

*Nur Ahmed*

## THE RECURRENCE OF SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS (CHT): EXPLORING ROOT CAUSES

### Abstract

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh have long been plagued by recurring security challenges which have deep historical roots and continue to complicate the region's stability. This paper explores the underlying causes of these persistent security issues by examining socio-political, historical, and economic factors. A comprehensive understanding of the region's security dynamics requires a retrospective analysis of root causes. Using a qualitative research approach, the paper draws on James C. Scott's work on hill demography and applies it to the context of CHT. The analysis identifies five key factors contributing to the recurrence of security challenges in the region: the unique political characteristics of CHT, identity-based politics, the complexities surrounding land disputes, policy failures, and the influence of broader geopolitical dynamics. By synthesising these elements, the paper offers a framework for understanding the drivers of instability in CHT. Based on these findings, it concludes with policy recommendations aimed at addressing the root causes of security challenges for fostering long-term peace and stability in the region.

**Keywords:** Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Security Challenges, National Security, Identity Politics, Hill Demography

### 1. Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is located in a strategically significant position in the Southeastern part of Bangladesh. Comprising mostly hilly areas, the area covers 10 per cent of Bangladesh's total land area occupying 5,093 square miles (sq mi). The three districts of CHT– Bandarban, Khagrachari and Rangamati host thirteen ethnic groups namely Chakmas, Marmas, Tripura, Khumis, Mro, Murang, Lushai, Bawm, Pankhos, Kukis, Tanchangya, Chak, and Rieng.<sup>1</sup> The area is ethnically and culturally very diverse and has land boundaries with the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh

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**Nur Ahmed** is Research Officer, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Bangladesh. His e-mail address is: [nur@biiss.org](mailto:nur@biiss.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Amena Mohsin, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh," in *The Emergence of Bangladesh: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Habibul Khondker, Olav Muurlink and Asif Bin Ali (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), 251–258.

– India and Myanmar. CHT had been under the British colonial administration, subsequently the Pakistan Government and now the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) administers the area. It went through a two-and-a-half-decades-long armed insurgency starting a few years after the birth of Bangladesh. The insurgency ended formally with the signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997 between the GoB and the Parbattya Chattogram Jana Samhati Samity (PCJSS also known as JSS), the tribal political body that carried out the political and armed movement for autonomy. However, peace has somewhat always been elusive in this remote area as there are deep-rooted fault lines that generate the recurrence of security challenges.

It is noticeable that there are deep interlinkages between the historically situated security problems and the contemporary security challenges in the CHT. The decades-long armed insurgency was followed by mistrust within the society, intra-communal and inter-communal violence and armed insurgency. In the contemporary context, the manifold security challenges in the CHT include armed insurgency against security agencies and among ethnic armed groups, killings, abductions, extortions, arms smuggling, narcotics smuggling, etc. Most of the tribal political parties like JSS, JSS (reformist), United People's Democratic Front (UPDF main) and UPDF (democratic) have their armed wings and there are also other armed groups whose activities have been recurring in contemporary times like Marma National Party (MNP) and Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF).<sup>2</sup> In the first quarter of 2024, KNF staged a bank robbery in Bandarban and a joint operation was launched afterwards to mitigate its influence.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, the deep-rooted societal division has surfaced in recent times through violent clashes between small ethnic minority groups and Bengali community.<sup>4</sup> The CHT has been subject to the recurrence of security challenges for a long period. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to decipher the root causes for this recurrence through an analytical framework which is primarily based on some metanarratives.<sup>5</sup>

Studies on CHT in different times are focused on a wide range of issues and the literature on this particular subject matter is not scarce. However, a closer review of these literature expose the innate biases of some research works. In social science research, it is impossible to generate value-free works since the perspectives are not devoid of the researchers' personal biases. But in the case of CHT studies, the bias is

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a senior journalist on CHT Affairs, September 2024.

<sup>3</sup> "Army leading joint operation against KNF," *The Daily Star*, April 08, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> "CHT clashes leave 4 dead, over 50 injured; section 144 imposed," *The Business Standard*, September 21, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> "Metanarratives," ScienceDirect, 2012, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/computer-science/metanarratives#:~:text=Metanarratives%20are%20overarching%20explanations%20or,the%20field%20of%20Computer%20Science>.

often blatant. However, there have been some phenomenal and pioneering works on CHT that surfaced the intricate complexities of this area in terms of its demography, culture, society, economy, etc. Some of the pioneering works were designed to introduce the complex CHT issues to the readers and they focused on various aspects like historical narratives<sup>6</sup>, genealogy of ethnic identity<sup>7</sup>, armed insurgency<sup>8</sup>, politics of identity<sup>9</sup>, political analysis of conflict<sup>10</sup>, politics of development,<sup>11</sup> etc. In addition to the aforementioned literature, specific issue-based literature like the analysis of peace accord<sup>12</sup>, post-conflict peacebuilding dynamism<sup>13</sup>, gender-based violence<sup>14</sup>, community-based intervention<sup>15</sup>, land rights,<sup>16</sup> etc. are key resources for a holistic analysis of security challenges in the CHT. The analysis of the causes of recurrent security problems in this area revolves around deciphering the different dynamics and impacts that the British, Pakistan and Bangladesh periods have on CHT. Different researchers prioritise different issues prevalent during those periods. However, there is a gap in understanding the political reasons for conflicts in CHT which would connect political issues beyond state borders. This would interweave every historical dimension and present the interlinkages among some metanarratives that explain the recurrence of security problems in hilly areas like CHT.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to introduce a metanarrative designed to decipher the root causes of the persistence of security challenges in the CHT. It is an

<sup>6</sup> Mizanur Rahman Shelley, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story* (Dhaka: CDRB, 1992); Khaled Belal, Mirza Zillur Rahman and G. M. Masbah Uddin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Falconry in the Hills* (Chittagong: CODEC, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> S. P. Talukdar, *Chakmas: An Embattled Tribe* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Jugdep S Chima, *Ethnic Subnationalist Insurgencies in South Asia* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997); Nasir Uddin, "Politics of cultural difference: Identity and marginality in the Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh," *South Asian Survey* 17, no. 2 (2010): 283–294.

