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DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITIONS IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND HUMAN SECURITY

Abstract

Demographic changes and security are interlinked, with changes in population greatly affecting the way security is managed. The study examines how shifts in the population affected environment degradation and human security in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The paper explores how changes in population and environmental issues affect human security in the CHT. It investigates the different aspects of human security, highlighting how environmental damage and climate change often drive social, economic, and political instability. The paper also examines the connection between population growth, the use up of resources and conflict. It also explores how changes in population, security of the environment and human security are linked. The study shows that state-supported Bengali migration has intensified competition for land and resources, undermining the land rights of ethnic communities and exacerbating insecurity. The study posits that these demographic shifts have led to a deterioration of human security, mostly due to individuals' lack of freedom from fear or deprivation. In this regard, this article elucidates how population fluctuations correlate with environmental issues and local conflicts, thereby illustrating the security risks faced by individuals in the CHT.

Keywords: Chittagong Hill Tracts, demographic transition, environmental degradation, human security, freedom from fear, ethnic communities, land conflict, resource competition.

1. Introduction

The way a population changes, including its size, age, migration and urban growth, is very important for shaping the demographic and security landscape. These shifts are the result of many social, economic, environmental and political factors interacting. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh demonstrates how population changes, environmental damage and human security are interrelated.

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CHT is made up of three districts, Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. The CHT is geographically distinct from the rest of Bangladesh due to its rough topography. It covers 13,181 square kilometers which is just a tenth of the country's total area and is found in the South-Eastern part of Bangladesh.[1] Arakan (Southern Chin State) of Myanmar and Mizoram state of India bounds the whole CHT to the East, Tripura state of India to the North, Chittagong District to the West, and the Southern boundary is delineated with the Rakhine state of Myanmar and Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. The ethnic communities have inhabited the region from time immemorial; Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Murung, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Khyang, Bawm, and Pangkhua are the notable ethnic groups presently residing in CHT.[2]

Historically, the expansion of the CHT's population was limited to ethnic groups, with restrictions on Plain-landers establishing new settlements in the region during British colonial rule. However, with the end of British colonialism and subsequent governmental patronage, Bengalis began infiltrating the CHT, leading to rapid demographic transformation.[3] Thereby, the scenario changed after the end of the British colonial rule in India where a good number of Bengalis established new settlements in CHT with the patronisation of the Government of Pakistan (1947-1971) which was earlier restricted under the "CHT Regulations' 1900" promulgated by the British.[4] This influx of Bengali population has exerted immense pressure on the region's land and resources, exceeding the limits of environmental sustainability. Environmental degradation both generates and results from conflict. Very seldom attempts have been made to explore the causes and dynamics of eco conflict. A Project on Environment, Population, and Security at the University of Toronto identifies resource scarcity as a main cause that can lead to three types of conflict: simple scarcity conflict (where at least two states or groups engage in violent conflict or warfare), group identity conflict (where groups are displaced from a resource-scarce region to another region, resulting in tension and conflict), or relative deprivation conflict (where one group perceives itself as deprived of resources in comparison to others).[5]

The demographic transformation in the CHT has not only intensified the human security crisis but also raised environmental security concerns. Climate

1 Kamily Chakma, "Climate Change Impacts on Chittagong Hill Tracts," YECAP, July 24, 2023, https://www.yecap-ap.org/post/climate-change-impacts-on-chittagong-hill-tracts.
2 Golam Rasul, "Determinants of Land-Use Changes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," *Applied Geography - APPL GEOGR* 24 (May 1, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1016/S0143-6228(04)00002-5.
3 Amena Mohsin, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace," 2003, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Chittagong-Hill-Tracts%2C-Bangladesh%3A-On-the-Road-Mohsin/4354ce02f4ac3e32f464835cf783a10d2801f414.
4 Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism : The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Dhaka : University Press, 1997), http://archive.org/details/politicsofnation0000mohs.
5 Shin-Wha Lee, "Emerging Threats to International Security: Environment, Refugees, and Conflict," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 73–90.

change and environmental degradation are creating an influx of ecological refugees all over the World. Refugees are those people who have no choice but to leave their habitats for their very survival because of natural and human-induced disasters and environmental change; or those who are internally displaced or compelled to cross borders as a result of harmful development plans, government ecocide, or a government's rehabilitation or resettlement plans.[6]

Environmental degradation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have developed gradually and for a reason. It resulted from many years of land pressure, increasing resource demand and frequent disregard for the rights of Ethnic population. Since the late 1970s, the government has relocated hundreds of thousands of Bengali settlers into the CHT, most of whom were landless families from other regions. Because the settlers needed to live and farm, they required more land than the region could provide. Consequently, forests were destroyed and hills were removed to provide space. A lot of this progress was achieved through government projects, and business development.[7]

In recent years, tourism has created new challenges. Due to the popularity of Bandarban and Rangamati among tourists, numerous resorts, restaurants, and guesthouses have been established. Many of these are created by excavating portions of hills or woods, frequently without the requisite authorisation from environmental agencies. The destruction of the forest results in significant issues for them. Individuals are forfeiting land that they have cultivated for numerous years.[8] The loss of forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is harmful to nature and also directly causes insecurity for the peoples. State development plans, business development and rising numbers of tourists are closely linked to environmental damage. Consequently, extensive deforestation and hillside excavation have occurred without prior consultation with local residents. Individuals have been deprived of their residences, customary sources of income, and a sense of communal security. This is evident from an interview with a human rights advocate from Rangamati, who has collaborated with impacted individuals for over a decade.

[6] Norman Myers, "Environmental Refugees: A Growing Phenomenon of the 21st Century," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 357, no. 1420 (April 29, 2002): 609–13, https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2001.0953.

[7] Kazi Ahsan Haque, "Environmental Impacts of Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," *Journal of Environmental Science and Natural Resources* 5, no. 1 (2013): 231–239. https://doi.org/10.3329/jesnr.v5i1.11596.

[8] Josinta Zinia and Redowan Islam Palash, *"Exploring the Impact of Eco-Tourism among the Ethnic Groups: A Qualitative Study in the Chittagong Hill Tracts,"* Global Scientific Journal 10, no. 12 (December 2022): 1–12, https://www.globalscientificjournal.com.

