This approach facilitated rich verbal interactions, enabling the discovery of profound insights and perspectives that truly reflect each community's essence. For the purpose of the comprehensive field study, the current research has conducted in total 120 in-depth interviews with respondents from various categories. The respondents were selected through meticulous sampling. Specifically, 40 interviews were conducted with Bengali settlers, 20 with Adi Bengali respondents, and 60 with Pahari communities, proportionally distributed as 21 Chakma, 19 Marma, and 20 Tripura individuals. Furthermore, the study has conducted interviews with five (5) key informants from five different ethnic groups within the CHT. The key informants were selected by

individuals who possess social positions and specialized knowledge about the local populations that is more extensive, detailed, or privileged than that of ordinary residents in the study areas.

To gather this valuable information, five meaningful Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with various community groups, creating a lively and inclusive conversation that highlights the voices and experiences of those most impacted. Using the life history approach greatly enriched the process of collecting genuine stories, helping to authentically represent the interactions and experiences of Bengali settlers with other communities. The study employs five case studies to obtain a complete and detailed account of a social phenomenon involving individuals, families, communities, institutions, and events. It helps to understand both the personal and hidden dimensions of human life. The case studies help retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events—such as individual life cycles and small group behavior. Both primary and secondary data were subjected to meticulous processing to facilitate statistical analysis, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, complemented by comprehensive observation. The methodology adopted in this research is distinguished by its rich, empirically grounded, and comprehensive data collection, supplemented by secondary data obtained from an extensive literature review concerning the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). When I mention a mixed-method approach, it denotes the integration of primary and secondary data.

## Findings and discussion

### The current picture of the Bengali (settlers) settlement

At the heart of the CHT issue lies the critical conflict between the Bengali settlement and the unjust dispossession of *Pahari* land. The minority groups have been alienated from their land through a state-sponsored project of the settlement of Bengalis into the hills. The Bengalis are people who have migrated internally to the hills in search of employment, as well as farmers and traders. According to the study, out of 120, only 40 are Bengali settlers. Among them, settler households reported that more than 22 percent of the total settlers came from the Chittagong District. Another large number of households came from the Noakhali district,

which accounted for approximately 20 percent of the total number of Bengali settlers' households. Approximately 17.5 per cent of the households also came from the Comilla and Mymensingh districts to the CHT. The lowest number (10 percent) of households came from the Sylhet district, and 12.5 percent were from other districts where people had settled in the CHT. It is important to note that, although the study observed 60 Pahari households, 32 households (53.33%) reported that they were not migrants. As they mentioned, they have been living in the CHT for countless generations; moreover, they are the firstborn of the CHT. Over the years, more than 87 per cent of Bengali settler families were housed by the government. Among them, 12 percent of households reported that they were settled in the CHT by relatives who had already established themselves there. No settlers were found who had settled in the CHT through service or business. Some Bengali settler families who were brought to the CHT by relatives insisted that their relatives had informed them that there was vast *Khas* land (government-owned land) in the CHT and that it was an excellent opportunity to settle there. They admitted that we did not delay for the government's second scheme settlement; we went to CHT and lived with the help of our relatives. However, during an ethnic insurgency between the military and the SB (*Shanti Bahini*) in 1977, the military rearranged Bengali settlers and shifted them into the Cluster Villages. The settlers left their houses and land, which had been allocated to them by the government. Due to unavoidable circumstances, Bengali settlers were informed that most households were poorer for having received a settlement opportunity in CHT. Almost 56 per cent of Bengali settler households reported that, as of now, their overall conditions in the CHT were good; however, they had lost many things that constituted their lives. On the other hand, the least number (17 percent) of households reported that they are as they were before. Some (27 percent) Bengali settler households also reported that their conditions had not changed in comparison to before the settlement. Only 17 per cent of households mentioned that their living standard was better than in previous times. Therefore, it is clear that

Bengali settler households were not in a better position by getting the settlement opportunity in CHT. Nevertheless, the Bengali settlers mentioned many reasons why they agreed to settle in the CHT.

