**Failure of Political Settlement in Chittagong Hill Tracts**

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**Introduction**

One of the major aims of any political settlement in a post-conflict situation is to promote peace and political stability by reaching an agreement among the leaders, elites, coalitions, and their followers. A working relationship between the three elements of political settlement framework, actor, interest, and institution is a pre-condition for a successful political settlement. However, this was not true in case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). CHT has remained as an area of intermittent conflicts and violence among various actors over different interests for a long time. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord in 1997 came as a political settlement between the government of Bangladesh and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) after a long battle between the Bangladesh Army and Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of PCJSS. It was an outcome of a protracted negotiation process (Mohsin, 2003), and thus, was expected to meet the negotiated demands of the tribal communities and establish peace and stability in this region. However, the 20 year long political settlement process between the government of Bangladesh and PCJSS that culminated as the accord could not meet the expectation of peace and stability. The ultimate goal of this accord has not been reached yet. The aim of the political settlement as argued by (Laws & Leftwich, 2014) referring to the World Development Report 2011:

“Pervasive conﬂict, insecurity and violence in a society are the enemies of development. The concept of the political settlement highlights the importance of leaders, elites, coalitions and their followers reaching agreement about the political conditions and practices they will observe. Political settlements make it possible to peacefully shape local and domestic institutions and policies that may, in turn, promote political stability and positive development outcomes.”

In the case of CHT, the accord was an agreement that was reached through extensive negotiation and discussion with the leaders and elites of the ethnic communities in order to address their demands, reform and shape new institutions to bring political stability back in CHT. Despite the fact, the political stability did not last long in this region and soon after the signing of the accord, a new political party named ‘United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF)’ emerged with their own demands of autonomy. Therefore, question may hit in mind that, does the political settlement always ensure the political stability and positive developments? The answer would be ‘no’ in this case. Because, despite addressing the issues and interests of the tribal people in the CHT accord as negotiated by their erstwhile only regional political party leaders, political fragmentation and communal violence[[1]](#footnote-1) still continues after the 21 years of this accord. Hence, the idea that political settlement brings political stability might not be held as true always. Chittagong Hill Tracts is as a case in point.

The demands of PCJSS in 1972 led by their tribal leader, Manabendra Narayan Larma, were as following:

1. Autonomy of the Chittagong Hill Tracts with its own legislature;
2. Retention of the Regulation 1900 in the constitution of Bangladesh (This regulation was passed by British to preserve the traditional socio-cultural and political institutions of the indigenous people of CHT based on their customary laws which were abrogated by the government of Pakistan in 1947);
3. Continuation of the offices of circle chief;
4. Constitutional Provision restricting the amendment of Regulation 1900 and imposing a ban on the influx of the Bengali people (Chakma, 2010).

As the demands were rejected the Bengali ethnic identity was elevated to the national identity in the constitution, the tribal people formed a political party called the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) in 1972, and subsequently formed Shanti Bahini (Peace Troops) in 1973 as their armed wing in demand for autonomy (Husain, 1999). They began an armed insurgency against the government of Bangladesh in 1977. Consequently, Bangladesh Army was deployed to counter the insurgency that led to the militarization of the whole region and violent ethnic conflict between the Shanti Bahini and Bangladesh Army which formally came to a settlement in 1997 through signing the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord between PCJSS and the government of Bangladesh (Chowdhury B. H., 2002), (Zahed, 2013).

However, PCJSS had compromise the demand of autonomy in the final accord. There were several other adjustments to their demands which had gone through both addition and subtraction (Husain, 1999). Despite the fact, it is a matter of question as to why a political settlement has failed to bring peace and political stability in CHT. In exploring the answers to this question, actors and their interest have been the prime focus in this study. As for actors, the regional political parties in CHT are the key unit of analysis. Besides, as the communal violence has also been a significant phenomenon in post-accord CHT, the study also looks at the actors of the communal violence. In both cases, what interests have drove them to be polarized or engaged in communal violence have been explored.

**Research Scope**

Although it might be expected that after signing the accord, there would be communal and political peace in the whole region and the commitments made in the accord would be fulfilled duly. However, the reality came as quite opposite to the expectation. On the one hand, the region has experienced factional politics of different political parties with their own vested interests, on the other hand, after the end of the rebel-military conflict in CHT, this region has experienced a significant number of communal conflicts between Bengali and non-Bengali people. While there was one regional political party in CHT during the signing of the CHT accord, within twenty years, there are now four mainstream regional political parties which are:

1. Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS);
2. PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma);
3. United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF);
4. UPDF (Democratic).

