“Bangladesh Has No Indigenous People”

To prevent the extinction of Adibashis, the Bangladesh government must recognize their right to self-determination.

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Image: Christian Erni/IWGIA via The New Humanitarian

In 2011, the Bangladesh government enacted the "Small Ethnic Group Cultural Institute Law", an act that would classify the 40-45 non-Bengali ethnic tribes as "ethnic minorities". On the eve of enactment, the contemporary Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni, said "Bangladesh does not have any indigenous population"; a similar claim had been made by the Bangladeshi delegate to the 9th UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues a year before. In 2012, an internal official memo, circulated in the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, stated "steps should be taken to publicize/broadcast in the print and electronic media that there are no Indigenous people in Bangladesh".

These statements are not isolated remarks made by ultranationalist or poorly informed bureaucrats, but rather a reflection of the government's attitude towards "ethnic minorities" since the inception of Bangladesh in 1971. In 1972, Bangladesh ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, which guarantees the protection of minority rights through "progressive integration", but it has not yet ratified ILO's Convention 169, created in 1991 in response to the criticism that Convention 107 was assimilationist. Convention 169 adopted the term "self-determination" and remains the only binding instrument dedicated to the rights of Indigenous peoples. Bangladesh's refusal to ratify Convention 169 continues a legacy of tribal populations being viewed as "alien others" in the Bengali-Muslim majority state. From constitutional amendments to economic development policy, a two decades long civil war, and continued oppression, the history of the indigenous people in Bangladesh is one of their right to self-determination being denied.

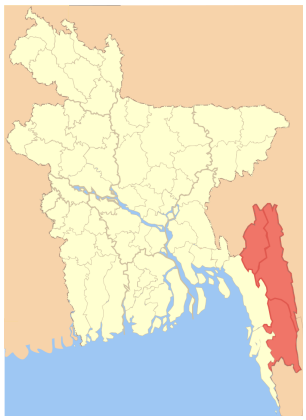
The fate of any population in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to 200 years of British colonial policy. But to solely lay the blame on the British and argue that nascent post-colonial states have inherited land conflicts between "ethnic minorities" and majority populations, as the Center for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB) has done in their monograph *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story* (1992), overlooks the policy decisions the subsequent governments of these states have enacted to prevent indigenous "self-determination". The *Adibashis* (indigents) of Bangladesh have not just lost their lands as minorities in successive colonial administrations, but their very way of life. Broken promises by governments, forced assimilations, and state repression threaten their very existence, slowly driving them towards extinction.

The Politics of Exclusion

> *...no person other than a Chakma, or a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, or the State of Tripura, shall enter or reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit...*
>
> - Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation (1900)

The ethnic tribes that make up 1-2% of the population in Bangladesh are scattered throughout the country, except in a few pockets where they are concentrated. The most prominent and conflict-ridden of those is the Chittagong Hill Tracts region (CHT) comprising Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari districts. The CHT is home to 12 ethnic groups, collectively called Jumma peoples: Chakma (the majority by numbers), Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Mro, Mrung/Riang, Bawm, Khami, Chak, Pangkho, Khyang and Lushai. The Mro are considered the original inhabitants of CHT, while most other tribes migrated into the area between the 15th and 19th centuries (historical accounts remain disputed as to the earliest inhabitants).

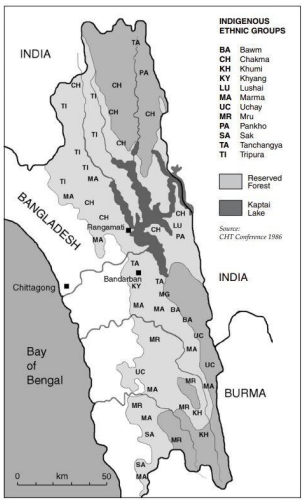
The CHT region was officially formed by the British in 1860 due to administrative exigencies, and in 1900, the CHT regulation divided up the region into three taxation circles under the Chakma, Bohmong and Marma