In Bangladesh, out of its total population of 11 million people, 6.18 million rural land-poor households belong to the categories of functionally landless (0.5-0.49 acres) and marginal (0.5-0.99 acres) farmers (Sobhan, 1991). In such a 'land hungry' situation, the settlements were bound to be popular with the Bengalis. It is understood that the government's primary motive in making this move is to colonise the CHT by inducing a demographic shift in the region (Ali, 1993, pp. 189-190). In terms of settlement, the government's perspective differed. The government's arguments (Mohsin, 1997) mentioned are as follows:

a) Bangladesh is an overpopulated land. The population density in the plain in 1980 was 1400 persons per sq. mile. On the other hand, vast tracts of the land in the CHT were lying empty;

b) The people of the hills are averse to developmental activities; therefore, it is important to settle the area with Bengalis for the sake of its development (Parliament Debates 1980, 2194-2196).

c) Rule 34 of the CHT Manual is inconsistent with the Constitution of Bangladesh. It violates Article 36 of the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of movement of citizens.

d) Bengalis have been settled on *Khas* land (government-owned land), so there has been no encroachment of private property.

The government's claims that Bengalis have been settled on *Khas* lands are also open to interpretation. There are discrepancies in the understanding of *Khas* land between the hill populace and the Bengali elite. What the government perceives as *Khas* land essentially corresponds to the traditional *Jhum* land and forest land<sup>5</sup> belonging to the hill community people. For the hill people, this land is considered common property, belonging to the community, kinship groups, and even the spiritual world. The government ignores this Pahari's view of *Khas* land, which the hill people regard as a gross violation of their inalienable rights. During the

<sup>5</sup>. Forest land: it indicates the land which also the government owned reserved forest land.

fieldwork, Bengali settlers mentioned several reasons why they agreed to settle in the CHT. As they mentioned first, there was a severe land crisis at the origin of living, and at the same time, they were landless poor on the plain land, whereas huge vacant lands were set in the CHT. On the other hand, these Bengalis were frequently suffering from natural disasters (like river erosion, flooding, drought, and others), and they thought that if they had had a chance to be rehabilitated in the CHT, it could have changed their way of life. Moreover, the government announced a settlement program for the poor and landless Bengalis in the CHT. Most of the Bengali settlers wished to lead improved lives in CHT due to economic hardship in their places of origin. Moreover, most of the Bengali settlers informed that when they were settled in the CHT, the government provided them with land, cash, house-building assistance, and rice and wheat as rations. Approximately 93 per cent of Bengali settlers received land and financial assistance from the government. Almost half of the settler households reported having house-building facilities.

All Bengali households are getting rations from the government. From the beginning of settlement, Bengali settlers have had access to this facility. Currently, 92.5% of Bengali settlers are receiving rations, while only 7.5% of households are not receiving them. In the Khagrachari district alone, where the majority of refugee transit camps are located, 80 Bengali villages are holding 26,262 families, all of whom continue to receive free rations (Feeny, 2001). There has been no card increase or decrease from the beginning. Bengali settlers were getting 35 Kg of rice and 49 Kg of wheat every month against a card. Nevertheless, many Bengali settler households were not ration cardholders because there were more settler households than ration cards. The settlers in the first scheme had access to various facilities, but those in the second and third schemes mostly did not receive any additional facilities, except for land. Some households that came to the CHT through their relatives did not receive any land or cash facilities from the government, but instead received rationing facilities. The claim of the Bengali population who receive lesser support than the Pahari do from the state and non-state actors and agencies is reflected in the narrative of one of my Bengali Key informants, who said, Pahari receive donations, education supports,

livelihood backup and medical facilities, from the regional council, district council, and many international AID organisations, but Bengali receive AIDs only from the Government organisation.

