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# Village Common Forest and Livelihood of the Indigenous Community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

**Satish Chakma[1] & Dr. M. Meera[2]**

[1]Research Scholar, University of Mysore, Mysuru
[2]Director, Institute of Development Studies, University of Mysore, Mysuru

***Abstract:***

*The Chittagong Hill Tracts, south-eastern corner of Bangladesh, share the international boundary with Tripura and Mizoram state of India in the north and east, and Rakhaine state of Myanmar in the south corner of Bangladesh, a mountainous region where 11 indigenous tribal groups have been residing since inception with distinct culture, religion, ethnicity and languages. Their life and livelihood are both closely associated with the natural forest resources such as fuel wood, timber, non-timber product, bamboo, flora, fauna, and various medicinal herbs which have been extracted by the indigenous people from the forest and streams as well. As they are relatively dependent on forest, their life and livelihood are being insecure and jeopardised due to the degradation of forest incorporated with various factors. Hence, in order to ensure the life and livelihood of indigenous people, and to safe the forest from degradation VCFs (Village Common Forest), a traditional forest conservation method, has been adopted in the CHTs by the collective effort of the indigenous community. Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine the contribution of VCFs for the livelihood of indigenous tribal communities associated with forest and maintaining the sustainable environment. In this study, the primary focus has been given on the contribution of VCFs for indigenous people and secondary data have been used from published research articles, government survey reports, various publications, newspapers, and websites followed by the quantitative research method. However, in order to solve the environmental issues-government and non-government agency have to come forward maintaining the indigenous knowledge which help to preserve the sustainable environment.*

***Keywords:*** *Chittagong Hill Tracts, indigenous people, Village Common Forest, livelihood, forest resources.*

## Introduction

There are 11 indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh (BBS, 2022; Tripura et al., 2020; Roy, 2018). CHT is a region that

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has national importance in respect of natural resources, biodiversity, and ecosystem which provide timber, medicinal plants, natural beauties and streams, non-timber products, flora and fauna, etc. These natural resources are meticulously associated with the lives and livelihoods of the indigenous people (Dhali 2008). This is why indigenous people are considered to be the son of forests (Gain, 2018). Hence, more or less, the inhabitant community of the CHTs particularly indigenous people extracts the natural resources from the forest.

The conservation of sustainable biodiversity and environment is a major concern for the international community. In this regard, Bangladesh is not exceptional and it is, indeed equally, concerned about the conservation of the environment itself. Hence, the international declaration of Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro–Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992 was ratified by the Bangladesh government in 1994. Therefore, in order to protect the environment, Bangladesh has adopted many policies to conserve the forest-Forest (Amendment) Act 2000, Forest Policy Act 1994, Wildlife (Protection and Safety) Act 2012, Social Forestry (Amendment) Rules 2010, Forest Produce Transit (Control) Rules 2011, Brick Burning (Control) (Amendment) Act 2001, The Saw Mill (License) Rules 2012, and Bangladesh Biological Diversity Act 2012 (Jashimuddin, 2012).

It is, however, estimated that 17 percent land of Bangladesh is covered by classified or unclassified state forest. Among them 2.52 million hectors are covered with forest, 1.52 million hectors are managed by the Forest Department followed by 0.73 million hectors are unclassified state forests controlled by the Ministry of Land, 0.27 million hectors are village forest (Rahman, 2009). Likewise, Bangladesh's forest land has been classified into three categories-mangrove forests (occupied 6,01,700 hectares represent 4.07 percent total land and 40 percent forest land) followed by tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forest (6,70,000 hectare represents 4.54 percent landmass and 44 percent national forest), and tropical moist deciduous forest (1,20,000 hectares represent 0.81 percent land mass and 7.8 percent forest land). The CHTs are considered to be the tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forest (Rahman, 2009). However, forest of Bangladesh is illustrated in Table 1.

