

***Mro* Community and their Livelihoods in Bandarban District of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh**

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Abstract:

The primary objective of the study is to understand the life and livelihood of the Mro indigenous community in Bandarban district of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. CHT is comprised by 10 percent of the total land of Bangladesh and located in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh sharing the international border with India in the north-east and Myanmar in the South and Chittagong district and India in the west accustomed by 11 distinct indigenous tribal community. Racially, religious, language, ethnicity, dress code, food habit, livelihood, customs, culture, social formation, habit and housing pattern is quite diverse than the mainstream community. In addition to the aforesaid aspects, they are also internally varied community to community and religion to religion. Though they are distinct between and within indigenous tribal community; they are harmonious by nature, peace lover by faith and hard working by blood. The study attempted to explore the Mro community and their livelihood in Bandarban district of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. They are the fifth largest community among of the 11-native community in CHTs followed by the Krama religion that emerged from the collective faith of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity; who most of them exclusively depend on jhum cultivation for their livelihood followed by the natural resources' extraction for subsistence livelihood. However, their unique culture, religion, customs, dress code, language and housing formation are the foundation of their identity.

Keywords: *Mro community, livelihoods and their activities, forest dependency, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.*

Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are located in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh, a land that is bejewelled by diverse culture, religion, ethnicity, geography, politics, faith, and customs, as well as vibrant costumes that are remarkably

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distinct from the mainstream Bengali community (MoCHTA, 2022). In addition to the 11 distinct indigenous communities, illustrated below, there are also Bengali community (Hindu and Muslim), are residing in the pristine region of Bangladesh. The Chittagong Hill Tracts represent 10 percent of the total land area of Bangladesh (MoCHTA, 2022). However, due to the inaccessibility of the region, the majority of the people are dependent on agriculture and forest resources, followed by two major cultivation methods. First, wetland cultivation, which is cultivated in lowland or valley land; and second, high or slope land cultivation, locally known as *jhum* cultivation (Majumdar, 2013; Hossain and Ahmad, 2017). Thus, both methods are integrated with the lives, culture, and religion of the Mro community in the CHTs, depending on the availability of land. It is, therefore, the traditional cultivation method by which the indigenous communities produce their subsistence livelihood. Hence, due to the different geographical structure of the CHTs, the local ethnic communities are gravely dependent on *jhum* cultivation.

The 11 distinct ethnic communities represent only 0.55 percent of the total population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (BBS, 2022). Among the 11 ethnic communities, some of them represent further minorities in terms of number, including Lusai, Khiang, Khumi, and Chak communities. However, their numbers individually do not even exceed

four thousand. Lushai is the smallest community among the total 11 ethnic groups of CHTs, whose total number is estimated at only 380 individuals (BBS, 2022). However, the majority of them are residing in the Bandarban district of CHTs. Mro is one of the fifth largest communities and is considered the most backward of the 11 ethnic groups due to its juxtaposition with nature and residing in a remote area.

The majority of the Mro people were found to be relatively residing in five upazilas (sub-districts) of Bandarban district vis-à-vis Thanchi, Alikadam, Lama, Ruma, and Naikhyangchari upazilas, particularly in rural remote areas (Chowdhury et al., 2014), where modern facilities such as education, transportation, medical facilities, business accessibility, banking, electricity, etc. have entirely remained absent for decades (Chowdhury et al., 2009). Though several developments, policies, and programs have been implemented in CHTs since the Peace Accord in 1997, the light and effect of such developments have yet to be felt in the locality of the Mro community. Eventually, they are totally and systematically excluded from the modern world. In this context, some of the researchers referred to them as the nude community in CHTs (van Schendel, W., 2002). *Jhum* farming was the main occupation for the Mro community as well as other minority groups in CHTs. Therefore, *jhum* cultivation is nowadays considered the dominant agriculture,

while horticulture, hunting, small businesses, and the collection of non-timber products are the secondary income sources for them in remote areas (Chowdhury et al. 2014).

Objectives

The Mro community of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, particularly in Bandarban district, is considered one of the most backward communities in the hilly region. Their socio-economic and political representation has been taken out of focus by the majority of the indigenous community themselves on one hand and the mainstream community, including government, on the other. Hence, the study is undertaken based on the following two particular objectives:

- To study the socio-economic condition of the Mro tribe
- To understand how and why their livelihoods are associated exclusively with the forest.

Methodology

The integrated research method of both qualitative and quantitative research techniques has been applied in this study based on the secondary data that has been collected from the published reports of the government and non-government organizations. However, Bandarban district has been selected purposefully because the majority of the Mro community has been existing since immemorial time.