It also reveals that changes in the environment can cause further problems. Depletion of forests and water resources may compel residents to vacate their residences or descend into deeper poverty. This has resulted in an increased involvement of individuals in cross-border migration, human trafficking, and illicit economic operations. Displaced kids face heightened dangers, as the loss of their traditional employment diminishes their opportunities for financial security and education. Due to these circumstances, individuals have heightened insecurity regarding their income, safety, and social interactions. It has created new conflicts between ethnic groups and Bengali settlers, as well as among ethnic individuals contending for limited resources. Consequently, environmental degradation is inextricably linked to broader security concerns in the region. Despite the gradual loss of the forest, the consequences are swift and extensive.[9]

Excessive timber, firewood, and bamboo extraction for commercial and industrial purposes pushed the ethnic people deeper into the countryside.[10] Destruction of green forests causes severe environmental damage which needs a substantial period to be repaired. In addition to this soil erosion, landslides, flash floods and a decrease in rainfall are the consequences of deforestation.[11] Illegal timber business also instigates conflicts and rivalry among the groups involved. Resource scarcity always instigates violent conflict among communities, races, and ethnic groups. The consequence is even more catastrophic when conflicts occur between ethnic groups and settler Bengalis. There are as many as half a million landless and ultra-poor people from different corners of the country who were re-settled in different cluster villages at various locations of the region. They were provided housing, rations, and substantial amounts of monthly allowances regularly. The rapid expansion of the population has generated excessive pressure on the land and habitats of their surroundings.[12] In addition to that, the presence of infiltrated migrant settlers in their inherent landscape has threatened the identity as well as the existence of the ethnic minorities of the region. Mistrust among the communities generates hostility and creates rivalry.[13] The relentless degradation of the natural environment threatens the livelihoods and identities of ethnic groups, exacerbating tensions.

[9] Interview with a Human Rights Activist, September, 2024.
[10] Muhammad Ala Uddin, "Displacement and Destruction of Ethnic People in Bangladesh," *Canadian Social Science*, 2008.
[11] Earth Reminder, "How Does Deforestation Lead to Floods and Droughts?," (blog), March 2, 2022, https://www.earthreminder.com/how-does-deforestation-lead-to-floods-and-droughts/.
[12] Adnan and Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs."
[13] Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Controversies and Questions," in *Environmental Conflict* (Routledge, 2001).

Against these backdrops, this paper argues that demographic changes have played a major role in shaping the ongoing human security crisis and environmental degradation in the CHT. The focus is not on offering solutions or measuring impacts through numbers. Rather, the study aims to understand how shifts in population, especially through government-backed settlement and land use changes, have created lasting problems for ethnic communities. By looking at past trends and hearing directly from people who know the region well, the research explores how issues like land conflict, displacement, and environmental damage are all connected. The main question guiding the study is, how have demographic changes in the CHT impacted human security and contributed to environmental degradation as a security threat in the region? The objective of this study is to make sense of how these challenges have built up over time and to highlight the deeper problems that need to be acknowledged if the region is ever to move toward lasting peace and stability.

This study uses qualitative methods and examines both primary and secondary data to link between population changes, human security, and harm to the environment in the CHT. Five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with individuals who are directly involved, knowledgeable, or have experienced the issues being discussed. One university professor, two academicians, a human rights activist from the CHT, and a commanding officer from the 38 ANSAR Battalion, Rangamati, were among those interviewed. Purposive sampling was used to choose the key informants. They were contacted because their expertise related to the study's questions and their familiarity with the CHT context. The majority of participants were found through professional contacts and referrals. Due to the sensitive subjects in the study, such as land rights, military forces, and marginalisation of ethnic groups, a lot of attention was given to ethical standards. Before every interview, the participants were told about the purpose of the study, that they could leave at any time, and what steps were taken to ensure their privacy. It was important that their privacy was maintained, and they participated willingly. Along with the interviews, academic papers, official documents, NGO and civil society reports, old records and census data were used as secondary data. The analysis was carried out thematically. After organising the data, recurring themes and patterns were identified, such as land disputes, environmental degradation, displacement, and inter-ethnic tensions. These themes formed the foundation of the study's findings, allowing for a more grounded understanding of how demographic shifts are shaping human and environmental security in the CHT. Triangulating the insights from both primary and secondary sources helped ensure a more holistic and reliable analysis.

Given this context, the present paper makes an attempt to investigate how shifts in population and environmental concerns interact with human security in the CHT. In order to accomplish this, the second section, which follows the introduction,

includes an analysis of the demographic shifts and marginalisation that have occurred in the CHT region. The third section makes an effort to comprehend the connection that exists between the alterations in population and the state of human security within the framework of CHT. In the fourth section, an attempt is made to investigate the demographic transition and the impact that it has on the degradation of the environment in the CHT. In the fifth section, author investigate the ways in which changes in population pattern have influenced the historical, economic, and political dynamics of the region. Finally, the paper ends with conclusion.

2. Demographic Transitions and Marginalisation in the Region: A Historical Appraisal

Because of its history of political and communal strife, the CHT faces a worsening humanitarian crisis. The number of Bengali in the CHT has risen because of support from the government. Besides, the change in the population, along with ongoing economic and political problems, has made ethnic groups and Bengalis fight more, further destabilising the area.

In the CHT, the shift in population has taken place gradually. Under Pakistani rule, the ethnic groups living there suffered from both economic marginalisation due to outside development projects and the loss of constitutional rights. The Karnaphuli Paper Mill and the Kaptai Hydroelectric Project, meant to help development, actually caused harm to the environment and to local people. Ethnic groups have regularly mentioned two main reasons for their human security threats: transmigration programs and the building of the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam. When the Kaptai Hydro Electric Dam was built in 1958, displacing many people, it led to the first major changes in the area's population. The Pakistani regime built the dam which greatly affected the economy. While it contributed positively to the region's economy by generating electricity that supports industrial growth and urban development, it disrupted traditional livelihoods, particularly for ethnic communities dependent on agriculture and access to natural resources.[14]

Following Bangladesh's independence, the continued migration of Bengali populaion into the CHT, supported by government policies, led to a further erosion of the rights of ethnic populations. The then government launched a plan in the mid-1970s to transmigrate large numbers of Bengalis who were landless and primarily from river erosion-prone areas. The promise of 5 acres of agricultural land, a homestead, construction materials, cash assistance, free rations, and bank

[14] Saila Parveen and I.M. Faisal, "People Versus Power: The Geopolitics of Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh," *Water Resources Development* Vol. 18, No. 1, 197–208 (2002), https://docslib.org/doc/2178890/people-versus-power-the-geopolitics-of-kaptai-dam-in-bangladesh.

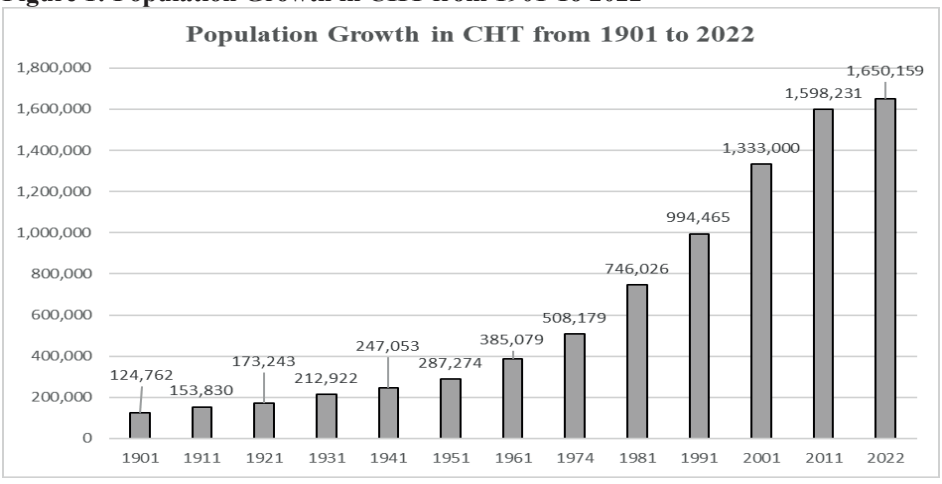
loans initially enticed the landless. Between 1979 and 1985, three phases of the transmigration program were implemented. In the first phase of CHT (1979-1981), approximately 100,000 people were implanted, according to available estimates. During the second phase, it is estimated that nearly identical figures were settled in CHT.[15] Another 250,000 people were reportedly relocated to CHT from plain land. As a result, the estimated transmigrant population ranges between 350,000 and 450,000. However, approximately 15 per cent of the transmigrated population left CHT due to the unfamiliar and inhospitable living conditions. The third phase of the transmigration program began in July 1982, during the General Ershad administration. Initially, this regime followed the policy of its predecessor. However, it appears to have decided to end the transmigration program by 1985.[16]