In this connection, Nang Thui, a Khyang indigenous woman expressed her feeling and fear "Nang Thui is suffering from depression because she is no longer able to earn. She is 50 years old. She has five children. She is frustrated with being just a housewife. She is not able to collect fuel today. Although her mother collected fuel wood from the forest until she was 60 years old, Nang Thui cannot, because the distance to the forest has greatly increased since the time of her mother. Moreover, if she wants to collect fuel, she has to go to

the deep forest which is very risky for her. This is because she has to walk six or seven kilometres to reach the deep jungle, where the wild edibles are available and safe from the forest security guards. While the distance to such a forest was only one to two kilometres in the past, she now needs a minimum of two or three hours to reach the destination. As an old woman, it is no longer possible for her to make this journey every day. For this reason, she has to depend totally on her husband. She can't take part in the decision-making process in her family as she makes no direct contribution to the family" (Dhali, 2008). At present, therefore, trouble has multiplied comparatively than in the earlier days. The gradual deterioration of forests enhances rapid shrinking of natural resources including wood, fuel wood, timber, water level, non-timber forest products, etc. In this situation, the village common forest (VCF) is the only source for the forest-dependent community.

**Table: 1. Various types of Forest (in hectares)**

| Types of Forest | Amount of forest |
|---|---|
| Hill Forest | 1377 |
| Natural Mangrove Forest | 610 |
| Planted Mangrove Forest | 200 |
| Sal Forest | 120 |
| Swamp Forest | 23 |
| Village Forest | 774 |
| Total | 3104 |

**Source:** Ministry of Forest Department, Bangladesh 2019

## Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows-

- To examine the significance of the natural resources of the indigenous community and how VCFs are contributing to maintaining a sustainable environment
- To study about the indigenous people's livelihood associated with forests.
- To study the emerging threats and challenges of VCFs and mechanism to preserve it from deterioration.

## Methods

This study mainly focuses on the VCFs and livelihoods of the indigenous tribal communities, and how and why they are mostly dependent on forest resources than the non-indigenous community. In this study, the secondary data have been used collected from the secondary sources of published research articles, government survey reports, various publications, newspapers, and websites, and followed the quantitative research method.

## Research area

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, south-eastern corner of Bangladesh, have been selected as the study area which once had been covered with natural forest when mono-cultural plantation has not been introduced. The people who reside in CHTs were dependent on forest for food to medicinal items, and thought to conserve the forest from childhood, and

jhum cultivation had been the mainstay for livelihood, streams and canals are the major providers of supplementary nutritional food and mineral, hunting was the primary source of meat provider, and above all, nature was the life and soul for the indigenous people in CHTs.

**The geographical location of the CHTs**

Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh is a hilly destination comprised by three hilly districts- Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and Bandarban. The three districts are predominantly inhabited by indigenous people who are mostly dependent on forest or agriculture as the main source of income. However, CHT shares the international border with Tripura and Mizoram states of India and the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Furthermore, it occupied a land of 13,295k2 represents one-tenth of the state territory (MoCHTA, 2022).

**The demographic composition of the CHTs**

CHTs belonged by to a diversified indigenous community before the colonization period with vibrant cultures, ethnicity, history, and religion. There are 11 distinct indigenous communities Chak, Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Mro, Pankhu, and Bowm who have been living in this location for decades. Hence, they are the prime dwellers in CHTs. Their culture, heritage, religion, tradition, dress code, physical appearance, cultivation method, lives, and livelihood pattern are remarkably distinct from the mainstream community. Among the 11 ethnic communities, Chakma is the largest (49%) and educated, and the Lushai is the smallest community (0.04%). The total population of the CHTs including Bengali is- 18,41,829 (1.11%) of the national average whereas the ethnic population constitutes around 9,20,217 (0.55%) (BBS, 2022).

**Livelihood pattern of the Indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Bangladesh is dominantly an agriculture-based country contribute to 50 percent employment opportunity and 70 percent rely on agriculture for their sustenance. This sector experienced massive progress in the past three decades from 3.2 percent to 70 percent followed by manufacturing 7.5 percent to 12.4 percent and service sector 6.2 percent to 23.5 percent. In case of GDP, agricultural sector contributes to 17.5 percent in 2009 to 12.68 percent in 2019 followed by manufacturing sector 25.3 percent in 2009 to 29.65 percent in 2019, and 53.2 percent in 2009 to 58.8 percent by the service sector (Imdad, 2021).

Chittagong hill tracts, a hilly region of the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh, are totally distinct from plain land by topography, biodiversity, location, climate, etc. The cultivation is also remarkably different from the rest of the country. As it is pertinent to mention that the land and forest for terrace cultivation became insufficient in CHTs. Jhum cultivation (Nath et al. 2005) is a traditional cultivation method cultivated

by indigenous people in the hilly areas and passed the traditional method of cultivation from one generation to another. In this context, a socio-economic baseline survey conducted by Barkat et al., (2009) in association with UNDP, Bangladesh, found 18 percent of the population in CHTs engaged in plough cultivation whereas 14 percent engaged in Jhum followed by business and jobs represent 3 percent and 3.5 percent respectively, and more than 9% found to be engaged in daily labour in farm and non-farm sector.