### **Bengali settlers' perceptions on their returns**

Although Bengali settlers are currently experiencing economic hardship in the CHT, the majority express disinterest in returning to their previous districts. Approximately 78 percent of Bengali settler households express a lack of interest in returning to their previous district. Only 22 percent of these households have indicated interest in returning, provided that the government facilitates the arrangement of housing and agricultural land for them. Respondents noted that residing in the CHT represents the most favourable option due to the insufficient housing available in their places of origin. Moreover, they have suffered the loss of both their residences and cultivable lands as a result of riverbank erosion. More than 75 percent of the total households reported that they have no remaining shelter in their previous districts, and nearly 16 percent indicated that they will be in a worse financial position. Only 22 percent expressed concern that their children's education might be adversely affected if they returned to their previous districts. In comparison, the smallest percentage (3.2%) of households cited other reasons. Therefore, as previously stated, it is not feasible for CHT to discontinue operations before the establishment of a favourable arrangement for them in the plain land by the government. As noted earlier, a significant number of households among the Bengali settlers express a lack of interest in returning to their former district, despite the majority of these households having anticipated maintaining a positive status in their previous district. Furthermore, over 62 percent of households believed that their circumstances would be more favourable if they were not established in the CHT. However, a portion of respondents (37.5%) maintained that relocating to the CHT was a more advantageous decision. Many Bengali settlers reported that there are currently substantial employment opportunities in their previous districts; conversely, there exists a significantly limited scope for employment for Bengali settlers in the CHT. Additionally, political crises, ethnic conflicts, and land disputes have placed them in a marginalised

position, leading them to conclude that it would be preferable not to be settled in the CHT.

### Perceptions towards one another

The settlement plans presented a significant opportunity for landless or economically disadvantaged Bengali families. Unsurprisingly, impoverished Bengalis are eager to seize any opportunity for survival that is made available to them. The Bengali peasantry who migrated to the CHT during the regimes of Presidents Zia and Ershad originated from the plain districts and lacked experience in *Jhum* cultivation. As a result, they are now occupying wet rice land owned by the Pahari, making it difficult for them to remain self-sufficient on the land allocated by the state. The planned settlement of Bengali people, along with various development projects, has made the land issues in the region even more complicated. Bengali settlers have taken over agricultural lands in Kaukhali, Dighinala, Panchari, and Rangamati. These settlements, including mosques, have been set up in areas that were previously recognized as Pahari land. Sometimes, Pahari people lose their land because they do not understand its commercial value or are unaware of private property rights (Barua, 2001). As a result, many Pahari have moved to the hills to do *jhum* cultivation, which has led to increased poverty and a higher risk of starvation among them. Some have even used their land as collateral for loans from Bengali moneylenders.

Due to their inability to repay the exorbitant interest rates, they have forfeited their land. Additionally, both the Ziaur Rahman and Ershad administrations implemented a deliberate policy aimed at encouraging individuals from the plains to settle in hilly regions, with the evident objective of outnumbering the Pahari in their ancestral homeland (Barua, 2001). Furthermore, numerous Pahari sought refuge in India after settlers from the plains usurped their lands. The Pahari perceived the state-sponsored influx as a calculated effort to undermine their unique culture and heritage, thereby relegating them to a minority status in a region where they had historically held majority status for centuries (Barua, 2001). The Chakma chief, Raja Devashish Roy (2004), expressed alignment with the sentiments of the ethnic minorities, stating,

“I do not want settlers from outside the CHT. The headmen are also against it. I have requested that the

government not settle Bengalis in the CHT. Those who settle here are creating conflict with the Pahari people. Many are compelled to leave their ancestral homelands, and some even go to India.”