The cultivable lands in CHT were extremely limited. The Kaptai Dam, which flooded 40 per cent of the CHT's prime cultivable land, exacerbated the problem. By the time 400,000 Bengalis migrated, there was no land available to fulfill the government's promise to the settlers.[17]

Attempts were often made to mix the ethnic groups in these settlements, to hinder any possible forging of solidarity amongst them.[18] The present ethnic and religious composition of CHT is strikingly different from what it was a century ago. In 1872, the CHT population had been almost entirely Ethnic Minority (98%). In comparison, the Bengali people accounted for a minuscule minority (2%). Even up to 1951-1956, the various Ethnic Minority groups together accounted for 90 per cent of the CHT population, with Bengalis comprising most of the remainder. However, by 1991, the share of all the Hill peoples declined drastically to around half (51.4%) of the CHT population. Correlatively, the share of Bengalis rose dramatically from around 9 per cent in 1951-1956 to 48.5 per cent in 1991.[19] The ethnic composition of CHT has been profoundly transformed during the second half of the twentieth century. A demographic transition in CHT thus occurred rapidly, as can be observed in the following figures.

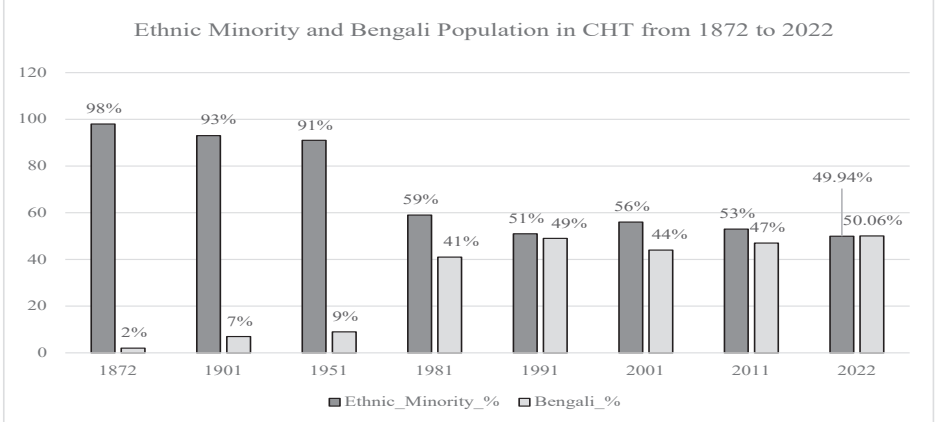
[15] Bhumitra Chakma and Nasir Uddin, "Bound to Be Failed?: The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts 'Peace Accord,'" *Politics of Peace: A Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh*, 2012, 121–42.
[16] Chakma and Uddin.
[17] Saila Parveen and I.M. Faisal, "People Versus Power: The Geopolitics of Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh," *Water Resources Development* Vol. 18, No. 1, 197–208 (2002), https://docslib.org/doc/2178890/people-versus-power-the-geopolitics-of-kaptai-dam-in-bangladesh.
[18] Papri Chakraborty, "Ethnic Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Cht) of Bangladesh: Politics of Homogenization," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 75, no. 2 (2014): 297–304.
[19] PCJSS, "CHT History & Struggle," *Information and Publicity Department of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS)*, 2003, https://www.pcjss.org/cht-history-struggle/.

Figure 1: Population Growth in CHT from 1901 To 2022



Source: Compiled from Bangladesh District Gazetteers, 1975; Population Census of Bangladesh 1974, 1981, 1991, 2011, 2022. Prepared by the Authors

Figure 2: *Ethnic Minority* and Bengali Population in CHT from 1872-2022



Source: Compiled from Bangladesh District Gazetteers, 1975; Population Census of Bangladesh 1974, 1981, 1991, 2011, 2022. Prepared by the Authors.

Over the entire period of 1872-2022, the population of CHT increased by almost 30 per cent, from 63,054 in 1872 to 1,842,815 in 2022. Whereas the number of ethnic minorities increased more than 15 times from the base figure in 1872, the number of Bengalis increased by more than 686 times from the corresponding starting times. Moreover, the course of population growth was very different for Ethnic Minority and Bengalis. From 1872 to 1951, the population size of Ethnic Minority was larger than Bengalis. However, between 1951 and 1981, the Bengali population rose dramatically from 9 per cent to 41 per cent.

The increase in Bengali population continued till 2001. In 2011 the percentage of Ethnic Minority population rose to 53 per cent from 44 per cent in 2001. However, in the latest 2022 Population Census of Bangladesh, the percentage of ethnic minorities decreased to 49.94 per cent, making it almost equal to the percentage of the Bengali population in the region.[20] The Bengali population that used to consist only 2 per cent of the total population in 1872, and 7 per cent in 1901 now consists of half of the entire population of the CTH region. This sharp upturn in the Bengali population is almost certainly attributable to the massive transmigration program, superimposed upon the ongoing process of in-migration and natural growth.

Table 1: Ethnic Minority and Bengali Population in CHT, 2011

District	Ethnic Minority	Percentage (%)	Bengali	Percentage (%)	Total
Khagrachari	316,987	51.63	296,930	48.37	613,917
Rangamat	356,153	59.76	239,826	40.24	595,979
Bandarban	172,401	44.39	215,934	55.61	388,335
Total	845,541	52.9	752,690	47.1	1,598,231

Source: Population Census of Bangladesh 2011

Table 2: Ethnic Minority and Bengali Population in CHT, 2022

District	Ethnic Minority	Percentage (%)	Bengali	Percentage (%)	Total
Khagrachari	349,378	49	364,741	51	714,119
Rangamat	372,864	58	274,723	42	647,587
Bandarban	197,975	41	283,134	59	481,109
Total	920,217	49.94	922,598	50.06	1,842,815