Result and discussion

The result and discussion section are the crucial part of the study. Generically,

it reflects on the in-depth introduction of ethnicity of the Mro community, their associated culture, religion, and customs; their living standards and eventually, their dependency on nature for livelihood. More or less degree, the indigenous communities in the CHTs usually depends on the natural forest for medicines, foods, nutrition, minerals, firewood and house construction materials. But the people who are residing in the remote areas they ultimately depend on nature. Among of them Mro community is one whose life is incorporated with forest.

Who are the Mro?

The Mro community is one of the 11 indigenous tribal communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman language group that is spoken by 52,455 Mro people (BBS, 2022; MHFW, 2011). They are explored to be dwelt in remote areas of Thanchi, Alikadam, Lama, Ruma, and Naikhyangchari upazilas in Bandarban district. In addition to that, a small segment of Mro people is seen to be residing in Rangamati district. In major societies, education fundamentally plays a pivotal role in development in respect of social, economic, cultural, religious, and political aspects, and education is found to have a correlation between and within knowledge, whether it is modern or traditional. In the context of education, the Mro community in Bolipara union of Thanchi upazila of Bandarban district found the zero-literacy rate (Chowdhury

et al. 2009) who are residing in the hilltops that are hardly reachable from the urban areas of Thanchi upazila, and they used to wear a typical traditional dress that almost seemed to be undressed. Above all, they are attempting their best to protect their uniqueness, culture, and lifestyle, as well as their major sources of subsistence livelihood, through their traditional farming system, popularly known as *jhum* cultivation, slash and burn, or shifting cultivation.

Ethnic composition in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is a land rich in ethnicity, culture, religion, dress, language, ritual, food habits, and a unique cultivation system that makes the hilly region more diverse than the other parts of Bangladesh. 11 distinct communities, for example, Chak, Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Mro, Pankhu, and Bawm, are living together following their respective cultures, religions, faiths, and customs.

Chakma is the majority community (48.8%), while Lusai is the minor community (0.04%). In the context of numbers, Mro is the fifth largest community (5.3%) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts among the ethnic communities. The majority of the indigenous tribal people reside in rural areas in scattered situations. Hamlet, or village, locally called *Para*, is the main abode of the indigenous tribal people, and each *para* is administered by the head of the village, called *Karbari*. Except that a temporary hut is built up on the *jhum* plot, which is eventually deserted when the harvest process gets over. Table No. 1 demonstrates the ethnic minority population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. However, the recent population and housing census in Bangladesh in 2022 enumerated that the total population of Chittagong Hill Tracts was 18,41,829, which represents only 1 percent of the total population of Bangladesh.

Table 1: Ethnic population distribution in CHTs

Communities	Male	Female	Total	%
Chak	1,555	1,522	3,077	0.03
Chakma	2,43,889	2,39,410	4,83,299	48.8
Marma	1,11,317	1,12,944	2,24,261	22.7
Tripura	78,183	78,395	1,56,578	15.8
Tonchonga	23,316	22,656	45,972	4.6
Khumi	1,951	1,829	3,780	0.4
Khiang	2,459	2,367	4,826	0.5
Lusai	189	191	380	0.04
Mro	26,742	25,713	52,455	5.3
Pankhoa/Pankho	943	914	1,857	0.2
Bom	6,659	6,534	13,193	1.3
Total	4,97,203	4,92,475	9,89,678	99.72

Source: BBS. (2022).

Land distribution in the agriculture sector

10 percent of the land area (13295 sq. miles) comprises the south-eastern hilly region called the Chittagong Hill Tracts (MoCHTA 2021; UNICEF, 2019). The term was coined by the British Administrator in 1860, when they officially annexed the CHT region under the domain of their administration (Chakma, 2022). However, in respect of the availability of agricultural land, particularly wet rice cultivation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, only 3.2 percent, which, according to the size of the population, is nominal or not sufficient to deal with the extensive agriculture. Hence, some parts of this region entirely depend on jhum cultivation. A prevalent scenario in respect of jhum cultivation is dominant in the two districts of Rangamati and Bandarban. Topographically, Bandarban comprises a mountainous area where the flat land is relatively scanty, and on the other hand, Rangamati is the largest district in Bangladesh, where farming land is not sufficient. In 1960, a hydroelectric development project was implemented by the then government in order to generate electricity for the welfare of the region's inhabitants as well as the entire Bangladesh, but the major target was to deal with the industries in cities, especially in Chittagong and Dhaka. It is the largest hydroelectric plant in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, it is seen