<sup>10</sup> Syed Anwar Hussain, *War and Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Retrospect and Prospect* (Dhaka: Agamee Prakashani, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Zobaida Nasreen and Masahiko Togawa, "Politics of Development: 'Pahari-Bengali' Discourse in the Chittagong Hill Tracts," *Journal of International Development and Cooperation* 9, no. 1 (2002): 97–112.

<sup>12</sup> Sajib Bala, *Politics of Peace Agreement Implementation: A Case Study of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Rafiqul Islam, Susanne Schech and Udoy Saikia, "Violent peace: community relations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh after the Peace Accord," *Conflict, Security & Development* 22, no. 3 (2022): 271–295.

<sup>14</sup> Zobaida Nasreen, *The Indigeneity Question: State Violence, Forced Displacement and Women's Narratives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh* (PhD dissertation, Durham University, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Mizanur Rahman Shelley, "Socioeconomic status and development of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh: An Overview" (Paper presented at the International Conference on Growth, Poverty Alleviation, and Sustainable Resource Management in the Mountain Areas of South Asia, Kathmandu, 2000), 107–136, [https://lib.icimod.org/record/23170/files/c\\_attachment\\_213\\_3024.pdf](https://lib.icimod.org/record/23170/files/c_attachment_213_3024.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Abul Barakat, Sadeka Halim, Asmer Osman, Ismail Hossain and Manjuma Ahsan, *Status and Dynamics of Land Rights, Land Use and Population in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Human Development Research Centre, 2010); Gopal B Thapa and Golam Rasul, "Implications of changing national policies on land use in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," *Journal of Environmental Management* 81, no. 4 (2006): 441–453.

academic endeavour to answer two fundamental research questions: What are the socio-political, historical, and economic factors contributing to the recurrent security challenges in the CHT, and how do they interact to perpetuate instability in the region? In order to answer these queries, it introduces the applicability of James C. Scott's seminal work<sup>17</sup> on hill demography in the context of CHT. The framework will unearth the underlying political characteristic of a hilly area like CHT which is interwoven with the contemporary political and security dynamics in the area. It has been argued in the paper that a combination of five issues contributes to the persistence of security challenges in CHT—innate political characteristics of CHT, politics of identity, complicated land issues, policy failure and geopolitical dynamics. This paper has mostly focused on the non-traditional security challenges in CHT. However, the scope of the paper also extends to the blurring space between traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Based on the findings through the framework, the paper has suggested some policy suggestions aimed at addressing the root causes of instability in CHT.

The methodology employed in this paper is primarily qualitative, grounded in an interpretive research approach. This approach is well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena, such as the recurrence of security challenges in the CHT, where understanding the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of key stakeholders is essential. To gather data, the study utilises two primary methods of data collection: key informant interviews (KIIs) and secondary literature review. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a select group of KIIs who have extensive knowledge and expertise on the region's socio-political and security dynamics. These participants included veteran academicians, journalists with in-depth coverage of CHT, political leaders of ethnic minority groups, and researchers who specialise in the region. Additionally, practitioners involved in conflict resolution mechanisms and peace-building efforts in the CHT were interviewed to gain insights from those directly engaged in addressing security issues. The selection of KII respondents was purposive, ensuring that each individual had a deep understanding of the historical, political, and socio-economic factors shaping the region's security challenges. Semi-structured interview questionnaire were developed, allowing for flexible and open-ended discussions while ensuring key areas of inquiry were addressed. This method enabled the collection of rich, detailed data from respondents, capturing their views on the root causes of instability in CHT.

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<sup>17</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010).

For secondary data, the paper reviewed a wide array of literature to build a comprehensive understanding of the context and background of the security challenges in CHT. These literature included academic books, journal articles, dissertations, monographs, and opinion pieces, as well as news articles and reports from both local and international sources. The literature review provided a foundation for understanding the historical and contemporary issues at play in CHT and helped identify gaps in existing research. By triangulating data from the KIIs with secondary data from diverse sources, this paper seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of the recurring security problems in the CHT and their underlying causes. In summary, the combination of qualitative data from key informants and secondary data from a wide range of literature allows for a thorough exploration of the factors contributing to the recurrent security challenges in CHT. The interpretive approach ensures that the study remains focused on the perspectives and experiences of those who are directly involved in or affected by the issues in the region.

The paper has nine sections of which five sections are dedicated to analyse the five dynamics of the analytical framework in order to explain the recurrence of security challenges in CHT in a comprehensive manner. Before that, the analytical framework has been introduced in the second section which is right after the introductory part. The third section sheds light on the political uniqueness of CHT by conceptualising the area as a historical shatter zone or zone of refuge. The fourth section analyses the multifaceted identity politics by both state and non-state actors in the CHT. The fifth segment appraises the complexities of longstanding land rights issues in CHT which might not be solved in the foreseeable future leading to security problems in the area. The sixth section analyses the implications of policy failures in CHT by focusing on the peace accord and its aftermath. The seventh section highlights the geopolitical interests of external actors in CHT. Before drawing conclusion in the ninth section, the paper provides some policy suggestions in the eighth section in order to address the longstanding security challenges in CHT.