Source: Population Census of Bangladesh 2022

Over time, the number of Bengalis has increased and they now represent the majority. This transition has led to increased competition for resources among ethnic groups and new settlers. CHT's territory can no longer sustain the existing population. As the population increases, so does the demand for sustenance and other essential commodities. Consequently, there is an overexploitation of natural resources and significant damage to the local ecology. The influx of individuals from the mainland resulted in a scarcity of various resources which incites conflicts among the people.[21]Because of the demographic shift, ethnic groups in the CHT have resisted losing their culture and autonomy which in turn has increased ongoing

[20] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Population and Housing Census 2022*, National Report (Volume 1), Dhaka, 2023.
[21] Interview with a Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, September 2024.

armed conflicts. The government's failure to recognise the unique cultural identity of these groups, coupled with policies promoting Bengali settlement, has deepened local grievances. Consequently, there have been several violent clashes between ethnic groups and security forces which have made the region unstable for a long period. The refusal to grant basic rights to the people of the CHT is increasing discontent and weakening human safety there.[22] The resettlement efforts were also inadequate, failing to account for the unique cultural practices of the ethnic groups. Budgetary constraints further hindered effective relocation, resulting in intensified agricultural activities, environmental degradation, and economic challenges within the region.[23]

The reduction in arable land caused by infrastructural work made it difficult for many ethnic families to keep farming, so they had to rely more on low-paid informal jobs. This marginalisation was worsened by the demographic shift as Bengali settlers began to dominate economic opportunities, leading to increased poverty and social exclusion among ethnic groups. The inundation of fertile lands forced many into economically precarious situations, leading to poverty and unemployment.[24] In this regard, it has been argued by scholar that the development initiatives that ignored local realities and relied heavily on donor prescriptions only deepened mistrust. When economic opportunities became concentrated in the hands of a few, the ethnic population was systematically pushed to the margins, socially, economically, and psychologically.[25] ,

The resettlement of these displaced populations, coupled with the influx of Bengali population, led to overcrowded living conditions and heightened competition for land and resources. This displacement has not only led to poverty but also created grievances that are often exploited by separatist groups. The lack of constitutional protections further entrenched these disparities, fueling resentment and conflict, which are central to the human security issues in the region.[26]

3. Understanding the Relationship between Demographic Changes and Human Security in the context of CHT

In the 1990s, after the Cold War ended, global security discussions began to emphasise issues that matter to people rather than just to states. Because of

[22] Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs," *Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission & IWGIA*, 2011, https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/305-books/3018-alienation-of-the-lands-of-indigenous-peoples-of-the-chittagong-hill-tracts-of-bangladesh.html.
[23] Parveen and Faisal, "People Versus Power."
[24] Interview with a Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, September, 2024.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Interview with the Research Manager at CBGA, September, 2024.

globalisation, civil wars and ongoing inequality, it became clear that many individuals and communities were not considered important in traditional security approaches. This paradigm shift acknowledges that security is no longer confined to the traditional realm of nation-states but extends to the security and well-being of individuals. This shift is particularly relevant in the CHT context, where demographic changes and environmental degradation have directly impacted the lives and livelihoods of local communities. The foundation of human security can be traced back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, with further conceptualisation by Professor Mahbub ul Haq in 1994 within the framework of the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI). Institutionalised in the UN's 1995 World Summit on Social Development, human security embodies a people-centered approach to security, focusing on protecting individuals while promoting peace and sustainable development.[27]

In its 1994 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced human security which is based on two main pillars: freedom from fear and freedom from want.[28] This was the first time that the concept of security included people's dignity, rights and daily safety. In particular, the idea of freedom from fear grew in response to the violence and displacement of people everywhere. It values protecting individuals from sudden violence as in war, torture, rape and communal violence, but also from ongoing dangers caused by political repression, instability and being excluded from society. [29]

In the CHT, human security takes on heightened significance due to the interplay of demographic transitions, resource scarcity, and socio-political tensions. The two primary dimensions of human security, freedom from fear and freedom from want, are particularly relevant in this context. Freedom from fear emphasises protecting individuals from violent conflicts. Freedom from want highlights the broader threats to well-being, including poverty, food insecurity, and environmental challenges. In CHT, fear comes in many forms. It comes from the worry of losing ancestral land, the possibility of clashes with other groups or facing revenge when trying to get justice. Insecurity is not just physical violence, it includes the constant fear and uncertainty people feel about their rights, safety and future. As land disputes, demographic shifts, and factional conflicts increase, individuals' perceptions of exposure and vulnerability intensify. Even in the absence of violence, many individuals in the CHT perceive a sense of insecurity or are reluctant to address land concerns, advocate for justice, or assert their communal rights. This

[27] United Nations, "Human Development Report 1994," *Human Development Reports* (United Nations, January 1, 1994), https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994.
[28] United Nations, "Human Development Report 1994," *Human Development Reports* (United Nations, January 1, 1994), https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994.
[29] Ibid.

persistent vulnerability underscores deficiencies in the human security framework. This pressure compels communities to alter their behaviours to prioritise safety and survival, resulting in a withdrawal from politics, abandonment of traditional settlements, and avoidance of official institutions.[30]

The influx of Bengali migrants in the CHT region has profoundly affected the physical environment. The previously symbiotic relationship between humans and nature has been disrupted by increasing activity, resulting in environmental damage. The Kaptai Hydro Electric Project, despite its original promise of economic advancement, has caused irreparable ecological harm, leading to deforestation, desertification, and a decline in biodiversity.[31] These environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with human security, as they exacerbate vulnerabilities such as food insecurity, health hazards, and socio-economic instability. The consequences of environmental degradation extend far beyond ecological concerns, manifesting in human security crises characterised by food insecurity, health hazards, and socio-economic instability. To understand contemporary global challenges, one has to examine the interrelationships between human safety, natural environment, and population dynamics. The dynamics of the size and density of populations and the changes in their age, sex, or race composition notably during economic challenges, political conflicts, and rapid urbanisation appear to get worse while increasing the prospects of conflict.[32]

To contextualise the human-environment nexus in the CHT, one must also examine the broader implications of population dynamics. The size and density of populations, changes in their composition, and rapid urbanisation compound the prospects of conflict and insecurity. Scholars like Myron Weiner have long explored the relationship between population changes and security, identifying key patterns. For example, uneven ethnic group growth rates increase the likelihood of internal conflicts, while rapid demographic shifts can amplify political and ethnic tensions.[33] These dynamics are reflected in disputes over land, resource allocation, and governance failures, further deepening the human and environmental security challenges.

[30] Sabina Alkire, "A Conceptual Framework for Human Security.," 2003, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Conceptual-Framework-for-Human-Security.-Alkire/54e5e2cba85d75dce75b8a79223d05630d0e5551.

[31] Saila Parveen and I.M. Faisal, "People Versus Power: The Geopolitics of Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh," *Water Resources Development* Vol. 18, No. 1, 197–208 (2002), https://docslib.org/doc/2178890/people-versus-power-the-geopolitics-of-kaptai-dam-in-bangladesh.

[32] Colin Kahl, "Demographic Change, Natural Resources and Violence: The Current Debate," *Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2002): 257–82.