Map showing the location of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in current day Bangladesh. Source: Wikipedia

chiefs. The tribal chiefs' power, however, was restricted to tax collection and tribal courts. This regulation was put in place for two main reasons: first, to ward off increasingly frequent raids on government property by Kuki tribes (ultimately suppressed through full-scale military operation) and second, to increase revenue by maximizing land rent. Under this regulation, in return for CHT being administered as an "excluded area" where immigration of Bengalis was prohibited, the local chiefs agreed to provide labor when requisitioned by the British government. This immigration "ban" in reality was a classic "divide and conquer" colonial policy – high quality land was given to European entrepreneurs and Gurkhas (British East India company soldiers recruited from hill regions in Nepal) were resettled in the area while Bengalis were denied entry. A 1920 amendment essentially gave control of CHT to the Governor General, entrenching British administrative and financial interests, while sowing further discontent among Bengalis and the tribal peoples. A 1933 amendment made it easier for Bengali settlers to enter the region, thus betraying the supposed intent of the regulation.

The British set up a unique land tenure policy in CHT compared to the rest of Bengal: instead of the *zamindari* system, the land belonged exclusively to the government, who didn't recognize the land rights of the tribal chiefs. Between 1892-1921, when the majority of the land leases were handed out, tenants only received *amalnamas* (orders of possession) that amounted to little more than bare permission to cultivate land. This set the conditions for tribal peoples to lose their lands in the tumult of the 1947 Partition, as well as the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh, through enforcement of technocratic mechanisms of deciding who the land belongs to.



Map showing the distribution of the Jumma peoples across the CHT. Source: IWGIA

The scarcity of cultivable land in CHT (less than 5%) meant harsh living conditions for its inhabitants, as attested to in W.W. Hunter's 1876 statistical account of Bengal. A 1928 survey committee report showed that all existing trade and sale of crops in CHT was controlled by Bengalis; a 1951 census report showed continuation of this trend – across 66 *bazars* (markets), only a handful of shops belonged to tribal peoples. These bazars were established to deal with crop surpluses thanks to plough cultivation in CHT, introduced by Bengali settlers and the British in the late 19th century. The tribes had previously relied on traditional *jhum* (swidden) cultivation for subsistence farming – while more ecologically beneficial, it required large areas per family. Facing increased settlement and pressure from the British to raise revenue, the tribes adopted plough cultivation in 1947, accelerating the transition to a market economy. Thus, while the tribal chiefs had wanted to become self-reliant and preserve the land for their people, colonial policies that made them economically dependent on Bengali settlers gave rise to antipathy between the two colonized populations.

The 1947 Partition aggravated the colonial politics of exclusion. The Bengal Boundary Commission paid little heed to the requests of the Chakma elite and their allies in Congress, who wanted CHT to be part of India given the region's non-Muslim majority. The Commission secured the port of Chittagong for commercial extraction and to compensate Pakistan for losing parts of Punjab. In a desperate attempt, Chakma leader Sneha Kumar Chakma raised the Indian flag in Rangamati on Aug 14, 1947; simultaneously, Marmas hoisted the Burmese flag in Bandarban given their ancestral ties to Myanmar.

The nascent Pakistani government took notice of these acts. Coming into power, they banned the only tribal political organization (Hill Tracts People's Organization), but enfranchised the tribal peoples in 1956. Ayub Khan's government in 1962 removed the "excluded area" status of CHT, and resettled Muslim refugees in the region. With the emigration of many tribal peoples across the border during Partition, the demographics of the region started changing drastically. It is crucial to note that the