Furthermore, Goutam Dewan, the former elected chairman of the Rangamati Local Government Committee, articulated that, “our main problems pertain to land. Because our culture, life, livelihood, customs, economy, everything is related to land” (Gain & Moral, 1994). The relations between the ethnic groups of the Hill Tracts and the increasingly dominant Bengali plainsmen have historically been characterised by tension. Bengalis have maintained a long-standing control over the bazaar and the trade in forest products. Early British accounts document the economic turmoil inflicted upon the hill inhabitants by Bengali moneylenders, as well as the growing encroachment by Bengali peasants from the densely populated plains into the district (Bertocci, 1984). Furthermore, a substantial 91 per cent of *Pahari* households expressed that their intergroup relations were favourable, indicating a level of trust among the eleven distinct tribes that constitute the community. It is essential to acknowledge that the antagonists of the Pahari peoples, specifically the Bengali settlers, are ethnically homogeneous, which would typically suggest a high level of trust within that demographic. However, only approximately 11% of the respondents indicated positive relations between the Bengali settlers and *Pahari* communities (Badiuzzaman & Murshed, 2015). From the aforementioned discussion, it becomes apparent that the relationship between the Pahari and Bengali communities has historically fluctuated between mistrust and apprehension. Although they participated jointly in socio-cultural ceremonies, a significant lack of trust persisted between them. The perception of the Bengalis by the Paharis tends to be quite practical; however, the view of Bengali settlers remains quite firm, leading to their continued reluctance to accept them. Since Bengali settlements began in the CHT, the Pahari community has often opposed this. Because of this history, their relationship has rarely been smooth. Most of the Pahari individuals reported that Bengalis are perceived as outsiders. More than 57 percent of Chakma, 52 percent of Marma, and 60 percent of Tripura communities consider Bengalis to be outsiders. Conversely, nearly all Bengalis believe that Paharis are not outsiders; however,

5 percent of Bengali households and 7.5 percent of Bengali settler households indicated that the Paharis are also outsiders. On average, 30 percent of Paharis perceive Bengalis as land grabbers, while 55 percent of Bengali settlers and 25 percent of Bengalis share this view. Additionally, 30 percent of Bengali settlers and 20 percent of Bengalis regard the Paharis as their opposition; nonetheless, only 4.8 percent of Chakma and 5.3 percent of Marma perceive Bengalis as their opposition. An intriguing aspect of this issue is that 50 percent of Bengalis consider Paharis to be cordial, whereas only 7.5 percent of Bengali settlers view Paharis as cordial. These patterns reveal deeply rooted challenges in their relationships, underscoring the necessity for enhanced understanding and open dialogue.

#### **Discontent between the Pahari and the settler Bengali over government policies**

Government efforts to integrate ethnic minorities in the CHT have included preferential policies and remedial measures such as amnesty offers, a package of small development projects, increased job opportunities, reservation of seats for tribal students in educational institutions, and the formation of local governance committees (LGC). However, these initiatives have not achieved the intended outcomes, as they do not address the primary socio-economic and political demands of the communities. The crisis has developed political significance over time, indicating that a political solution may be necessary. In my FGDs and Key Informants Interview, many suggested that “resolving the socio-economic and political issues is likely to require meaningful dialogue and integration based on national consensus.” However, a message from the ground doesn’t reach the policy level unless there is a strong nexus between the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ of society. However, many of my informants suggested that “a roundtable conference should be convened to bring together all relevant stakeholders, including the Bangladesh government, representatives of ethnic minorities, *Adi* Bengali communities, and settlers.” The purpose of this gathering would be to identify a mutually acceptable resolution to the integration crisis faced by the CHT groups (Barua, 2001). There are two primary policy strategies aimed at achieving integration. The

first strategy involves incorporating the distinct cultural characteristics of minority ethnic communities into the mainstream culture, which is typically that of the dominant group; this approach is commonly referred to as assimilation or the melting pot. The second strategy, known as “unity in diversity,” aims to foster national loyalties while preserving subordinate cultures.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be said that issues around Bengali settlements and land alienation in the CHT are extremely important for the Pahari people. In response to ongoing protests by the Hill people, the government has banned new Bengali settlements in the CHT. The main challenges faced by minority groups and Bengali settlers in the CHT include non-Pahari settlement, deployment of military forces and related acts of violence, denial of political rights and economic opportunities, threats to the religion, culture, and language of minorities, and the division of the CHT into three separate districts. Many respondents have shared concerns about challenges like illiteracy, limited communication infrastructure, cultural differences, social distances, tense and often hostile relationships between Bengali settlers and Pahari groups, as well as inter-ethnic conflicts. They also mention the encroachment of Bengali culture and the government’s tendencies toward communal actions as additional obstacles. These issues have contributed to the continued unchallenged dominance of the state in the CHT. Currently, Bengali land ownership reflects this dominance, supported by government efforts to settle temporary Bengali migrants in the region.