that the indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh have been given the opportunity to access electricity at a rate of approximately less than 37.5 percent, while they are using energy from kerosene at around 46.4 percent, which is equal to the national rural average, and 29.4 percent are using solar (Toufique et al., 2017). Consequently, this plant submerged around 40 percent of the arable land in CHTs and uprooted approximately 100 thousand indigenous people from their land without making any or partial compensation (Jean and Chakma, 2008; Prakash, 2013). However, the affected community is mostly identified as the Chakma community, which constitutes around 70 percent (Chakravarty, 2017; Prakash, 2013). Among them, the largest segment of the victims migrated to Arunachal Pradesh (earlier NEFA—at present comprised of Lohit, Changlang, and Papumpare in Arunachal Pradesh) (Chawngkunga, 1983), and the rest of the affected people settled down in the forest area, dealing with the insecure life. Hence, due to this project, cultivable land became scarce, and on the other hand, forest land became dominant. Simultaneously, the Forest Department has declared more than 50 percent of land to be taken into consideration under the Forest Department in order to expand the forestry that was previously considered community land by the indigenous communities. which several thousands of

people were evicted from their occupied land for the second time after the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam. Furthermore, approximately 64609 individuals of 12222 families of the indigenous people repatriated from Tripura state of India who crossed the border during the turmoil situation in CHTs (PCJSS, 2021) within 1986 took shelter in Tripura state of India in order to be safe from the torture and persecution perpetrated jointly by the security forces of the state and settler Bengali migrated from plain district. Table No. 2 addresses the land distribution of CHTs in various farming and non-farming sectors.

Table 2: Land use capacity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

Class	Suitability	Land area (%)
Class A	Suitable for paddy cultivation	3.2
Class B	Suitable for horticulture	2.90
Class C	Suitable for tree crops with intrusive soil conservation practices	15.50
Intermediate class between C and D	Miscellaneous use	1.40
Class D	Suitable for forestry alone	77.00

Source: Nishat, A and Biswas, S. R. (2005).

Demography of the CHTs

According to the land size of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the population is growing faster, which is leading to exceeding the minimum land capacity. However, the inconsistency growth of non-tribal population from plain districts into CHTs is considered to be a critical problem that not only contributes to reducing the land size but also affects the lives of the tribal people, demography, harmony, environment, and biodiversity in CHTs, gravely threatening and jeopardizing the lives and livelihood of the local community. The density of the population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh varies remarkably from region to region and district to district. In the case of Khagrachari district, it is, however, seen that the density of population is 243 per sq. km, while Rangamati and Bandarban represent 106 and 98 persons, respectively. Hence, the average density of the population in CHTs represents 135 per sq. km. against the national average of 1265 per km² (3,277 people per mi²). Table no. 3 reflects the demography of CHTs.

Table 3: Demographic Profile of Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

Particulars	Khagrachari	Rangamati	Bandarban	CHT
Total population	668,944	650,079	436,950	1,755,973
Share of population in the division (%)	2.16	2.10	1.41	6.67
Total under-eighteen population	265,391	257,907	173,351	696,649
Total under-five population	69,948	67,976	45,690	183,614
Population density per sq. Km.	243	106	98	132
Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	117	61	35	75

Source: UNICEF (2019).

Activities carried out by the Mro people

The indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh engaged in various domestic and non-domestic activities throughout the year. Due to their prime dependence on natural resources, the indigenous people's activities significantly vary from those of other sections of the population, particularly the Bengali community, who do not rely on natural resources. Hence, throughout the year, indigenous people accomplished the work based on the month, and every month they produced new activities. However, the Mro community also engaged with various work from January to December. Hunting, harvesting the forest product, and Jhum cultivation are the prime activities carried out by the Mro community. In the context of the

activities, some of the work is only in the domain of women, such as fetching water from the stream, caring for and rearing domestic animals, cooking food, collecting fuel wood, weeding the jhum field, and taking care of children and old people. On the contrary, some of the work is exclusively carried out by men, such as clearing the forest for jhum cultivation, taking wood from the forest, clearing the debris in the jhum field, carrying the cash crop product, hunting wild animals, etc. Furthermore, some work is gender neutral and can be done both male and female together, such as harvesting paddy, cotton, vegetables, the construction of a house, sowing seeds, burning the field, etc. Table no. 4 is the flow chart of the annual activities carried out by the Mro community in Bandarban district.