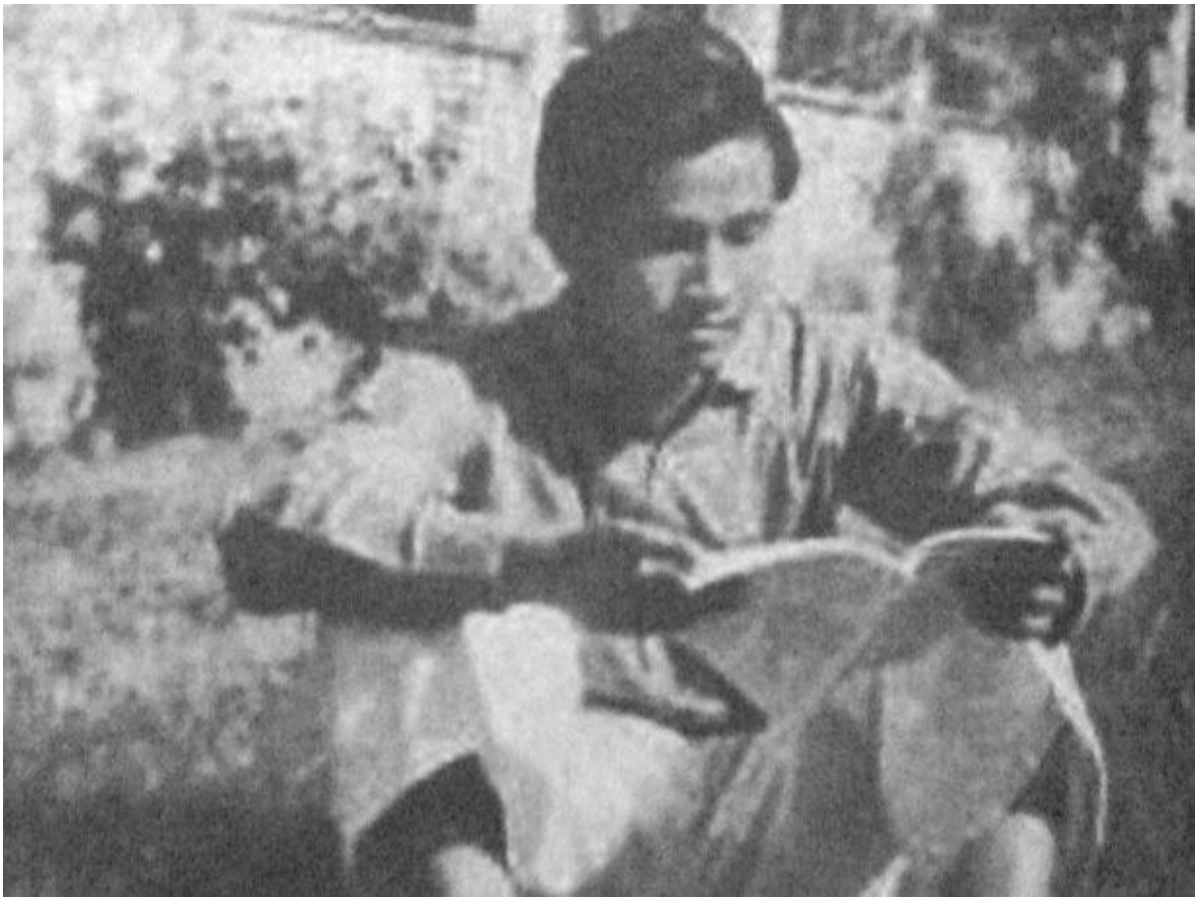
1952 Bengali language movement, which carried the seeds of Bengali ethnonationalism and the 1971 liberation war, did not make any overtures to the tribal peoples, despite their own rebellions against the Pakistani government that set the stage for the mass uprising.