Killing of political leaders and activists of the regional political parties such as PCJSS, UPDF etc. have also been very regular alongside the rise of factional politics in CHT. A common culture to blame each other for murders and attacks has also been maintained for years (Manik, 2018). According to the report of a national daily in Bangladesh, 278 political leaders have been killed only from UPDF while more than 1200 of them have been attacked and injured (Manik, 2018). The scores of killing also have a fair stake in three other political parties.

Besides the political fragmentation and the continued inter and intra-group political unrest among the political parties, the predicament of communal violence of both large and small scale has also maintained its existence in the post CHT accord period. For example, an attack in 2017 by the Bengali community in Longadu can be taken as a case in point. 300 houses of the tribal community were torched and burned to ashes in Longadu village of Rangamati Hill District which is alleged to be carried out with backing by the army and local law enforcement agencies (Cultural Survival, 2017).

A succinct idea about the ethnic conflict in CHT also can be found from the amount of casualties in recent years as reported in the newspapers. From 1 January 2014 to 30 November 2018, 166 tribal people were killed, 259 were injured, and 312 were abducted while 98 Bengali people were killed, 572 people were injured, and 148 people were abducted (Dhaka Tribune, 2018b). The voluminous casualties of CHT tell us that peace has not been a real phenomenon in this region even after the formal ending of the armed conflict back in 1997. Therefore, it is evident that the political settlement that took place between the government of Bangladesh and PCJSS might not have worked out quite successfully.

Therefore, it seems that the political settlement did not bring an end to the political instability or communal conflict in CHT. Hence, it is important to know that why the political settlement has failed to align the interests of the political parties and all communities living there. Having the background in our discussion frame, we can determine our research question as follows:

*Why did the political settlement fail in case of CHT?*

The brief background about the post-accord situation in CHT gives us the impression that Political fragmentation in CHT has surfaced in 1997 after the signing of CHT accord. Similarly, the communal violence was supposed to end after the accord. However, the number of communal violence is also high in this period. In this consideration, the study explores as to why the political fragmentation has been experienced and political conflict has been so high in the post CHT accord period. Alongside, it is also important to dig in as to why the communal conflict is still so prevalent with a little interval in this region.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The post-liberation war development of CHT indicates that there has been a dispute of interest between the political actors of CHT and political actors of Bangladesh. Particularly, the denial of four points demand by Manobendra Narayan Larma, the threat of the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to marginalize the hill people by sending Bengali people to CHT, refusal of Larma to endorse the article 9 of the 1972 constitution, and the unitary nature of the constitution were the exhibition of clash of interests between the political actors of CHT and the government of Bangladesh. Therefore, ‘interest’ and ‘actors’ are very important aspects of this event. The four-point demands were also highly political that were not accommodated within the erstwhile constitutional and political capacity of Bangladesh. In view of the nature of actors and their vested interests over the years in both pre and post CHT accord period, the political settlement framework can effectively address this issue. Barnes (2009) refers to political settlement quoting DFID as “the forging of a common understanding, usually between elites, that their best interests or beliefs are served through acquiescence to a framework for administering political power. …[They] are the deep, sometimes unarticulated, understandings between elites about how the division of power will work.” Fritz and Menocal (2007) view political settlement as a negotiated agreement that binds the state and society. To them, this is an on-going process rather a one-off event. The Asia Foundation in their occasional paper ‘Political Settlements: Implications for International Development Policy and Practice” defined political settlement as ‘informal power arrangement’ or ‘social order’ in a country where political elites make up the key actors in this process (Parks & Cole, 2010). The goal of a political settlement framework is to ensure governance, stability, and the quality and pace of development which are expected as the outcomes of struggles and ensuing arrangements among powerful elites. There are three elements of a political settlement framework which are actors, interests, and institutions (Parks & Cole, 2010). The actors are powerful elite groups who operate in pursuit of their interest to establish or reshape institutions to sustain political settlements.

In such a political process, the rules of game are determined, and the actors refer to what players are in the game and their interests determine what role they will play in the game. Similarly, as we can see the intext of CHT, the demand of autonomy was compromised by PCJSS in finalizing the CHT accord which ultimately put the players away from this process who were still in favor of autonomy. The repercussion of pushing a group of players away from the game gave birth to the emergence of UPDF in the same year. The vital demand of UPDF was full autonomy (UPDF, 2016). Therefore, actors and interest are indispensable units of analysis in this study.

In this study, the first two elements of political settlement are taken into consideration for an analytical framework. As for the actor, the study first looks into the polarized political parties as to who have been polarized and who are engaged to what extents in the political conflicts including the extent of their participation in the political process such as local and national elections. Second, it also investigates the ethnic and Bengali communities as to what extent they are engaged in communal violence. It finds out whether the Bengali or the ethnic communities are more prone to be the actor of communal violence.