Table 4: Annual activity calendar of the Mro tribe in Thanchi, Bandarban

Month	Activities
January	Hunting of deer, birds, selection of Jhum land.
February	Cutting the jungle in the Jhum land.
March	The cut jungle remains as usual to facilitate drying.
April	Burning of dried plant materials. Unburned materials are collected and kept in heap in one place and further burning was done 7-10 days after the first burning.
May	After the first shower, planting of banana and gada flower (marigold) was done followed by rice.
June	Planting continues, 1st weeding was done in rice.
July	2nd weeding done, insecticide application done in rice, harvesting of pine apple.
August	Harvesting of rice, maize and vegetables.
September	Harvesting of cotton, sesame, vegetables, later rice (koyil dhan).
October	Harvesting of remaining cotton, Cow-killing Ceremony (Chia-Chot-Plai).
November	Jhum finished.
December	Hunting starts in the jungle and forests.

Source: Chowdhury et al. (2007).

Preferences of the wild animals for consumption

Forest resources contribute to the livelihoods of millions of ethnic minority population such as wild foods, fodder, construction materials, and medicinal herbs. Bangladesh has 2.52 million ha of tropical forest ecosystems, amounting to 10 percent of its total land area. More than two thirds of the population live in rural areas and is directly or indirectly depend on forests. Chittagong Hill Tracts comprise 10 percent of the country's total land, but they constitute almost 43 percent of the total land area in the region and are either natural, planted, or grasslands with scatter timber trees and bamboo (Ahammad et al., 2019).

Diversified food is always seen to be consumed by the tribal communities in the world. They extract various types of food items from the forest. Along with that, they even harvest some sorts of wild animals, which helps them to meet their nutritional needs. The indigenous people in the CHTs of Bangladesh have been exclusively dependent on the forest resource for some decades. Due to the development of agriculture and access to market facilities, a small segment of the population became reluctant to extract forest resources. Besides that, most of the indigenous people are still relying on forest products, particularly in rural communities. They extract vegetables, fuel wood, medicinal plants, flora and fauna, fruits, non-timber products such as cane, bamboo, sun grass, creepy plants,

and hunt wild animals for nutritional supplements, etc. As a source for them, rivers and forests are considered to be the best storehouses of natural resources. However, several factors are associated with the reduction of forest resources. Hence, due to the overexploitation of natural resources, the rapid increase in population and rapid increase of the value of forest resources are the prime sources of reducing forest resources. Except the vegetables, it is, however, seen that the Mro community in Bandarban district harvests numerous wild animals, as well as other indigenous communities in CHTs. Tabel no. 5 illustrates the wild animals preferred by the Mro community.

Table 5: Top ten animals preferred for hunting by Mro tribal in Bandarban district

Income category of farmers			
Rank	Rich	Medium	Poor
1	Wild boar	Wild boar	Deer
2	Monitor	Monitor	Monitor
3	Python	Wild cow	Talking bird/Parrot
4	Wild cow	Jungle fowl	Hornbill
5	Monkey	Fishing cat	Wild boar
6	Jungle fowl	Leopard	Wild elephant
7	Snail	Frogs	Snail
8	Tortoise	Tortoise	Jungle fowl
9	Crab	Monkey	Fox
10	Frogs	Crab	Mongoose

Source: Chowdhury et al. (2007).

Fuelwood used by the Mro community in Bandarban

The indigenous people in the world gained sufficient knowledge to deal with the forest resources. They know better how, when, and what they should extract and use. Hence, their dependency rate on forests is comparatively higher than that of the non-tribal population. In the present era, the tribal people are therefore massively affected by climate change, which has made their livelihoods insecure. Lynn et al. (2013) conducted a study in order to understand climate change and its impact on the tribal people of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes. They find that tribal people depend on forests gravely in order to extract a wide variety of natural resources, such as natural fungi, plants, and animals' species, for foods, medicines, ceremonies, community health, and economic health from generation to generation. Due to climate change, the impact directly affects the culture, economy, and traditional way of life of tribal people. However, the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh are not exceptional. Due to climate change, the indigenous people of that region suffer a lot during the summer when water scarcity becomes widespread and acute that severely affecting their lives. Unabated destroying of the natural forests that retain high water levels is considered to be one of the causes of climate change in CHTs. As a result, the way of life of indigenous people is going to change radically along

with the occupation. Furthermore, firewood is the traditional source of energy for indigenous people, collected from the forest. The native people in CHTs, including the Mro community, possess good knowledge about the longevity of fire depending on the varieties of trees or woods. Hence, they prefer the trees illustrated below in table no. 6 for firewood. Miah and Chowdhury (2022) estimated that the Mro people at Bolipara Union of Bandarban district, each family of the Mro community, collected fuel wood approximately 835 kg every month for consumption. It is not only the Mro people who depend on wood for energy but also all the communities who are residing in rural areas. However, there are no alternative facilities available in CHTs for energy; fuel wood is the only source of energy.