## **2. Understanding Root Causes of Security Challenges in CHT: Towards a Holistic Analytical Framework**

The social, political and economic attributes of hilly regions are not the same as valleys or plainlands. Therefore, studying security challenges in a hilly region requires a transborder understanding of the contributing factors. However, transborder attributes are often defined in terms of social factors like shared ethnic roots rather than political and economic ones. The aspects of shared attributes across the border in this region were identified by Willem van Schendel who gave the name ‘Zomia’ to

the area of concern.<sup>18</sup> The term was derived from ‘Zomi’ which refers to people speaking Chin, Mizo, and Kuki languages in countries such as Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh. Linguists categorise these languages as part of the extensive Tibeto-Burman language family, which is spoken across Zomia encompassing a wide geographical area, including Kashmir, North India, Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Northeast India, the CHT in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Yunnan, and Sichuan in China, as well as Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> The manifold shared attributes identified were language affinities, religious commonalities, cultural traits, ancient trade networks, and ecological conditions. The idea of Zomia was taken by James C. Scott as a matter of anthropological study in this concerned space.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Schendel’s wider definition of Zomia, the territorial boundary of Scott’s study is confined within hilly areas eastward, beginning with the Naga and Mizo hills of Northeast India and the CHT of Bangladesh. It incorporates a vast mountainous realm on the marches of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India, and Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup>

While the geographical scope of the study is relevant to the case of CHT, Scott’s thesis is pertinent to understanding the security challenges in CHT. His thesis posits that the inhabitants of this Zomia region had not entirely been integrated into the structure of the modern nation-state. Rather, this region is geographically positioned at the periphery of nation-states which are generally very remote and inaccessible. This makes the region a zone of refuge for people who have migrated from the lowlands to escape the governance of the state. Henceforth, this region is characterised as a historical epitome of resistance against the state’s governance system. It includes resistance against classical, colonial and modern nation-states. In this regard, every aspect of the people of this region resembles political choices to keep the state at arm’s length. Most of their traits and culture are often perceived as primitive, but Scott’s thesis established a new paradigm in area studies by identifying the political nature of the chosen lifestyle of these people. Modern state formation predominantly relies upon the concentration of the population and their legible and taxable activities for which sedentary agricultural practices hold significant value. In contrast, the people of Zomia resemble scattered presence in rugged terrains with swiddening or slash-and-burn agricultural practices which enable them to maintain a distance from the state’s traditional practices like taxation, conscription, forced labour, etc. The shifting agricultural practices of growing root crops make their

<sup>18</sup> Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647–68, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d16s>.

<sup>19</sup> Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing,” 653.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Michaud, Margaret Byrne Swain and Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

economic activities out of the scope of legible and taxable ones. In contrast to viewing these practices as primitive and environmentally destructive, Scott perceives these as political choices resembling the traits of escape-agriculture which is challenging for the state to monitor and make it taxable. Another state-evading technique is the predominance of oral culture which helps them maintain the ethno-social history and culture flexible and out of reach for state documentation activities.

The mountainous area of Zomia is regarded as a shatter zone where people moved to over hundreds of years. What unites them is their shared attempt to flee and escape from the reach of state governance and they encounter each other in this hilly region at different periods of times of history. This makes the region ethnically and linguistically very complex and diverse with minimal political unity among these diverse groups. During the colonial period, the classical divide-and-rule policy was applied to ensure the political and cultural autonomy of the hill region. The separate administered hill zones were devised by the European colonisers to obscure the resentful movements against colonial rule in the lowlands. One of the major implications of this policy was little or no contribution of the hill people in the anti-colonial resistance.

The thesis of Scott, in this aspect, is particularly important to understand the recurrence of security challenges in the CHT as it exposes some innate governance challenges which have been complicated with the addition of newer problems over the years. The CHT has been subject to administrative rule under the Pakistan government after the partition and subsequently under the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the area has gone through the administrative structure of classical, colonial and modern nation-states. After the independence, Bangladesh's political elites faced deep-rooted political problems in this area, and it quickly escalated into years-long conflict. The armed insurgency formally ended with the signing of a Peace Accord in 1997. But it was followed by division among the local political entities and the implementation of the Accord still remains a major challenge. One of the fundamental difficulties in ensuring a peaceful CHT is solving the complicated land issue to which layers of complexities have been added each year. Policy failures in the post-accord period have also complicated the socio-political dynamics of CHT. The politics of identity is another sensitive issue which fuel the security challenges in every layer of the society. Moreover, the political conflict among the ethnic groups has been a deep-rooted cause of continuance of the volatility in CHT which has taken the forms of killing, abduction, arms proliferation, narcotics smuggling, extortion, etc.



On top of these issues, CHT stands at a crossroad of diverging geopolitical interests of external powers which influence the trajectory of existing security challenges. Non-government and transnational actors are also deeply involved in the development activities and their footprints shape the situation in CHT. In order to develop an analytical framework to understand the deep-rooted security problems in CHT, Scott's thesis about the political lifestyle of the highlander people of Zomia is a good starting point. Although Scott acknowledged the limitation of applying his thesis in the post-1950s context, his notion is important to provide answers to identify the root causes of most of the puzzling security concerns in CHT. Nevertheless, the security context of CHT has evolved over the years and newer dimensions have been added to the complicated dynamics of this area. These evolving dynamics are also of paramount significance to understand the underlying causes of recurrence of the security problems in the CHT over the years. This paper, thus, is an attempt to develop an interlinked framework to understand the recurrence of security challenges in CHT. In addition to deciphering the innate political characteristics of CHT based on Scott's thesis, the framework focuses on issues like politics of identity and marginalisation, complicated land issues, policy implementation failure and complex geopolitical dynamics.

### 3. Contextualising CHT as a Historical Shatter Zone

Applying Scott's thesis on Zomia, the CHT can be considered as a shatter zone where different ethnic groups migrated to this hilly area and bumped into each other over the course of history. Among the ethnic minority groups living in the CHT, the Chakmas represent the largest one.<sup>22</sup> There are different historical interpretations of their historical trajectory as an ethnic group. One account of the narrative identifies them as descendants of emigrants who migrated to this part during the period of the Arakanese king.<sup>23</sup> Another historical account of the Chakmas portray that one of their ancient rulers launched expeditions to the Chittagong and Arakan area and left the area after a while but entered Chittagong again in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The reason for their migrations tended to be insecurity of their lives and properties.<sup>25</sup> The second largest small ethnic group in CHT is the Marmas who have often erroneously been

<sup>22</sup> Sayed Ibn Rahmat, "Population Census 2022: A CHT demographic analysis," *Parbatta News*, September 19, 2022, <https://en.parbattanews.com/population-census-2022-a-cht-demographic-analysis/>.

<sup>23</sup> R. H. Sneddy Hutchinson, *An Account of the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1906).

<sup>24</sup> Biraj Mohan Dewan, *Chakma Jatir Itibritta* (Rangamati: Gazi Prakashani, 1969), 14.