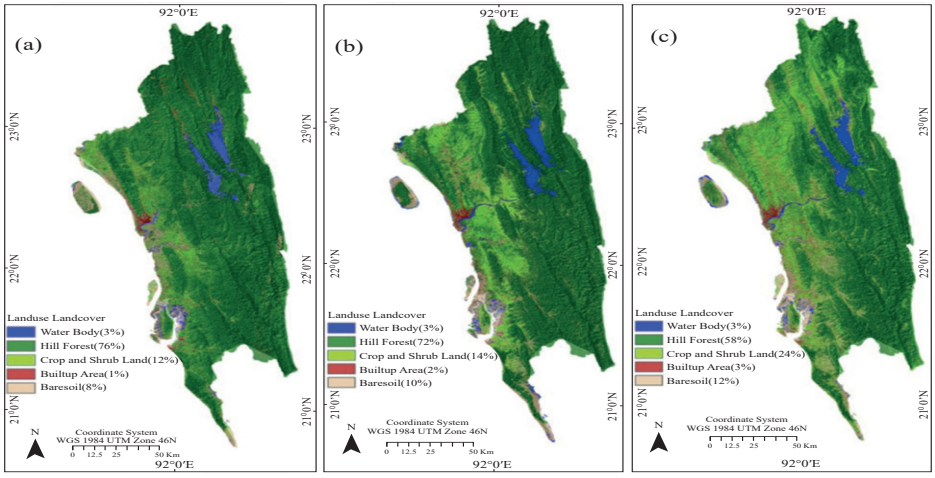
[33] Jack A. Goldstone, "Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict," *Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2002): 3–21.

4. Demographic Transition & Environmental Degradation in the CHT

The surge in population, particularly evident in CHT, intensifies resource scarcity and sparks violent conflicts between ethnic groups and Bengali settlers. This demographic shift exerts unparalleled pressure on the land and environment, compelling settlers to cut down the hills to create additional agricultural space. This indiscriminate use of resources caused devastating environmental destruction. The long-term effect of environmental degradation is even more far-reaching. Deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity have severely impacted the livelihoods of ethnic groups, who rely heavily on natural resources. Forest and land degradation has led to reduced agricultural productivity, increasing food insecurity and poverty. Additionally, water scarcity, driven by both environmental changes and unsustainable land use practices, has heightened competition for this vital resource, leading to conflicts and further marginalisation of ethnic populations.[34]

Kafy et al. prepared decadal land cover maps of CHT which have been prepared for 1995, 2005, and 2015 using Landsat satellite images. The study found that about 18 per cent of the hill forest has been depleted due to expanding urban development and agricultural practices on the hillside, adversely affecting the livelihoods of the population and resulting in a significant human security crisis in the region.[35]

Figure 3: Land cover map of CHT in 1995(a), 2005(b) and 2015(c)



Source: Kafy et al. (2017)

[34] Interview with the Commanding officer of 38 ANSAR Battalion, September 2024.

[35] Abdulla-Al Kafy, Md Shahinoor Rahman, and Lamia Ferdous. "Exploring the Association of Land Cover Change and Landslides in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT): A Remote Sensing Perspective." Paper presented at the International Conference on Disaster Risk Mitigation, Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 23-24, 2017.

Major Causes of Environmental Degradation

A. Jhum Cultivation

The massive expansion of population due to the cause of demographic transformation has mounted enormous pressures on the resource consumption patterns and the livelihood system of the people of the region, especially for the ethnic groups. Finding no other options, people of CHT had to rely on the primary form of economic activities where jhum cultivation has become the most preferable means of their livelihood. To meet the mounting demand for livelihood, the fallow period of *jhum* cultivation has decreased over the decades from 10-12 to 2-3 years.[36] In most of the CHT region Repetition of jhum cultivation in the same area with less fallow period accelerated soil erosion, and soil nutrient mining, and considerably reduced the yield of crops thereby jeopardising the livelihood of the ethnic communities who solely depend on agriculture for their sustenance. A decrease in yield is a concern for the subsistence cultivators which leads them to insecurity of food, health, and economic as well.

Jhum cultivation is a traditional farming method by the ethnic groups in the CHT and adjacent regions. However, biodiversity in the area is compromised through Jhum cultivation among tribes. This process involves the clearance of slopes that are found in the hill, burning down the vegetation with fire before monsoon season, and then planting crops on them. After harvesting, land is usually allowed to lay fallow so that it can regain its fertility in a cycle manner. Burning also preferentially releases nutrients but at the same time reduces organic matter and hence nutrient loss, soil erosion, and changes in microclimate leading to further impacts on regional biodiversity.[37]

Jhum cultivation in CHT has caused significant deforestation and soil degradation. In Khagrachari, Rangamati, and Bandarban jhum cultivation was used on about 14,000 hectares of land across the three districts in 2023.[38] Global Forest Watch reports a 17 per cent forest cover loss from 2000 to 2020, primarily due to jhum practices, leading to biodiversity loss and ecosystem disruption. Soil erosion is also a critical issue, with the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) estimating rates of up to 150 tons per hectare annually, depleting fertile soil and reducing agricultural productivity. A 2018 ICIMOD survey found that over

[36] Rasul and Thapa, "Shifting Cultivation in the Mountains of South and Southeast Asia"
[37] Mohammad Thanvir, "What Are the Impacts of Jhum Cultivation on Biodiversity?," April 28, 2023, https://thinkwildlifefoundation.com/what-are-the-impacts-of-jhum-cultivation-on-biodiversity/.
[38] According to a personal interview with Officials of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), Bangladesh.

60 per cent of jhum farmers reported declining yields and rising food insecurity. Additionally, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board noted a 20 per cent increase in flash floods in jhum areas, exacerbating environmental and livelihood challenges. Jhumias face vulnerability to natural disasters and reliance on chemical inputs for higher yields, further harming the environment. Initiatives promoting organic farming, supporting non-agricultural livelihoods, and ensuring fair market access are essential to safeguard both the environment and ethnic peoples' livelihoods in the region. Despite debates over its ecological impact, Jhum cultivation, when following its natural cycle, is considered eco-friendly.[39]

B. Monoculture Plantation

Demographic changes have also led to the proliferation of monoculture plantations in the CHT. Monoculture plantations, characterised by the extensive cultivation of single species of exotic plants, have experienced a noticeable surge across the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. As traditional farming could not meet the mounting demand of the excessive number of populaces, the cultivators, even the Jhumias are becoming less interested in their age-old traditional subsistence farming. Many of the Jhum fields are now used for industrial and monoculture plantations instead of cultivating crops. Monoculture plantations with exotic species like rubber including pulpwood, palm, agroforestry, woodlot, and tick pine are the most devastating to the ecological balance that affects both the life and livelihood of the forest-dependent communities. Among these, short-rotation plantations, as highlighted by forestry experts, are particularly concerning as they not only fail to emulate natural forest ecosystems but also pose substantial environmental threats. Reports of insect infestations and disease outbreaks within these monoculture plantations further underscore their ecological fragility.[40]

Harvest seasons for these plantations often bring about complete devastation to the surrounding landscape, manifesting as an ecocide scenario, particularly evident in areas like the Sal Forest and pulpwood plantation zones of the CHT. The environmental degradation induced by rubber plantations, for instance, has reached unprecedented levels, despite their outwardly verdant appearance. These monoculture landscapes function as ecological deserts, devoid of the diverse plant species, avifauna, and wildlife that once thrived in these regions. Notably, such plantations have encroached on traditional jhum lands, leading to a loss of

[39] Laltanlian Pangkhua, "Jhum Taking a Turn from Its Traditional Past," The Daily Star, October 17, 2023, https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/jhum-taking-turn-its-traditional-past-3445296.