**Table 2 : Flora of Chittagong hill tracts**

| Local name | English name | Scientific name |
|---|---|---|
| Pan alu | Yam | Dioscores bulbifera |
| Dheki shak | Table fern | Angiopteris evecta |
| Kola thore | Plnatain stem | Musa ornate |
| Baruna shak | Indian lverue | Xanthoxylum rhetsa |
| Misti begun | Pea eggplant | Solanum spinosa |
| Ojan shak | Pellitary | Spilanthes calva |
| Lalom pata | Headache tree | Prenma obtusifolia |
| Kusumgulu | Bead tree | Elaeocarpus angustifolius |
| Thankuni | Centella | Centell asiatica |
| Dumurshumi | Pegeon pea | Cajanus cajan |
| Sanjna | Drumstick tree | Moringa oleifera |
| Roshko | Blood fruit | Syzygium balsameum |
| Tak begun | Solanum | Solanum virginianum |

**Source:** Chakma et al, (2020)

**Table 3: Fauna of Chittagong hill tracts**

| Local name | English name | Scientific name |
|---|---|---|
| Kakra | Crab | Liocarcinus vernalis |
| Taki mach | Taki fish | Channa puncpatus |
| Bela mach | Bailla | Awaous guamensis |
| Shamuk (choto) | Snail | Helix pomatia |
| Shamuk (boro) | Snail | Helix pomatia |
| Chingri mach | Shrimp | Macrobrachium rosenberghii |
| Beng | Frog | Litora caerulea |
| Choto puti | Fry | Puntius ticho |
| Kuchai | Gangetic mudeel | Monopterus cuchia |

**Source:** Chakma et al, (2020)

## Village Common Forest (VCF)

Village common forest is a traditional method of forest conservation system managed by the Forest User Group (FUG). It is a collective effort by the local community who reside adjacent to the forest keeping a substantial amount of forest land unharmed to grow the natural plants. Thus, it is called the repository of forest resources. The hilly region of CHTs was suitable for Jhum cultivation when population was normal and land was found to be adequate on which majority of the rural people depend on it.

## Threats and challenges of VCFs

Up to the first quarter of 21st century, CHTs of Bangladesh had been affluent with natural resources but unfortunately, it has changed remarkably due to the population explosion by in-migration from

plainland, unjustified government monocultural plantation, developmental programs, and declaration one-fourth of common land as the reserved forest which force to marginalized and demarcated the lives and livelihood of indigenous people. These projects severely affected on the livelihood of indigenous communities and hampered the entire biodiversity of the CHTs (Misbahuzzaman et al., 2008). As a result, it aggravated land and forest degradation, and reduce water levels in stream. In addition to that, though VCF is considered to be the stationed for animals' species that support the livelihood for local communities as well for example- water from springs and aquifers, fuelwood, timber, shrubs, non-timber product, medicinal herbs, fodder, construction materials, clean air, etc. are playing a crucial role to maintain biodiversity, but unfortunately, this sustainable system still remains exclusion from government policy for conservation consequently letting to damage the sustainable environment.

Gradual degradation of forest hampered livelihood and increased vulnerability to poverty and multiplying the drudgery of local people in CHT. The CHT is an indigenous people's inhabited area which approximately 50 percent of forest represents in Bangladesh **(**Nath and Inoue, 2009: 2014). Similarly, according to World Bank, approximately, there are 470 million indigenous people in the world who contribute 6 percent global population and provide 80 percent of biodiversity by a quarter of land in the world they occupied and 19 percent of them suffer from extreme poverty (World Bank, 2023). However, the major threat of rapid degrading environment identified as the growth of population, urbanization, and industrialization which are mutually responsible for the degradation of environment. As a result, relatively poor section of the population is being pushed to encroach into the natural forest.

**Mechanism of VCF**

As VCF is the collective effort of beneficiaries deal with the maintenance by Forest User Group (FUG) through the management committee headed by the Mouza headman or village head along with members. They oversee the entire process of VCF and pass regulation whether in a written form or oral basis, and decision may be taken to give permission for extraction. However, in CHTs, a survey conducted by Shining Hill, a local NGO, found 314 VCFs in CHTs. Generally, 129 are found in Rangamati district followed by 75 in Khagrachari and 110 in Bandorban district (Shining Hill cited in Chakma 2018). In this regard, Chiyal Jowl Pankhua, President of the Badol Haat VCF, Rangamati district opined that "we the indigenous people depend on the forest for livelihood. So, we have to protect the forest and its biodiversity. The VCF system is really effective for the purpose".