<sup>25</sup> Aftab Ahmed, "Ethnicity and insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region: A study of the crisis of political integration in Bangladesh," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 31, no. 3 (1993): 32–66, DOI: 10.1080/14662049308447665.



called as Maghs/Moghs. Their arrival to this area was recorded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Burmese king invaded Arakan and forced the inhabitants to migrate to the neighbouring region.<sup>26</sup> The third largest group is the Tripuras whose original inhabitants were in the State of Tripura of India from where their King Govinda Manikya migrated to this area in 1661.<sup>27</sup>

The small ethnic groups residing in the present-day CHT had all come and encountered each other at different times and in distinct areas of CHT making it rich in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. However, in order to decipher the fundamental reasons for the recurrence of security challenges in this area, it is necessary to shed light on the political implications of CHT being a zone of refuge for small ethnic groups. According to Scott, the only thing that unites a shatter zone/zone of refuge is the inhabitants' migration from different places to this hilly area. One major implication of this is the lack of political unity among the groups which is persistent till date. There is hardly anything organic that can unite them politically. Resistance against state authority can be transformed into a united political front for a brief period of time, but the deep-rooted faultlines are bound to be surfaced. After the signing of the historic Peace Accord in 1997, inter-communal and intra-communal violences have increased significantly. Immediately after the signing of the accord with JSS, an anti accord political group named UPDF emerged and it has been gaining important political footprint since then.<sup>28</sup> Since 1998, the conflict between these two political groups has become regular in the local political landscape, leading to continuous violence and more polarisation.<sup>29</sup> Two new factions emerged as JSS (reformist) in 2007 and UPDF (democratic) in 2017. These local political groups needed funds to run and sustain their organisations. Therefore, they became gradually involved in supporting their armed wings that engaged in carrying out violent activities such as extortion, abduction, armed violence, etc.<sup>30</sup> JSS blames the proliferation of arms in the post accord era on the formation of UPDF and its activities.<sup>31</sup>

Another political characteristic of the inhabitants of a shatter zone is their preference to maintain autonomy to a varying degree in different contexts. During the British colonial era, the CHT was regarded as an autonomously administered area

<sup>26</sup> Zainal Abedin, *Chittagong Hill Tracts: In Search of Reality* (Dhaka: Book Museum, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Abedin, *Chittagong Hill Tracts*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a retired General of Bangladesh Army, October 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Muhammad Ala Uddin, "Continuing Conflict-Critical Transition to Peace in the Post-Conflict Southeastern Bangladesh," *Anthropos* 112, no. 1 (2017): 63–74.

<sup>30</sup> "Interview of UPDF spokesperson," *Jamuna TV*, October 06, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrlcCOMKMc>.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a JSS leader, November 2024.

under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900.<sup>32</sup> The Government of India Act of 1935 also designated the area as a ‘totally excluded area’ under which the people of this area were given relative autonomy and ruled by their tribal chiefs administered by the central government.<sup>33</sup> However, a critical examination of the narrative of colonial protective measures for the inhabitants of the CHT exposes its fallacies. The myths of colonial protection are designed to portray safeguarding the local people against three actors – external invasion, Bengali groups’ domination and oppressive tribal chiefs.<sup>34</sup> A closer examination reveals that these protective rhetoric measures were actually designed to serve the economic and military interests of the colonial rulers which further exacerbated the socio-political complexities among the different ethnic groups. After the partition of 1947, CHT became part of Pakistan in spite of the desire of many of the leaders of CHT to be part of India.<sup>35</sup> In the constitution of 1956, the area regained the status of an excluded area, but an amendment to the constitution in 1963 repealed this status of CHT and designated it as a ‘tribal area’.<sup>36</sup> During the Pakistan period, several government policies and activities like building of a hydroelectric dam at the heart of CHT causing forced migration to a greater extent jeopardised the demographic and social dynamics of this area. The people and political leaders of this shatter zone in this part of the subcontinent realised the perils of being under the governance of a modern nation-state. Therefore, after the emergence of a new independent county named Bangladesh, CHT leaders rushed to demand some political measures – autonomous region having its own legislature, protective measures similar to the 1900 CHT Regulations, the continuance of the offices of tribal Rajas, and prohibition of any constitutional amendment or change related to CHT.<sup>37</sup>

The challenges to govern a shatter zone like the CHT surfaced in the context of both colonial and independent nation-states. The innate lack of political unity and rich

<sup>32</sup> Pranab Kumar Panday and Ishtiaq Jamil. “Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: An Unimplemented Accord and Continued Violence,” *Asian Survey* 49, no. 6 (2009): 1052–1070.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Dictaan-Bang-oa, “In Search for Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,” in *Beyond the Silencing of the Guns*, eds. Chandra K. Roy, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz and Amanda Romero-Medina (Baguio City: Teetebba Foundation, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Mohammad Shahabuddin, “The Myth of Colonial ‘Protection’ of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts under British rule,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 25, no. 2 (2018): 210–235.

<sup>35</sup> Md Nazmul Hasan Chowdhury, “The Resistance Movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Global and Regional Connections,” *Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2006): 36–51.

<sup>36</sup> R. Ramasubramanian, “Elusive Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Background,” *South Asia Analysis Group*, no. 1540 (2005), <http://www.saag.org/papers16/paper1540.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Maher Islam, “Parbattya Chattogram e Senabahini O Bangali Keno Elo?” *Parbatta News*, July 04, 2018, <https://www.parbattanews.com/%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%9F%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%9F%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%A8-6/>.