[40] Adnan and Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs."

biodiversity, exacerbating soil erosion, and posing severe threats to the livelihoods of small ethnic communities inhabiting the area.[41]

Because they were often built without considering the local population, these plantations have resulted in massive tree cutting, a decline in plant and animal life and significant soil loss. They have consequences that go further than harming the environment. Many ethnic families have been displaced from their traditional lands without any notice.

The persistent displacement and dispossession have rendered it increasingly challenging to live without the worry of losing one's safety, residence, or employment. Insecurity here can be caused by things other than violence or conflict. It involves worrying that one day, you might find your home disappeared, the land blocked off or others have taken over without your consent. The fear is not being able to defend themselves, being pushed aside and losing both their home and their lifestyle. When foreign actors enter these regions, usually with greater influence, locals often feel they have no control. Many in these regions now live with the constant fear of being evicted, losing their land and identity and becoming casual laborers on their old land. It's a quiet fear that does not go away. It plays a role in decisions about where to live, having children or starting a farm. People find themselves uncertain and anxious, not feeling safe anymore. Thus, it can be asserted that freedom from fear is most profoundly achieved not just from the absence of violence but also from the incremental erosion of rights, dignity, and capacity for self-care.[42]

Despite some semblance of stability or even growth in monoculture plantation activity since the 1990s, deforestation rates in the CHT persist at alarming levels, far surpassing those observed in other wooded areas of Bangladesh. A staggering 90,000 hectares of naturally occurring or planted bamboo and timber forests have succumbed to conversion into grasslands or agricultural expenses. Furthermore, forest cover changes on previously barren land, estimated at approximately 287,461 hectares, underscore the magnitude of environmental transformation and the urgent need for sustainable land management practices to mitigate ecological degradation and protect the socio-economic well-being of ethnic populations in the region.[43]

[41] Gain, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts*.

[42] "Survival on the Fringe: Adivasis of Bangladesh /" (Dhaka : Society for Environment and Human Development, 2011); United Nations, "Human Development Report 1994," *Human Development Reports* (United Nations, January 1, 1994), https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994.

[43] Golam Rasul and Gopal Thapa, "Shifting Cultivation in the Mountains of South and Southeast Asia: Regional Patterns and Factors Influencing the Change," *Land Degradation & Development* 14 (September 1, 2003): 495–508, https://doi.org/10.1002/ldr.570.

C. Tobacco Cultivation

The rise in tobacco farming, driven by economic pressures and the need for quick cash among settlers and local communities, has further degraded the environment in the CHT. This demographic pressure has led to extensive deforestation as large amounts of firewood are used to cure tobacco leaves, diminishing natural forests and exacerbating soil fertility loss.

In the CHT, tobacco farming has become a major threat to forests, the environment, agriculture, and public health. Tobacco cultivation not only poses a serious threat to public health but also to the natural environment of the region. Hills and hillocks of the adjacent plain land are cut down indiscriminately by the cultivators to expand their tobacco fields which increases the risk of much soil erosions and landslides in the region. Each year dozens die due to the cause of landslides and the number of incidents is mounting every year augmenting the risk of earthquakes in the region as well.[44]

There has been an increase in tobacco cultivation since the 1990s despite the prohibition by local and multinational firms. This is a result of strict laws against it. The growing of tobacco entails the use of lots of firewood as about 60-70,000 metric tons of firewood are consumed annually in 2,000 drying barns for curing tobacco leaves.[45] This activity not only diminishes reserved and natural forests but also places hills' ecology under severe risk due to environmental degradation. Again, soil fertility diminution that results from tobacco growing hinders other crops from being grown on the same lands compelling hill people to forfeit such territories for tobacco plantations. Due to loans granted by tobacco firms thereby getting them trapped in debt cycles and dependent systems, farmers in areas like Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari have started abandoning the cultivation of these varieties. Also, there has been extensive utilisation of insecticides and pesticides in producing tobacco which over time has led to decreasing fertility rates. Furthermore, tobacco farming requires substantial water usage, often near bodies of water, leading to contamination of water bodies with chemical residues from fertilisers and pesticides. This contamination not only affects aquatic ecosystems but also contributes to a decrease in fish populations and deteriorates water quality, adversely impacting both the environment and public health in the region. Despite awareness of the detrimental impacts of tobacco farming, farmers continue to engage in it due to its higher return rates and instant cash, perpetuating a cycle of environmental degradation and socio-economic vulnerability in the CHT. [46]

[44] Thanvir, "What Are the Impacts of Jhum Cultivation on Biodiversity?"
[45] Naznin Sultana et al., "Environmental Damage and Land Use Change from Tobacco Farming: A Spatio-Temporal Study in Bandarban, Bangladesh," June 30, 2020.
[46] Sultana et al.

D. Brick Kilns

Brick kilns cause massive environmental degradation and human health issues. The increase in population and the demand for construction materials have led to the proliferation of brick kilns in the CHT. More than 100 brick kilns in the districts deplete 540 thousand tons of loamy soil annually, leading to the loss-making of agricultural lands, hills and forests, and the environment. In Khagrachari, Bandarban, and Rangamati, brick kilns make some 1.8 billion bricks every year at a loss of at least 270 hectares of cropland topsoil every year. Most kilns operate flouting regulations, regardless of their impact. This includes illegal kilns in this part of the CHT that have for years strengthened their positions, leaving very little for demonstrators to do. There is also a disturbing tendency to build new ones in the thinly populated upland regions in the vicinity of reserve forests, further aggravating environmental degradation. Lama, Alikadam, Ruma, Naikonchhari and Sadar upazilas in the district are the most adversely impaired regions due to their prevalence and operation of around 55 brickfields. The lack of checks undermines the authority's surveillance of an industry actively disregarding restrictions to protect the public's wellness.[47]

5. Implications for Human Security

The demographic change, especially the influx of Bengali populations, have had positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, there has been resource mobilisation and investment in the region, improving infrastructure like roads, hotels, and resorts. This development has enhanced communication channels and reduced personal security issues such as theft and isolation. However, the negative effects include increased resource competition, which disrupts the traditional ways of life for ethnic groups. This influx has led to the destruction of biodiversity through practices such as cutting down mountains, negatively affecting environmental sustainability. Additionally, ethnic groups have been displaced, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, poverty, and involvement in illegal activities, which has fueled separatist movements.[48]

To grasp the full extent of these changes, it is essential to explore how demographic shifts have affected the historical, economic, and political dynamics of the region. This section is an attempt to delve into these dimensions.