As for interests, the study investigates what change in interests are driving the political parties to be polarized and to do factional politics and kill each other. Alongside, it also explores what interests might there be behind the communal violence in CHT. The following diagram can more comprehensively exhibit the theoretical framework of this study.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Unit of Analysis | Political Fragmentation and Conflict | Communal Violence |
| Actors | Who | Who |
| Interests | Why | Why |

The study follows a qualitative approach. This particular approach has been undertaken in order to examine the nuanced political interests of different political and ethnic groups in a more specific and case-oriented manner. Because the interests of the political parties are diverse and changing over time, it is important to investigate the actors and their interests through a qualitative approach. Content analysis technique is followed in this study while data are collected using secondary sources including books, journal articles, websites, newspaper reports, and organizational reports.

**Literature Review**

The ethnic tension in CHT is a prolonged issue, although it seems to be exacerbating after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, and after the CHT Accord in 1997. As mentioned, it is inhabited by eleven tribal groups and each of them is distinct in culture, language, and ethnicity (Uddin, 2017), this area was also first inhabited by the tribal people a few centuries back. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of dependable scholarly sources to track the full history of CHT people (Husain, 1999). Nevertheless, including Husain, some have tried to dig into the history and found that this area was a migration place for people from neighboring states of Arakan (Myanmar) and Tripura of India. Those people were politically independent, economically self-sufficient, and socially egalitarian (Uddin, 2017). The time traces back to the Mughal Period. At that time, Bengali people would come to CHT upon the invitation of tribal people to trade food products, clothes, and tobacco which were not available in CHT (Husain, 1999). Since then, even during the British rule in the Indian subcontinent from 1860-1947, the tribal people enjoyed autonomy by administering the CHT under the rule of their traditional and customary kingship system (Uddin, 2008) (2010b) (2011). However, the ethnic communities in this region have historical precedence of their continued effort to become politically autonomous and nationally independent. In 1777, the Chakma chief Jan Baux Khan formally declared war against the Mughal rulers and after a decade long war, they signed a peace treaty in Calcutta (Barua, 2001). The similar expression of their interest has also been exhibited in the post-liberation war period in Bangladesh. Besides, there are also a number of new developments took place after the independence of Bangladesh. in 1979, a large influx of 30,000 Bengali people in CHT gave birth to a new dimension of frustration, deprivation, and suspicion which ostensibly resulted into the manifested hostile relationship between the tribal and Bengali communities (Barua, 2001). Although many scholars opine that this was beginning of the discontent, some more arguments are also found in Husain’s essay which shows that this discontent dates to the Mughal period again. During the eighteenth century, the Mughal emperor made the CHT people give in to them where until then, Bengali people would come to CHT as a trading partner only upon the invitation of the Chakma chief. Nevertheless, due to Mughal interference in administration, the CHT leaders were to yield to political superiority. But they had nothing to challenge as they lost power and means to the Mughal authority. Husain (1999) thinks that in retrospect, it seems that the hatred against the plain people or Bengali people remained built into their psyche and got transmitted through generations, to be manifested in later years under certain specific circumstances.

Scholars also argue that the tribal people have been deprived of their legitimate claims to the lands, civil rights, legal recognition of their ethnic identity through the state’s legal apparatus (Uddin, 2017). Different scholars have seen this deprivation-induced ethnic tension and violence in different ways. For example, Zahed (2013) thinks the construction of Kaptai Dam, refusal of separate ethnic identity in the constitution of Bangladesh, land occupation, environmental migration, militarization in CHT, religious belligerence, cultural belligerence, and procrastinated and incomplete implantation of CHT accord play a vital role in ethnic tension. On the other hand, duality in administrative legislation, identity crisis in constitution, militarization and its continuation, external support of India behind this insurgency, tribal-Bengali relationship, emergence of Jumma identity and new leadership, massive demographic change in CHT, and ethnic rivalry among the tribal groups are considered by Mohsin and Hossain, as responsible for prolonged ethnic tension in CHT (Mohsin & Hossain, 2015). In a different study, Mohsin finds that fragmentation between the hill people and the Bengali people has been deepened following the CHT accord of 1997.

There have been several incidents of violence between the two communities, ranging from the cases of land-grabbing to rape. Prior to the accord, the hill people expected that the Bengali people (those who came following 1979) would be withdrawn from the region as this was the primary demand of PCJSS. The Bengali people, on the other hand, see themselves as victims of poverty and natural calamities. Both communities see one another as their main enemy. There is no trust or a strong mutual relationship. Their everyday engagement with each other is full of anxiety, fear, hate, and discrimination. Mere implementation of the accord will not necessarily bring about peace especially given the fragmentation that has emerged within CHT (Mohsin, 2003).