cultural diversity pose significant governance challenges for a nation-state. The process of integrating the inhabitants of a shatter zone is a mammoth task which might not be a total success in most cases due to the embedded resistant political culture. However, identifying the challenges and political uniqueness of this hilly area is the foremost task for any state authority. Failing to identify these unique traits is the first mistake which would put the policy perspective into a cycle of erroneous decisions exacerbating the security challenges. The CHT is a classic example of this policy dilemma where internal incompetence made it easier for external actors to implement their vested interests. The first misstep in identifying the uniqueness of this area was followed by a series of policies that failed to generate social, economic and cultural integration of the people of CHT. The area was marred by years-long conflict leading to deeply rooted mistrust in the society. The Accord that saw the formal ending of the conflict in 1997 also failed to reflect the unique political and security dynamics of this area. On top of that, the newly established institutions developed through the framework of the accord failed to generate social and economic capital for the inhabitants of this area. Since there is a lack of innate political unity among the ethnic groups, the source of integration into a nationalistic paradigm has to be a state. Failing to do so has made the area a victim of chronic problems for the national security of Bangladesh. However, the challenges are not similar to what Scott predicted for a shatter zone as the area has gone through years of interaction with the governance structure of a nation-state. Therefore, the local political elites have their own mechanisms to exploit the loopholes of state apparatus and much of the complexities of the problems are deeply entrenched within the state's own dynamics. Nevertheless, Scott's idea of a shatter zone is a first step to realise the present-day security challenges in CHT. Hence, understanding the linkage between historically situated dynamics and the current one is important.

#### 4. Politics of Identity and Marginality

In a remote area like CHT where innate governance challenges exist and the demography is diverse, the endmost thing it needed was the imposition of an identity completely different from the ethnic identity of the people living there. This is exactly what happened after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. The four-point demand presented by Manabendra Narayan Larma (also known as M N Larma) was rejected by the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh with advice of assimilation with the Bengali nationalist identity.<sup>38</sup> He even went on to threaten to

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<sup>38</sup> Amena Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 22.

marginalise the ethnic groups by sending Bengali people to the CHT.<sup>39</sup> The outright rejection and humiliation by the Bangladeshi political elites led to the formation of PCJSS on March 07, 1972, to secure the distinct identity of the ethnic groups. Afterwards, the constitution of Bangladesh was drafted, which defined the basis of national identity in terms of Bengali nationalism.<sup>40</sup> In response, M N Larma gave an emphatic speech by pointing out that the hill people can never become Bengali.<sup>41</sup> The political elites of Bangladesh continued to ignore the demands of PCJSS and humiliate their claims. The then Prime Minister even talked about giving the hill people a promoted identity called Bengali.<sup>42</sup> This implies that the claimed identity is below the Bengali national identity and it referred to the hill peoples' identity as derogatory.

Over time, this politics of identity and marginality in the CHT further aggravated the ethnic political entities and they got engaged in an armed insurgency against the state that spanned over two decades. Identity politics run at the heart of formulating political narratives that help a political group to spearhead its ideology among its potential supporters. PCJSS also realised that they required a unifying political identity to rally people behind their political and armed struggle against the state. By the mid-1980s, they attempted to unify the diverse ethnic populations of CHT under the umbrella of Jumma nationalism. This nationalistic identity has its roots in the jhum cultivation practices and it sheds light on the multi-layered distinctiveness of the hill people. Although it is claimed to be a projection of a demand for a separate nationhood instead of statehood<sup>43</sup>, the desire for the latter is often explicit.<sup>44</sup> This nationalistic identity suffered from ideological weaknesses as well as inadequate external support from India as the latter is aware of the ramifications in its Northeastern part.<sup>45</sup> The insurgency in the name of Jumma nationalism also lacks comparative mass appeal as the ethnic groups' distinct identity has been signified more than the colonial and Pakistani administrations.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the identity was predominantly formulated by the Chakmas and other smaller groups preferred sticking to their own generic names. The differentiated identity has even been transformed into a contemporary armed struggle by KNF who demanded a separate administrative zone called Kuki-Chin

<sup>39</sup> Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism*, 58.

<sup>40</sup> *Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Ministry of Law, 1972), 5.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism*, 62.

<sup>43</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with a JSS leader, November 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a JSS leader, November 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Caf Dowlah, "Jumma Insurgency in Chittagong Hills Tracts: How Serious is the Threat to Bangladesh's National Integration and What Can be Done?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 5 (2013): 773–794, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2013.866419.

Territorial Council (KTC) comprising seven upazillas of CHT.<sup>47</sup> Their grievances are mostly targeted against the Chakmas and JSS who are blamed for their socio-economic and socio-political marginalisation. Given the paucity of political unity in CHT and the absence of any ideological front, it is not unexpected that more political factions supported by their armed wings might surface in the suture. In addition to KNF, the Marma National Party (MNP) has also threatened to wage an armed struggle against JSS.<sup>48</sup>

Another identity contestation that has not been turned into an armed struggle but has been going on for quite some time is the small ethnic groups' claim to be recognised as the indigenous people of CHT. The CHT being a zone of refuge for diverse ethnic groups, this claim is factually and historically not accurate. In fact, it is mostly applicable to all the hill people in the imagined land of Zomia as Scott labelled it as misleading to assume that the colonisers encountered indigenous people in this area.<sup>49</sup> The politics of indigenous identity has much to do with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People 2007, which provides special rights to their self-determination and self-governance.<sup>50</sup> This has serious political implications for the national security of Bangladesh and interestingly the claim of identifying as indigenous people of CHT has become more prominent since 2008. Therefore, the politics of identity cannot be solely implied on the national political elites of Bangladesh, rather, in the absence of any unifying political identity, the ethnic political entities of CHT have also been playing this identity card to augment the vested political interest of different groups which marginalises other ethnic groups.

## 5. Politics of Land Rights

The issue of contested land rights is probably the most complicated and sensitive issue of CHT which contributes to the formulation of complicated security challenges in this area. There is a fundamental difference between the idea of land ownership of the people of the ethnic minority groups and the prevalent idea of land ownership in a modern nation-state. Contrary to private ownership, they consider land to be communal property owned by the community, kinship groups and sometimes divine ancestral spirits where the individual families are believed to only have the right to usufruct.<sup>51</sup> This idea of land ownership also reflects their agricultural practices of

<sup>47</sup> Kuki-Chin National Front, *Kuki-Chin Demands to the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* (Chittagong Hill Tracts: KNF, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> "MNP threatens war against JSS in Chittagong Hill Tracts," *Parbatta News*, January 27, 2024, <https://en.parbattanews.com/mnp-threatens-war-against-jss-in-chittagong-hill-tracts/>.