#### **Conclusion**

The findings present a comprehensive reality: Bengali settlers are encountering significant economic hardships, with limited opportunities for income-generating activities in the region. It has been observed that a notable distinction exists between the ‘*Adi* Bengali’ and Bengali settlers in terms of their settlement experiences in the CHT. This disparity is especially striking given that Bengali settlers encounter similar levels of marginalization as ethnic minorities. It is crucial to recognize these inequalities to ensure equitable support and opportunities for all communities in the CHT. No issues pertaining to Bengali settlers were documented within the indexes of International Donor

Agencies and NGOs. However, it is perceived that the government provides rations and plans to implement measures aimed at improving conditions for the CHT people. However, it has been observed that Bengali settlers in the CHT are in a disadvantaged position, with limited opportunities to access socio-economic benefits. Consequently, without support from both Government Organisations (GOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), it would be increasingly challenging for them to compete on an equal footing with other groups within the CHT. Furthermore, no Bengali settler Para (Cluster Village) was identified as a location where the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was conducting development activities for this group, despite the UNDP's operations spanning all three districts of the CHT, with a focus on remote and underserved regions. Nevertheless, these Bengali settlers, who have migrated to the CHT, are grappling with various struggles, ranging from economic hardships to the complexities of political existence in the CHT. It has been established that, on average, *Paharis* possess a greater amount of land than both categories of Bengalis in the CHT, despite having the fewest number of registered ownership documents. The majority of *Pahari* land is classified as customary property. A majority of the settler Bengali respondents informed that “most of the *Pahari* people have lands without documents and Bengali settlers have documents but no lands.” This statement encapsulates the primary issue concerning land in the CHT. In conclusion, it has been observed that the CHT possesses a rich history of peaceful coexistence between the *Pahari* and the Bengali. This harmony was disrupted solely by the initiation of government-sponsored Bengali settlements. Notwithstanding the challenges that have emerged, the CHT—constituting a mere one-tenth of Bangladesh's total land area—possesses immense potential for facilitating the nation's economic advancement. The realisation of sustainable peace in this region is not merely an ideal; it is necessary and attainable through the commitment and collaboration of all stakeholders. The study does not suggest curtailing facilities for *Pahari* and allocating them to the Bengali population, but rather fostering conditions for the mutual and peaceful coexistence of both the *Pahari* and Bengali populations with reciprocal respect. For a meaningful

future, we should prioritise the reintegration of Bengali settlers with other marginalised communities. By implementing a pro-human development strategy that includes *Pahari*, *Adi*, and settler Bengalis, we can foster a thriving and harmonious CHT that benefits all residents.

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The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

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I do acknowledge that the article is largely based on the findings from my PhD Dissertation research (unpublished); however, I have made the necessary revisions and modifications to align it with the central theme of the article. My Ph.D. Dissertation is available at:

<http://reposit.library.du.ac.bd:8080/xmlui/discover?scope=%2F&query=The+Positioning+of+Bengali+Settler+in+the+Chittagong++Hill+Tracts%3A+A+Development+Understanding&submit=Go>

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I acknowledge that less than 20% of the scientific writing was produced with the assistance of AI tools, specifically Grammarly and ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>), to improve the academic tone and language accuracy, including grammatical structures, punctuation, and vocabulary.

#### **CRedit author statement**

The author's sole responsibility for all aspects of the work—including the conceptualization of the study, methodology, investigation, data curation, original draft preparation, presentation of results, and manuscript preparation, Review and editing.

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