The Struggle for a Jummaland

> *I am a Chakma. I am not a Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh — Bangladeshi.*
>
> - M. N. Larma (1972)

The Pakistani government's attitude towards the tribes was ambivalent. It did not significantly engage with them, while its scant modernization efforts in East Pakistan (as compared to West Pakistan) more generally ended up displacing tribal populations from their ancestral lands. For instance, the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the CHT, with help from USAID, submerged 40% of cultivable land, displacing 10,000 families. The rehabilitation plan was poorly carried out, with half the families given only a third of their original holdings in inferior quality land. The rest were never resettled and large numbers of Chakmas crossed the border over to India. In a 1979 survey, 93% of the affected families reported they were economically self-sufficient before dam construction.

Previous efforts to form political organizations dedicated to the rights of Jumma peoples had fizzled out or were suppressed by authorities. With an increase in literacy rates, especially among Chakmas, the *Pahari Chatra Samity* (PCS, Hill Students Association) was formed with Marxist principles in 1962. Members of the PCS, M.N. Larma and his brother Shantu Larma, went on to form the Rangamati Communist Party in 1970; M.N. Larma was the first tribal student leader to go to jail for participating in mass demonstrations against Ayub Khan's government in 1969. In the 1970 general election, M.N. Larma was elected as an independent candidate for East Pakistan Assembly, while Chakma chief Tridiv Roy was elected to the National Assembly.



M.N Larma was a Jumma Chakma politician, member of parliament, and founder of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and Shanti Bahini. Image: Jum Journal

In the Bengali narrative, the Jummas are believed to have opposed the liberation war in 1971 – a misconception that has nonetheless provided the basis for discrimination against Jummas in Bangladesh. While it is true that Tridiv Roy was a Pakistani delegate to the UN in 1971 and spoke in support of a united Pakistan, hundreds of Jummas joined the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters) but their enthusiasm was met with suspicion by the Awami League (AL) leadership and local Bengali commanders. Many of the Chakma freedom fighters were not given their due recognition till decades later, as the case of Nayek Subedar Bir Bikram U.K. Ching and eleven others show. But the poison of this misconstrued narrative had done its work: in Dec 1971, overzealous freedom fighters attacked tribal villages, driving away the residents deeper into the forest. These acts only served to further alienate the tribes from the Bengali majority in liberated Bangladesh.

After Bangladesh's independence, M.N. Larma and CHT delegates tried to convince Sheikh Mujib and his government, and the authors of the country's constitution, to retain the 1900 CHT Regulation, which granted autonomy to CHT, and recognize their ethnicities as indigenous. Mujib denied this request, and famously proclaimed that everyone in Bangladesh was Bengali, resulting in M.N. Larma's outburst quoted above. More insidiously, Mujib had threatened to settle thousands of Bengalis in the CHT region if the Jummas didn't accept his verdict. He reiterated as much during his visit to Rangamati ahead of the 1973 general elections, but promised to pay special attention to the needs of the CHT region.