<sup>49</sup> Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed*, 143–144.

<sup>50</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (New York: UN, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 29.

slash and burn where new lands are required for cultivating root crops at regular intervals. The process of altering this traditional thinking of land ownership started during the colonial era in 1868 when two types of land tenure were introduced in this area – private rights and usufruct. Intending to change the practice of shifting agriculture to plough cultivation, private rights were given to people who would take the latter option. Regarding land matters, the Deputy Commissioner was endowed with absolute power.<sup>52</sup> The colonial attempt to alter the agricultural practices resulted in socio-economic division in CHT. Ethnic groups like Mrung, Bawm, Pankho, Khumi, etc. who lived in the ridgetops suffered due to the loss of forest lands to the state's Reserve Forest classification, while groups like the Chakma and Marma who adopted the plough cultivation in the valley areas did better in terms of socio-economic development.<sup>53</sup> This socio-economic division was reflected in the political representation in signing the Peace Accord as well as the present-day scenario. One of the major grievances of armed groups like KNF, who claims to represent the demands of those suffered groups, is against the socio-political supremacy of the Chakma and Marma people.<sup>54</sup>

During the Pakistan period, land rights were further jeopardised with the building of a hydro-electric dam causing massive displacement. The government's decision to implement gradual industrialisation with the findings from the USAID created resentments among the hill people in CHT and they considered it as a blueprint for massive demographic change.<sup>55</sup> No social impact assessment was carried out before creating a huge lake to the north and east of the barrage in Kaptai between 1957 and 1962.<sup>56</sup> The Kaptai Dam inundated 40 per cent of the total area of the district which was 400 sq mi of the ground and it rendered one hundred thousand people homeless many of which crossed border to take refuge in India.<sup>57</sup> This was a watershed event in CHT which spearheaded a chronicle of devastation for the people of CHT.<sup>58</sup> These traumas and fundamental contradictions regarding land rights continued after 1971 with newer dimensions of complexities. In the meanwhile, demography of the CHT started to change and Bengali population has increased over the years. The Bengali inhabitants started residing on some of the lands owned by the government which is locally known as *Khas* land.<sup>59</sup> The traditional land ownership customs had been in

<sup>52</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Partha Shankar Saha, "Rise of KNF: Why does KNF oppose CHT Peace Accord and JSS?" *Prothom Alo*, April 14, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Ahmed, *Ethnicity and Insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region*, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Hussain, *War and Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with a senior journalist on CHT affairs, October 2024.

breach since long before the advent of Bangladesh. In fact, the colonial rule established government control over three-fourths of the area of CHT as government-owned forest land and these lands were transferred to the Government of Pakistan and subsequently that of Bangladesh in terms of the changes in political and administrative settings.<sup>60</sup>

The issue of land rights was also addressed in the 1997 Peace Accord after which the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission was formed in 1999. Associated law to conduct the commission was introduced in 2001, but the political groups of the ethnic minority communities submitted thirteen complaints to review the act. Their demands were approved in 2013 and amended version of the act was passed in 2016. After the passing of the amended law, a total of 22,881 complaints were submitted to the commission, 90 per cent of which were lodged from the ethnic minority people.<sup>61</sup> The Bengali inhabitants now form a considerable majority in the demographic context of the CHT and they have been expressing concerns over the land commission as the majority of the members (7 out of 9) of the commission are to be from small ethnic groups. The commission is yet to start its mandated functions and the conflict between Bengali inhabitants and ethnic people has loomed large over the years as the claims of regaining the property currently Bengali inhabitants have been residing on are getting louder from ethnic political entities. A complete cadastral survey to measure the state of lands in CHT has never been done there because of continued protest by ethnic political entities against any type of survey.<sup>62</sup> Henceforth, the problem has got intensified and complicated more over the years and therefore, the security challenges have grown manifold due to this.

## 6. The 1997 Peace Accord and the Failure of National Integration

While the 1997 Peace Accord put a stop to the two-and-a-half-decades-long armed insurgency, the post-accord political dynamics got even more complex. There was a gap between the original demands of PCJSS and the agreement<sup>63</sup> which contributed to the growing political faction among the ethnic groups to some extent. On the other hand, there has also been a slow pace of implementation of the Accord which has led to a virtual failure of integrating the ethnic groups of CHT into the mainstream national dynamics of Bangladesh. The failure to implement the Accord also led to augmented intra-communal discrimination and division which exacerbated the security challenges in that area and led to the emergence of new armed factions

<sup>60</sup> Mahfuz Parvez, *Shantichuktir Dui Jug: Sompriti O Unnoyoner Pothe Parbatta Chattogram* (Dhaka: Student Ways, 2022), 102.

<sup>61</sup> Parvez, *Shantichuktir Dui Jug*, 96.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with a senior journalist on CHT affairs, October 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Mohsin, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh," 255.



like the KNF and MNP. The signing of the CHT Accord led to the creation of several local administrative bodies such as the CHT Regional Council, three Hill District Councils and a separate ministry named the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs. These institutions were designed to foster political representation and empowerment among the ethnic groups of CHT which is a complex political process.<sup>64</sup>

However, the initial intention has miserably failed as these local governance institutions have been in control by a few political elites due to the absence of any type of democratic practices since the establishment of these institutions.<sup>65</sup> Hence, the emergence of new leadership is virtually blocked in the local political landscape of CHT and the dominance of the Chakmas in terms of institutional and socio-political representation has led to exacerbate intra-communal violence and conflict. Many of the local ethnic political groups are engaged in establishing control over resources and territory which often results in killings, extortion, kidnapping, etc. After the two-and-a-half-decades-long armed insurgency, there was a pressing need for a robust peacebuilding activity in the CHT focusing on a socio-cultural approach to integrate the conflict-torn community into the mainstream national socio-political and socio-economic dynamics. However, the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, the taskforces and the national political elites of Bangladesh failed to generate the necessary momentum in this regard.<sup>66</sup> There is also the dynamics of uneven power sharing among local institutions created through the accord, civil administration and traditional administration for which it gets difficult to locate the source of political and administrative power in CHT.<sup>67</sup>

The problems of the CHT Peace Accord started since the very inception period as the political elites adopted a top-down approach while drafting the accord. A top-down approach often works when the objectives of an agreement are clear, but the complex political and security dynamics of CHT required the adoption of a bottom-up approach.<sup>68</sup> The CHT Peace Accord and its legal and administrative derivatives have also been labelled as unconstitutional<sup>69</sup> since the country runs on a unitary state system. Therefore, there are some valid strategic concerns regarding the legal implications of this Accord. The CHT Regional Council Bill was passed in 1998 and

<sup>64</sup> Mohsin, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh," 256.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with a Professor of Political Science, University of Chittagong. October 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with a Professor of Political Science, University of Chittagong. October 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Mohsin, "The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh," 256.