[47] The Daily Star Editorial, "Brick Kilns Destroying the Environment," The Daily Star, January 14, 2018, https://www.thedailystar.net/editorial/brick-kilns-destroying-the-environment-1519318.
[48] Interview with a Research Associate at BIGD, September, 2024.

5.1 *Resource Competition and Land Disputes*

In 1976, President General Zia identified underdevelopment as the root cause of issues in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region and established Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB) to address them through comprehensive development initiatives. Since its establishment, the CHTDB has initiated a range of projects aimed at improving the region's infrastructure, focusing on roads, telecommunications, and electrification. These development efforts have brought numerous positive changes. For instance, better roads and improved communication networks have connected previously isolated communities, making it easier for locals to access markets, healthcare, and education. Investment in infrastructure has also spurred the growth of the local economy, leading to the development of hotels, resorts, and other facilities that have bolstered the tourism industry. This influx of resources and opportunities has contributed to improved living standards. They have also led to more problems with land. Roads built in remote areas have allowed people to settle there and brought more government officials, making it easier for others to take over lands. [49] Moreover, the establishment of cluster settlements through security and restoration initiatives altered traditional land utilisation practices. Although these villages were officially praised as examples of rural development, they were also used to keep an eye on and control people. The actions taken in the region are still affecting its political and social life. Many groups forced from their homes by the fighting have found it hard to recover their lands, while Bengalis have often received more assistance from the authorities in claiming property. Because of these developments, customary land rights have been greatly weakened. In many cases, the land that was handed down in ethnic families is no longer recognised by state law. There are now many cases of conflict between ethnic communities and settlers, and these disagreements usually do not have a formal method for resolution. Because land courts are not working and the CHT Land Commission's mandate is not carried out, the sense of being cut off from the land has increased.[50] In this regard, one scholar argued that the development projects did help improve connectivity, but they also changed how land was accessed and used. In many places, once a road was built or a village was declared a model settlement, local land dynamics shifted. Communities who had lived there for generations often found it harder to prove their claims, while others arrived with better documentation or support. This argument reflects how development has altered power dynamics over land. Without formal documents, many ethnic families struggle to defend land they have occupied for generations. Meanwhile, settlers with administrative support often gain

[49] P. Gain, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk | SEHD* (Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)., 2020), https://sehd.org/the-chittagong-hill-tracts-life-and-nature-at-risk/.

[50] Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, Life Is Not Ours: Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1991), 42–46.

legal recognition. These conditions have fueled ongoing disputes and a deepening sense of insecurity. As land becomes harder to claim, fear of loss has become part of everyday life.[51]

Fear in this environment is closely linked to the wider concept of human security. Even though violence may not always be visible, the constant fear of being pushed out or ignored is everywhere. It is common for people to be fearful about farming certain areas, building permanent houses, or publicly talking about their land. Groups also worry about revenge, especially in places where there isn't a respected leader or authority to step in. As a result, there is a lot of tension and mistrust between groups is becoming common, although fighting is often hidden. Here, the loss of freedom from fear is strongly linked to problems in land governance. Since there is no reliable way to recognise or protect traditional land rights, communities worry about being taken away from their land by either official or unofficial means. Instead of being settled, land insecurity is causing more and more mistrust among different groups. The dissolution of community spirit makes it more difficult to unite people, weakens the efforts of advocates, and puts every land issue at risk of becoming a source of violence.[52]

5.2 *Demographic Shifts as Catalyst for the Complications in Implementing the CHT Peace Accord*

The demographic shifts in the CHT have directly impacted the implementation of the 1997 Peace Accord, intensifying land disputes, exacerbating resource competition, and creating political and social barriers to peace. The failure to address the influx of Bengali settlers and their impact on the demographic balance has been a significant barrier to peace. One of the core issues is the failure to address the significant influx of Bengali settlers and the resulting demographic imbalance, which has disrupted traditional land ownership patterns and exacerbated tensions between ethnic groups and settlers. This demographic transformation has undermined the region's social fabric and fueled grievances among ethnic communities, posing a major barrier to peace. In 1997, a peace treaty was negotiated between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) after years of conflict and bloodshed.[53]

[51] Interview with a Research Associate at CBGA, September 2024.

[52] "Bangladesh: Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Slow Demise of the Region's Indigenous Peoples. IWGIA Report 14. - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs," accessed June 3, 2024, https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/308-human-rights-reports/3076-bangladesh-militarization-in-the-chittagong-hill-tracts-the-slow-demise-of-the-regions-indigenous-peoples-iwgia-report-14.html.

[53] Fardaus Ara and Md Mostafizur Rahman Khan, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Promises and Performances," in *Migration, Regional Autonomy, and Conflicts in Eastern South Asia: Searching for a Home(Land)*, ed. Amit Ranjan and Diotima Chattoraj (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 293–317,

The 1997 accord reaffirmed that administrative arrangements in CHT would remain distinct from those in the rest of the country, albeit falling short of the autonomy desired by some. Implementation of the 1997 accord has faced numerous challenges, with key clauses remaining unimplemented even after almost three decades. The CHT Land Commission, tasked with safeguarding the land rights of ethnic groups, remains non-functional due to delays in formulating rules for the amended CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act. Of the 72 clauses aimed at bringing significant changes to people's lives, only a fraction has been fully or partially implemented, fueling frustration among the hill tracts' residents. The accord also lacked political support, facing opposition from groups like the Bengali settlers and political parties.[54] Successive governments have fallen short in implementing key provisions of the accord, such as rehabilitating returned displaced individuals and internally displaced persons, restoring confiscated land, and withdrawing temporary army camps. Although there were commitments to dismantle over 500 non-permanent military camps, progress has been minimal, with only a small portion removed.[55] Consequently, the CHT remains under diligent military oversight, perpetuating a legacy of conflict and discontent in the region.

5.3 *Socio-Political Tensions and Violence*

The socio-political tensions in the CHT are linked to historical grievances, land disputes, and demographic changes that have exacerbated inequality and instability. These shifts, coupled with the activities of armed groups and persistent human rights abuses, have disrupted peace efforts and deepened divisions.

A. Violence and Human Rights Abuses

For years, the CHT have faced violence and insecurity. Lately, killings, land disputes, sexual assaults and threats have made people unsure about their safety. Many communities feel unsafe and unsettled because both armed groups and local actors are involved in these events. Such events are directly linked to the idea of freedom from fear, one of the main parts of human security focused on living without constant dangers to safety and dignity. Tensions often start when people fight over land. Since the population has grown and patterns have changed, there is now greater competition for land and natural resources. Because land ownership is often unclear, there are often conflicts between different groups. Ethnic communities are afraid

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28764-0_12.

[54] Ara and Khan.