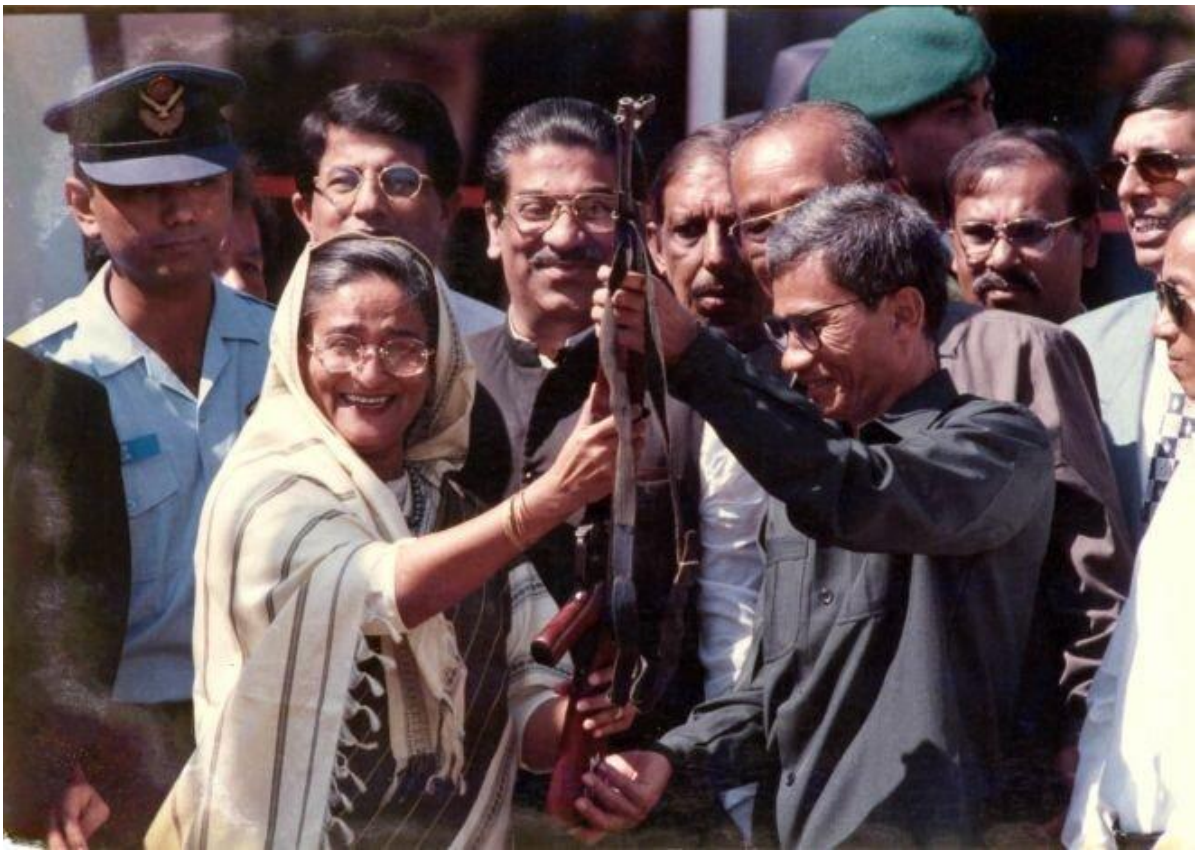
In response, the Larma brothers formed the *Parbatya Chottogram Jana Samhiti Samiti* (PCJSS, Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Solidarity Party) in 1972; a year later, its armed wing, the *Shanti Bahini* (Peace Brigade) was formed. The PCJSS reclaimed the term "Jumma" to denote the collection of the ethnic tribes in CHT ("Jumma" had previously been used in a derogatory manner by Bengali settlers to refer to the CHT tribes). Although Mujib had planned to uproot any armed rebellion at its embryonic stage with the help of India, his assassination in 1975 postponed any such plans. In a *realpolitik* twist, the Indian government provided Shanti Bahini with weapons, training and safe haven to destabilize the succeeding government which had a more Islamist orientation and U.S. influence, and the organization carried out its first operation against the Bangladesh military in late 1976.

The Ziaur Rahman government, coming to power after Mujib's assassination, handled the insurgency through a two-fold assimilationist approach. First, it completely militarized the region, bringing the ratio of armed forces to CHT residents to 1:5 (one-third of the Bangladesh Army still remains engaged in the area). And second, it pursued an economic approach to assimilate the Jumma people by establishing, with the support of foreign donors, the CHT Development Board (CHTDB). The CHTDB undertook major infrastructure development projects in several sectors, and while it provided some benefits to the Jummas, it also brought 400,000 Bengali settlers to the region. From 1974 to 1981, the percentage of Bengalis in CHT rose from 26% to 41%.

Members of Shanti Bahini . Image: Ama Jumo Mon Ghorot,Gop Madibong Jun Porot

On the other hand, military operations in response to the 1976 Shanti Bahini attack started escalating, with several massacres taking place between 1977 and 1992, resulting in the death of hundreds of Jummas and the emigration of thousands to India. Subsequent military governments escalated the military operations, aided by settler Bengalis who were emboldened to carry on autonomous attacks on Jumma settlements under self-organized village defense parties.