<sup>68</sup> Ishtiaq Jamil and Pranab Kumar Panday, "The Elusive Peace Accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the Plight of the Indigenous People," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 46, no. 4 (November 2008): 464–89.

<sup>69</sup> David Bergman, "HC deals serious blow to CHT Accord," *Bdnews24.com*, April 13, 2010, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/hc-deals-serious-blow-to-cht-accord>.

it requires the national parliament to consult the council and take recommendations to make any laws concerning CHT.<sup>70</sup> The strategic value of CHT to the national security of Bangladesh should have been prioritised and reflected more in the Peace Accord as some of its provisions provide potential delegation of power related to national security to local governance which is still in its nascent phase. The Accord can be analysed as an overly ambitious one where strategic implication was largely ignored.<sup>71</sup> However, the strategic concerns cannot be addressed through the slow implementation of the Accord as it has been jeopardising the local political dynamics even more.

## 7. CHT at the Juncture of Diverging Geopolitical Interests

CHT is situated at the crossroads of diverging geopolitical interests of major external powers which is often negated while analysing the security dynamics of CHT. The geopolitical interest of India often appears as blatant due to the intricate relationships between the stability of CHT and that of its Northeast provinces. The multidimensional support it provided to Shanti Bahini—the armed wing of PCJSS that carried out the two-and-a-half-decades-long armed insurgency against the security forces of Bangladesh is well-known.<sup>72</sup> India is aware of the strategic ramifications of secessionist armed insurgencies in CHT on its Northeastern part which suffers a geostrategic weakness in terms of potential external attacks and has also been experiencing armed resistance for a long period. Therefore, the nationalist movement of Jumma land did not get the required support from India.<sup>73</sup> The tribal leaders of the CHT are aware of these strategic prerogatives of India and it is evident that the largest neighbour of Bangladesh utilises their strategic leverage on CHT to shape the trajectory of bilateral relations.<sup>74</sup> The other neighbour of Bangladesh, Myanmar has vested geopolitical interests in this area but due to the nature of their statehood, the interests are also fragmented. The country has been undergoing political and military process of coming to terms with its fragmented sovereignty since its independence<sup>75</sup> and it is going through a full-scale civil war where most of the Burmese neighbouring parts of Bangladesh are currently under the *de facto* control of the Arakan Army. KNF

<sup>70</sup> M Rashiduzzaman, “Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Institutional Features and Strategic Concerns,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 7 (1998): 653–670.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with a Professor of Political Science, University of Chittagong, October 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Chowdhury, “The Resistance Movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts,” 36–51.

<sup>73</sup> Mohsin, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with a retired general of Bangladesh Army, October 2024.

<sup>75</sup> Morten B. Pedersen, “Outrage is not a policy: Coming to terms with Myanmar’s fragmented state,” Lowy Institute, May 12, 2024, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/outrage-not-policy-coming-terms-myanmar-s-fragmented-state>.

is reported to have strategic connection with the rebels of Chin state of Myanmar.<sup>76</sup> The Rohingya crisis has also exacerbated the geopolitical interests of various state and non-state actors that shape the security dynamics across the southeastern border of Bangladesh. Various misleading claims regarding the origin of the Rohingya community are prevalent even in academia which cannot be ruled out as attempts to reshape strategic narratives in this region.<sup>77</sup>

CHT is also at the crossroads of the great game of the 21<sup>st</sup> century between China and India where the frontier in India's Northeast is at the centre of diverging geopolitical interests.<sup>78</sup> The geopolitical competition over establishing strategic leverage in the Indian Ocean has prompted China to forge deep strategic linkages in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Japan also has strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal and it has greater implications for the strategic developments in the northeast of India and southeast of Bangladesh. Therefore, the major powers' diverging geopolitical interests also shape the security dynamics in CHT and beyond. Apart from the Sino-Indian rivalry, the Sino-US rivalry is an important determinant of the geopolitical dynamics in this region. The United States (US) has vested interests in this hilly part of South Asia and Southeast Asia designed to counter the Chinese influence.<sup>79</sup> The Burma Act of the US is perceived not to have a territorial limitation within boundary of Myanmar, but has the potential to shape the security dynamics of the neighbouring region like the CHT and India's Northeast since these areas share a deeply interlinked demography in terms of ethno-cultural identity.<sup>80</sup> There is an ethno-religious dimension to the Western interests in this region which is often overlooked while analysing security dynamics of CHT. It is widely speculated that the West is trying to create a Christian-majority state in this region to counter the influence of China.<sup>81</sup> The CHT has experienced a rapid rate of evangelisation in the last few decades and it resembles the highest in terms of religious conversion rate between 1991 and 2011 in CHT.<sup>82</sup> For the people of a shatter zone, Christianity provides an oppositional and a modern alternative vis-à-vis the lowland states' dominant ideologies.<sup>83</sup> The role of transnational actors and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) has vested

<sup>76</sup> Shariful Islam and Mong Sing Hai Marma, "KNF gets arms, support from other side of border," *The Daily Star*, April 07, 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Sreeparna Banerjee, "Road from Rakhine: The Uncertain Fate of Rohingyas," *Raisina Debates*, October 05, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/road-from-rakhine-the-uncertain-fate-of-rohingyas>.

<sup>78</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> David Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Interview with a retired general of Bangladesh Army, October 2024.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with a Professor of Political Science, University of Chittagong, October 2024; Interview with a retired officer of Bangladesh Army, September 2024.