On 13-17 November 2020, a high-level delegation team of the United Nations

visited in CHTs, especially in Rangamati and Bandorban districts. The delegation team comprises UN Resident Coordinator Group Lewis, US Ambassador Charles Whiteley, UK High Commissioner Robert Chatterton Dickson, Norway Ambassador Espen Rikter Svendsen, UNDP Resident Representative Stefan Liller, UNFPA Country Representative Kristine Blokhus, FAO Country Representative Robert Simpson and UNICEF Country Representative Sheldon Yett in order to oversee the development of CHT. During the visit, they examined the impact of VCF and met with the Chairman of two District Council, the Deputy Commissioner, the Mong and Chakma Circle Chief, the Women Leaders, the Environmental NGO, and the CHT Development Board, and finally, they share and hear the experience of local communities' stories, challenges and gave some recommendations. Robert Chatterton Dickson opined that "This is my third visit to CHT. I am always struck by the development and challenges in the region and by the opportunities for the government, the UN development partners, and the communities themselves to work together for a sustainable future. I was particularly impressed by the impact of the VCF in improving water supplies in remote communities and hope this management of forest resources can be expanded to the benefit of all". And, they urged to the government of Bangladesh to come forward in order to achieve prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable CHTs that will lead to no one leaving behind (Gain, 2018).

**General discussion**

The livelihood and dependency on forests by indigenous people has a historical linkage and they know the maintenance of forest. For the monocultural plantation on the indigenous people's jhum land for profit maximisation let to degrading environment due to clear and fall of the natural forest. As a consequence, the fallow period is significantly decrease from 15-20 to 3-5 years nowadays, and similarly decreases the yield and production, and deplete the soil fertility. Again, however, it was found in Nath & Inoue (2009) study remarked jhum cultivation does not produce the expected production.

The rapid decrease of forest involved several causes and effects, and hence, local communities developed an alternative model for forest conservation called Village Common Forest. It is the source of natural resources. Bamboo is the dominant product in VCF and it has the association with indigenous communities in culture, customs, and rituals. In addition, bamboo has a crucial role to play from house construction to fences, and birth to death ceremonies. However, the resources of VCF one cannot extract whenever she/he wants. There is a paramount management committee in every VCF, and they fixed the extraction process and tenure. It may be 3–5-year but

in special cases- the construction of temple, school, or community resort, and underprivileged people who unable to buy the housing material, in this situation, special permission may be granted for extraction. On the other hand, in order to help the affected people of natural calamities, VCF resources may be sold out- trees, bamboo, and canes, etc. Therefore, the head of the village or Mouza plays a great role in respect of the VCF management.

## Recommendations

Some recommendations in order to protect the VCFs in CHT are as follows:

- Government intervention is necessary to save the VCF
- Illegal logging should be banned
- Local regulations may be imposed
- VCFs registration by government should initiate
- Training to beneficiary's community should be provided for VCF conservation
- Employment opportunities for unemployed should have to be created to abstain them from forest resource extraction.

## Conclusion

Indigenous people in the CHT are predominantly nature-based and hence, their lives, livelihood, culture, rites, and rituals are intrinsically connected with the forest. Therefore, some of the communities still don't have a specific God to worship but nature they consider to be the God. Consequently, it is assumed that how much they care the nature and how they exploited the forest. Many songs, stories, and folk songs have been introduced to personify the beauty and attributes of nature and forests. However, the environment of CHTs gradually deteriorating that generally affecting the indigenous people's livelihoods and environment. Due to the rapid degradation of forests, many places in CHTs such as Sajek in Rangamati and Simbuk in Bandorban lost water retaining capacity; consequently, the miseries of local community increased significantly. Monocultural plantations, rubber, teak, migration, tobacco cultivation, brick field, road construction and commercial forestry are responsible for degrading the sustainable environment in CHTs. In this case, VCFs are the magnificent invention as sustainable model invented by the indigenous people which support the monetary as well as fulfil the daily necessities. This sustainable system should not have to extinguish and collective efforts must be adopted jointly by the government and local community in order to ensure the existence of sustainable VCF system in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

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