By the early 1990s, the internecine conflict and the increasing ferocity with which the Bangladesh Army and settlers responded brought on a wave of domestic and international inquiry commissions. Leftists such as Rashed Khan Menon and Humayun Azad, along with Jumma politicians in AL, pressured Khaleda Zia's government to bring about a ceasefire. Meanwhile, the Jumma insurgency was losing steam – a rift within the PCJSS led to M.N. Larma's assassination in 1983. The dissident faction, under Priti Kumar Chakma, surrendered in 1985. In fear of their lives, Jummas continued to flee over the border and become refugees in India. In 1996, when AL came to power, Shantu Larma, contemporary leader of PCJSS, flew to Dhaka to participate in peace talks. After two decades of fighting, the CHT Peace Accord was finally signed in December 1997.



Sheikh Hasina and PCJSS President Santu Larma pose with a rifle after signing the 1997 Peace Accord. Image: The Daily Star

☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒/*Oi Pahare Julum Chole* (Torture goes on in the Hills)

☒☒☒☒ ☒ ☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒☒*! / Why shall we not resist*
☒☒☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒*/ They do whatever they want*
☒☒☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒☒☒☒ */ Settlements razed to dust*
☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒ ☒☒☒☒☒☒☒ */ Forests turned to desert*

- Kabita Chakma (1999)

The Peace Accord neither stopped settler violence against the Jummas nor granted them the right of self-determination. While the PCJSS had held out for some form of autonomy in the region and the recognition of Jummas as *Adibashis* (indigenous) in the constitution, the Peace Accord denied both. In that sense, the PCJSS was forced into submission through this accord, resulting in a split within the party – the dissidents formed the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) in 1997. The rivalry between UPDF and PCJSS was further aggravated by Bengali political forces that exploited it to delay implementing the accord. But the accord itself didn't address the roots of the problem – the settlement of Bengalis in CHT as a counterinsurgency strategy and land rights for the Jummas. Even though the accord established a Land Commission, which promised a cadastral survey, the Jummas were left in the dark about how it was going to be performed.

The violence against the Jummas continued, resulting in many more tragedies between 1997 and 2010. CHT also became increasingly Islamized thanks to the influx of Saudi funding for *madrasas* (religious schools) – between 1982-2001, the number of madrasas in CHT grew forty times. Jumma children were even abducted or bought off by settlers and sent to madrasas outside the CHT; forced marriages between Muslim settlers and Jumma women was carried out as part of counter-insurgency tactics. The political sphere saw the rise of the nationalist-Islamist coalition formed by BNP and Jamaat, who, in opposition to the AL government, dubbed the accord as handing over CHT to India. The election of this coalition to power in 2002-05 further emboldened the Bengali settlers to settle further into Jumma dominant areas such as Sajek valley. In the 2006-08 elections, the Election Commission denied both PCJSS and UPDF the eligibility to contest in national elections, further hobbling prospects of Jumma self-determination.

The Bangladesh government's approach in CHT was and continues to be guided by a confluence of military and economic strategies. While early attempts were made at overall infrastructure development, starting in 2000s, the focus shifted to one of commodification of Jumma peoples and their lands, mainly through eco-tourism. The Bangladesh Army, in line with its predecessor the Pakistani Army, engages in several profiteering enterprises through its welfare trust *Sena Kalyan Sangstha*. These economic activities remain outside the jurisdiction of the civilian government and are not subject to any regulatory scrutiny. Given the military presence in the region, the Army decided to pursue tourist developments starting in 1990, primarily by evicting Jumma families. By 2014, the military had set up two luxury resorts in Sajek valley, in a relatively short distance from where 35 Jumma houses were burned down by Bengali settlers. Similarly, the Nilgiri resort in Bandarban area led to the eviction of 200 Marma and Mro families. More recently, the Mro community has been protesting the construction of a 5-star hotel in Bandarban.