<sup>82</sup> Parvez, *Shantichukhtir Dui Jug*, 144.

<sup>83</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 319.

linkages with these evolving dynamics. Therefore, it will be a naive attempt to understand the complex security challenges of CHT without taking the geopolitical great game into consideration.

## 8. Chronic Security Challenges and Policy Suggestions

The five meta-narratives of the root causes of the security challenges in the CHT which have been analysed in the previous sections explain the recurrence of security challenges in the CHT of Bangladesh. Each of the causal elements cannot be seen in isolation, rather, they are interwoven in the mosaic of security challenges in the area. The political uniqueness of the area is a fundamental criterion for understanding the security problems in the area. Failing to do that, there have been repetitive attempts to marginalise the ethnic groups through the politics of national identity. Marginalised identity is related to grievances and sometimes overshadows other deep-rooted problems like the issues of land rights and deprivation. The fundamental differences in terms of land ownership are complex and it will require compromise on both sides to make some progress. Against all of these odds, a peace accord was signed and its implementation failure has further complicated the aforementioned problems. On top of these issues, CHT is positioned at the crossroads of diverging geopolitical interests of external powers and this concern is often negated in mainstream literature on security challenges in CHT. Therefore, the challenges are paramount to ensure stability and harmony in this southeastern part of Bangladesh.

The complex situation in CHT requires a political solution for which a national consensus is required to safeguard the national integrity of Bangladesh. There will be divergences of policy narratives regarding every aspect of domestic politics among the national political elites, but the CHT issue has to be considered as a significant concern to protect the territorial integrity of Bangladesh. Political elites of Bangladesh are often not aware of the consequences of their narratives on CHT which are mainstreamed through various channels of communication. It is unfortunate that after five decades of emergence as an independent country, the political consciousness of the sensitivity and complexity of problems in CHT among the political elites are still missing to a large extent. Reaching a political consensus is the foremost task which itself is a complex process to resolve the problems.

Thus, the multifaceted security problems in CHT require a political solution. But, in order to prepare a convenient ground reality, socio-cultural harmony should exist beforehand. The voices of the youth are still not prominent in the local political landscape who are untapped human resources to augment socio-cultural harmony between ethnic groups and the Bengali community. Many of these young generations

are well-educated and deeply involved in various governmental and non-governmental sectors in Bangladesh. Especially in the changed political landscape of Bangladesh, the youths have tremendous potentials in reshaping the political dynamics of the country. The CHT is not an exception to this as the context has been changed in the last five decades due to tremendous infrastructural and connectivity development works. However, these developments will be futile if there is no socio-political and socio-cultural harmony among the people residing in the region. The involvement of local and transnational NGOs in CHT is deep-rooted and the government should focus on encouraging them to invest on improving the socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics in CHT.

In the absence of socio-political integration, the intended objectives of various government initiatives cannot be accomplished. A national policy on integrating all the small ethnic groups and Bengali community living in CHT to the mainstream national socio-political dynamics has to be devised as early as possible. This is a mammoth task which requires contributions from political elites, intellectuals, bureaucrats, ethnic political leaders, etc. The celebration of the sociocultural diversity of CHT can be the basis for devising a national integration policy. An efficient and innovative human resource apparatus is needed to complete the mammoth tasks of identifying the resolving point to reach an agreement. In order to solve complicated issues like land rights, each side will have to make compromises to reach a viable solution. In addition to a revitalised administrative apparatus, the political elites have a significant role to play in fostering confidence-building measures in a society where inter-communal trust has gone down to a great extent. The political apparatus will be the key in terms of accomplishing this objective where the administration will work as a major implementing partner. The approach should be holistic one; government stakeholders have to play a pioneering role to engage non-government and transnational actors in this regard.

The deep-rooted security challenges in CHT cannot be treated as insignificant which might not have any linkages with the territorial integrity of Bangladesh. However, the innate political characteristics of the demography of this hilly terrain pose significant challenges for a nation-state. On top of that, the area is subject to the interests of major external powers who have diverging interests in the region. As argued in the previous section, the transnational actors also have vested interests to accomplish in this area. Therefore, while making any political, economic and security narratives, policies must consider this strategic concern. There should be no compromise on the question of territorial integrity. Therefore, the strategic implications must be carefully analysed before adopting a policy on the modalities of

the security forces' presence in CHT. There should be a broader definition of security to be applied in the context of CHT so that every inhabitant feels secure at all levels.

## 9. Conclusion

The security challenges in the CHT are an intricate blend of historical, socio-cultural, political, and geopolitical factors that continue to shape the area's current security landscape. This paper is an attempt to provide a pentadimensional metanarrative that explains the root causes of the recurrence of complex security challenges in the CHT. However, each dimension of this metanarrative requires further rigorous research which will produce larger volumes of literature on security challenges in this area. The CHT, characterised by its unique demographic composition, diverse ethnic identities, and historical resistance to centralised authority, epitomises the enduring complexity of integrating peripheral regions into the nation-state framework. Rooted in Scott's thesis on governance challenges in hilly areas identified as a shatter zone, CHT's challenges demand recognition of its unique attributes—ethnic diversity, cultural autonomy, and the persistent issues surrounding land rights and political identity.

Despite the signing of the 1997 Peace Accord, the failure to fully implement its terms has led to political factionalism and further exacerbated numerous long-standing issues. This has been compounded by increasing geopolitical interests and the active involvement of transnational actors, each with vested stakes in the region. The need for a political consensus at the national level, combined with policies aimed at fostering social and cultural harmony, remains crucial to addressing the insecurities and achieving lasting peace.

To move forward, Bangladesh must adopt an integrated approach that prioritises both the territorial integrity of the nation and the socio-political inclusion of CHT's communities. By implementing an inclusive national integration policy, promoting youth involvement, revitalising administrative structures, and recognising CHT as a strategic priority, there is hope for transforming the security dynamics in this historically complex region. Only through such a holistic approach can the national security challenges in the CHT be sustainably addressed, ensuring both regional stability and national unity.