[55] Mokammel Shuvo, "CHT Peace Accord: 25 Years on, Full Implementation Still Elusive," The Daily Star, December 2, 2022, https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/cht-peace-accord-25-years-full-implementation-still-elusive-3184896.

of losing land that has been important to them for generations. Among those who settle, fear can happen when they do not have secure rights and might be evicted or opposed by others. The existence of uncertainty among all makes it more difficult to maintain peace. Much of this violence is rooted in deep-seated competition over land and power. As population pressures grow and settlement patterns change, different groups find themselves competing for limited resources.[56]

Occasionally, conflicts about who leads, who controls resources or who supports which political group have brought about targeted violence. The shortage of good land, poverty and few opportunities make it even harder for different ethnic groups to cooperate. If communities are split and leadership is argued over, individuals are given fewer ways to feel safe or resolve their problems which makes them feel even more afraid and cut off. Apart from violence, daily difficulties faced by CHT residents often threaten their sense of security. Because they cannot easily use the law, are afraid to complain and have no way to influence decisions on their land or work, individuals feel vulnerable. Some families hold back from investing in real estate or farming because they are not sure if they will keep their land in the coming years. Because of this continuous insecurity, both from physical threats and not having control over their lives, people in the region live with a lack of freedom from fear.[57] This sense of insecurity has been well supported by one scholar and it has been argued that the problem is not just the incidents of violence, it is that people do not expect protection when they happen. Whether it is an attack, a threat, or harassment, most cases go unreported because people believe nothing will change. Over time, that belief becomes part of everyday life.[58]

B. Armed Groups and Instability

The ongoing demographic changes, exemplified by the activities of groups like the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), highlight the enduring security challenges in the CHT. The demographic imbalance created by the settlement policies continues to fuel violence, human rights violations, and instability, making it difficult to achieve lasting peace and security in the region. Reports indicate that the group, under the leadership of Nathan Bom, has been involved in a series of bank robberies, targeting government banks to assert its influence.[59] These incidents have raised concerns

[56] Obayedul Hoque Patwary. "The Dynamics of Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh in the Post Peace Accord Period." Social Alternatives 42, no. 1 (2023): 40–47. https://socialalternatives.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PATWARY-SA42_1.pdf

[57] PCJSS.

[58] Interview with a Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, September 2024.

[59] Star Report, "Bank Heists Rock Hills," The Daily Star, April 4, 2024, https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/bank-heists-rock-hills-3581531.

about security and stability in Bandarban, prompting authorities to address the escalating situation caused by the KNF's activities. The Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA) gained notoriety following an attack on May 16, 2023, resulting in the deaths of two army personnel and injuries to two others due to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion and ambush in Ruma Upazila of Bandarban.[60]

Maintaining human security and fostering cooperation between ethnic and non-ethnic groups is challenging due to ongoing intra-group political conflicts. Various factions, such as United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), Pahari Chhatra Parisad (PCP), and reformist groups, are involved in violent disputes that disrupt unity within the ethnic population. This lack of unity hinders the implementation of economic development programs and contributes to extortion and factional violence. Land disputes also remain a significant issue, exacerbating tensions between communities.[61]

C. Inter-Ethnic Conflicts

Tensions between ethnic groups in the CHT have made the region's politics and society even more complicated. When it comes to peacebuilding, tensions within ethnic groups are often neglected, even though people often discuss land pressure and demography. It has been reflected in the key informant interview that, there are land disputes not only between Bengalis and Ethnic groups, but also between various Ethnic groups. In various cases, these disputes are linked to previous rivalries and more recent disagreements over who owns or controls certain areas or resources. Often, a group will claim land that another group says they have been using for years.

This follows a pattern that has been noticed recently. As the amount of usable land and forest resources has decreased, so has the unity among ethnic groups. Occasionally, disputes between the Chakma and Marma have occurred over who owns the land in reserved forests. According to the ANSAR officer, residents often express confusion and fear over shifting alliances and overlapping territorial claims. As a result, it becomes difficult to bring people together and implement development projects on schedule.[62]

[60] Riyadh Talukder, "KNF: Where Does It Get Its Funding and What Is Its Endgame?," Dhaka Tribune, 2023, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/305410/knf-where-does-it-get-its-funding-and-what-is-its.

[61] Interview with a Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, September, 2024.

[62] Interview with the Commanding Officer, 38 Ansar Battalion, Longodu, Rangamati, September, 2024.

Similarly, rivalry between the Bawm and Mro communities for representation and state aid has led to disagreements and has divided the community. The formation of the UPDF in 1998 as a breakaway from the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) created divisions not just in armed politics but also within everyday community interactions, which led to clashes between ethnic groups, casualties and the displacement of families. Some of these incidents are not mentioned in national news, but both local leaders and security forces are troubled by their increasing frequency. Due to these conflicts, ethnic groups have a harder time speaking up for their land or for the Peace Accord.

As a result, people are concerned not only about violence but also about persistent instability. People are uncertain regarding the territorial affiliations of various groups, the potential assistance or neglect of their community, and the possibility of escalating confrontations. The absence of robust mediation and the ambiguity of the situation undermine the social cohesion essential for enduring peace in the CHT.[63]

6. Concluding Remarks

The impact of demographic changes in the CHT on both human security and the environment supports the idea that demographic shifts are main contributors to these challenges. The findings highlight that more non-ethnic settlers, who came in large numbers through state-supported transmigration, have contributed to disputes over land, pushed ethnic groups out and caused overuse of natural resources. It is also clear from the findings that human security has suffered, since environmental damage and fewer resources have led to more competition for water and land used for farming. The displacement of ethnic groups due to land appropriation and official resettlements has severely hindered their survival, rendering many more vulnerable to human trafficking, migration, and illicit activities. Because of these factors, there is ongoing instability which has caused tension between groups and raised the risk of violence.

The demographic transition has aggravated environmental degradation, as evidenced by deforestation, soil erosion, and declining biodiversity, which have negatively impacted the livelihoods of ethnic groups. The construction of Kaptai

[63] Fardaus Ara, and Md Mostafizur Rahman Khan. "The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Promises and Performances." In *Migration, Regional Autonomy, and Conflicts in Eastern South Asia: Searching for a Home (Land)*, edited by Amit Ranjan and Diotima Chattoraj, 293–317. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28764-0_12.; Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), *Annual Report of 2023 on Human Rights Situation of CHT*, January 3, 2024, https://www.pcjss.org/pcjss-annual-report-of-2023-on-human-rights-situation-of-cht/.

Dam and expansion of monoculture plantations have also contributed to the ecological dam. The findings of the study respond to the key research question by addressing how demographic factors have influenced land use, caused social and political issues and put additional strain on the environment. These concerns are so connected that the study stresses the importance of tackling them all together. For these interrelated concerns, the study underscores the necessity of addressing these interrelated challenges. It is important that the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 is fully implemented, so that land disputes are resolved and ethnic groups receive their land rights. Secondly, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, afforestation, and strengthening environmental protection policies is vital to mitigate environmental degradation and reduce hazards such as landslides. Education, healthcare, and economic development tailored for ethnic groups should also be prioritised to enhance their human security. Mainstreaming ethnic population in policy formulation and implementation is paramount to achieving lasting peace and stability in the region. The study concludes that without addressing the issues created by demographic shifts and environmental degradation, human security in the CHT will continue to deteriorate, posing significant risks to both the region's ecological sustainability and socio-political fabric.