Members of the Mro indigenous community protesting against the building of a resort on their ancestral land. Image: Uting Marma via Eco Bussiness

Anthropologist Hana S. Ahmed depicts these resorts as securitized enclosures, where tourists enjoy natural beauty under strict military surveillance. Sajek remains one of the most prominent tourist sites – and the most policed. As part of the CHT, Sajek is also one of the poorest regions in the nation (65% of population live below the poverty line). At these resorts, the Jummas become a "spectacle" through state and military-sponsored cultural festivals and beauty contests. Sex trafficking, especially of underage Jumma girls, is also rampant; this follows the trend of rape, abduction and killing of Jumma women by Bengali settlers and military in the decades prior. There is little legal respite for Jummas seeking justice against discrimination and abuse – even the highly publicized abduction of Kalpana Chakma, the fiery 16 year old secretary of Hill Women's Federation, in 1996 has not yet been resolved.

Organizing Secretary of the Hill Women's Federation Kalpana Chakma and her two brothers were abducted on 12 June 1996 from her home allegedly by the Bangladesh army. She remains missing while no one has been tried for her disappearance. Image: Daily Star

Life is Not Theirs

The struggles of the Jummas for their self-determination serves as an archetype for other ethnic tribes not just in Bangladesh, but across the Indian subcontinent. In *Tribal Peoples, Nationalism and the Human Rights Challenge*:*The Adivasis of Bangladesh* (2005), Tone Bleie details the rise of armed struggles across the extended Northeast in the Indian subcontinent, from Nagaland, Mizoram to Assam. Most of these armed struggles were carried out by tribes imbued with a Marxist-Leninist or Maoist philosophy; tragically, there was little coordination among groups across the states. In both India and Bangladesh, mainstream communist parties were strangely uninterested in the liberation struggles of the ethnic tribes.

Bleie's work further highlights the plight of the Santals and Oraons, the Adibashis inhabiting Northwest Bangladesh, who were cheated out of their lands by British, Pakistani and then Bengali governments. While they were active participants in the Nachol rebellion, after 1971, the Santals lost their lands to Bengalis through the Enemy Property Act and other technocratic measures. The lack of panethnic solidarity, especially across borders, warrants more investigation, but with vanishing ancestral lands and their livelihood threatened, in no small part by capitalism, the fragmentation is easier to understand.

It is undeniable that at the heart of these conflicts lies the question of land. As one Bangladesh army general remarked in 1977: "we only want their land". In the landmark report "Life is Not Ours" (1991), the CHT Commission noted that the only way to solve the CHT situation would be to re-institute the traditional land rights system. The ILO Convention 169 for indigenous peoples says as much, which explains why the Bangladesh government refuses to ratify it — to recognize the Jummas and other Adibashis as indigenous would be to concede their lands back to them. But land is never just the ground they walk upon — it defines their way of life. It is not that the colonizers do not recognize that, but precisely because of this recognition, land-grabbing becomes a method of subjugation. The British made the Santals cut down their ancestral Sal forests, while the Forestry department of postcolonial Bangladesh continues along the same arc as one of the largest land-grabbers in the country.

The list of crimes committed by the Bangladesh government against the Jummas and Adibashis is long. Any discussions on reparations or justice must begin with "land back". As long as their ancestral lands are held captive, their life will not be theirs – preventing their extinction must begin with recognizing their right to self-determination.

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Retrieved on 22nd January 2026 from jamhoor.org
Terminology for indigenous peoples in this essay has been used as discussed by Hana S. Ahmed in "Tourism and State Violence in Chittagong Hill Tracts" and Tone Bleie in "Tribal Peoples, Nationalism, and the Human Rights Challenge: The Adivasis of Bangladesh".
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