Table 6: Species used for energy by the Mro tribes.

Bengali name	Local name	Scientific name
Assar	Uileeb	Grewia microcos L.
Bhadi	Klowching	Bischofia javanica Blume
Bormala	Ramgat ching	Callicarpa arborea Roxb.
Bura	Hapllaoching	Macaranga denticulate (Blume) Mull.Arg.
Dumur	Lohotching	Ficus hispida L.f.
Gutyutya	Uimiaching	Bursera serrate Wall.

		Ex Colebr.
Hargoja	Uipeng ching	Dillenia pentagyna Roxb.
Jaigga dumur	Lohotching	Ficus racemosa L.
Kadam	Phongfarching	Anthocephalus chinensis (Lam.) Rich. ex Walp
Kanak	Changmeching	Schima wallichii Choisy
Nishinda	Quihokching	Vitex peduncularis Wall. ex Schauer in A. DC.
Roinna	Jukkakching	Aphanamixis polystachya (Wall.) R. Parker
Silkoroi	Singchoa	Albizia procera Benth.

Source: Miah, Md. D and Chowdhury, M. S.H (2004).

Discussion

The geography as well as the topography of the CHTs are covered with hills, valleys, and dense semi-tropical forest. It is generally comprised of three hilly districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban, where 11 distinct indigenous communities are recorded who have been dwelling for decades (Hasan, M. T. 2014). He further opined that the indigenous people in Bandarban district still lag behind in respect of education, farming knowledge, access to information, modern culture, modern

inputs, and government facilities such as loan facilities, and they suffer from food shortages because of the traditional farming system, which cannot ensure their livelihood for the whole year. Hence, Hossain and Ahmad (2017) find that most of the Mro family entirely depends on jhum cultivation in Bandarban district. Jannat et al. (2018) attempted to highlight the dependency of local people on forests and the contribution of forests to the livelihoods of rural people in CHTs. They find that there is a relationship between education level and dependency on forests. Furthermore, they suggest that providing education facilities to forest-dependent communities and alternative income-generating activities may be effective tools to reduce forest dependency.

"Historically, the village of Bandarban has constituted something more than merely a physical aggregation of households. Ritually, it has been set apart by local guardians' spirits and religious shrines; economically, it has represented a self-sufficient community; socially, it has formed the unit of status, of reciprocity, and of social insurance; politically, it has generally been a unit of dispute settlement as well as of administration and taxation, until the massive economic changes since the 1980s, which undermined much of the economic basis of village autonomy".

Mro community, being close to nature, their lives and livelihood are encircled and fastened with forest. Forests, in some respects, play a great role in producing

the livelihood of indigenous populations in CHTs. In the study area, Chowdhury and Miah (2003) found that the natural resources were depleting at a fast pace due to the settlement of non-tribal people within and between the vicinity of Mro people. As a result, their life, livelihood, movement, and practice of jhum cultivation were significantly demarcated and reduced.

Conclusion

11 distinct ethnic minority groups of people who bear different cultures, religions, faces, ethnicities, beliefs, and subsistence lifestyles than the other mainstream population living in CHTs, incorporating their own values, culture, and religion. Though the land area of CHTs is comprised of only 10 percent, its diversity in various aspects is more affluent than that of the rest of Bangladesh. Mro community is one of the 11 communities of CHTs concentrated mainly in Bandarban district, whereas a small segment of the Mro people is also inhabiting the nearest district of Rangamati, but in Khagrachari district, their settlement has not been recorded. However, Mros are believed to be a Tibeto-Burman group of people, extensively living in the remote area of Bandarban district, a south-eastern hilly region of Bangladesh.

Jhum cultivation is the primary source of subsistence livelihood, while horticulture, hunting, small businesses, and the collection of non-timber products

are considered secondary sources of income for them. The associated community is not only marginalized in respect of population, but they also carry on their shoulders the status of the poorest ethnic community, among others. Moreover, their education status is also further regressive than that of the other communities in CHTs. However, for the development or upliftment of the Mro community and to ensure their equal status with the other progressive communities in respect of basic necessities such as education, health, economic, social, and political representation, the government should have to take constructive or viable steps. And the facilities that are available in urban areas, more or less, are expected to be established equally in the locality of the Mro community and furthermore, the special focus should have to be given in order to foster their standard of living.

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