While it was expected to bring an end to the tension, conflict, and violence in CHT, scholars think that a protracted and arguably more complex phase of conflict has started after the CHT accord (Sohad, Sajib, Chowdhury, & Hossain, 2017). Earlier, it was a conflict between the state and PCJSS or in other words, tribal leaders were fighting altogether for the same four demands. But after the accord, the political leaders were split into few political fractions and started a new fight between them alongside with the Bengali people and the government. In that sense, the peace accord has brought more conflict than peace. According to Uddin, PCJSS is accused of selling off the CHT and its democratic movement to the state in name of CHT accord (Uddin, 2010a) (2013) (2014) (2017). At this circumstance, it is significant to look at the interests of political parties as to what are their stakes in being polarized and killing each other. The similar importance should also be drawn on the actors of communal violence in CHT to see what interests drive them to carry out violent activities.

**Identifying the Actors and Interests in Political Fragmentation**

Political fragmentation in CHT is not entirely a new development as might be assumed from the post-accord situation in CHT. Given the heterogeneity of this area, the divergence and disagreement about political decision making and determining political interest has always been evident in CHT. As mentioned above, this region is home to eleven different ethnic communities which are different from each other in their language, culture, and ethnicity. Due to being quite different in their ethno-lingual identity, historically they have never been unified in any political decision or process. Mohsin and Hossain (2015) state that:

“These groups were hardly united on the issue of self-determination. During the political transition of the British colonial rule to Pakistan State, Hill leadership was divided in choosing their political affiliation and administrative structure.”

Similarly, there was discorded decision during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. As a result, one group of the ethnic people fought for the independence of Bangladesh whereas the other group opposed the cause and fought against the liberation war fighters of Bangladesh. Politically, they could not decide unitedly as to what stance they should have taken in such a national crisis.

Political rivalry among the tribal communities is also not new in their history. Ethnic hegemony among the large ethnic groups is quite visible in CHT. Particularly, there are four ethnic communities which are reported to be large in size, and therefore, hegemonic in the areas they are more in number. A spatial distribution throughout the region and the pattern of their inhabitant settlement exhibits territorial intermingling. According to Mohsin and Hossain (2015), Chakma comprise the largest ethnic group in CHT that predominantly inhibit in Rangamati, the center of CHT. On the other hand, Marma dominate the geography of Bandarban while Tripura dominate the geography of North Khagrachari. South part of Bandarban is dominated by Mro community. (Jamil & Pandey, 2008) explains that conflict among the ethnic communities has resulted into serious consequences for the tribal people in CHT including intergroup rivalry and conflicts, fragmentation within the ethnic communities, and stagnation of the social and human development in the region. It has led the multi-ethnic tribal communities into increasing division.

The culture of political disagreement and divergent interests has also been portrayed during the signing of the accord of CHT. The negotiation and accord development process lack transparency and participation of all stakeholders including the civil society of CHT from both the tribal and Bengali communities. The process of decision making also lacked the credibility including the decision makers. Interestingly, the signatory of the accord on behalf of the tribal communities also lacked the credibility. (Chowdhury N. J., 2005) asserts that the legitimacy of the accord is questioned since the persons who signed it did not have the legal authority or the people’s mandate where Santu Larma signed on behalf of the hill people. Therefore, it can be assumed that the interests of the ethnic communities were not properly addressed in CHT accord. The following table can help more in understanding the level of satisfaction of the tribal people regarding the accord.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction | Frequency  N= 258 | Percentage |
| Fully Satisfied | 51 | 19.8% |
| Somewhat Satisfied | 91 | 35.3% |
| Somewhat Dissatisfied | 74 | 28.7% |
| Fully Dissatisfied | 26 | 10.1% |
| No Opinion/Cannot Say | 16 | 6.2% |

*Table 1: Level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction about the accord*

*Source: Mohsin & Hossain (2015)*

From the above table 1, it can be understood that only 19.8% of the hill people were fully satisfied with the accord the dissatisfaction counts together 38.8% and little satisfaction is reflected by 35.3% tribal people. Mohsin & Hossain (2015) also explored the reason behind their satisfaction or dissatisfaction which has been illustrated by the following table.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Responses | Frequency | Percent |
| Addressed Real Issue | 76 | 29.5% |
| Just Controlling Violence | 134 | 51.9% |
| No Opinion | 48 | 18.6% |

*Table 2: Reason behind the CHT accord*

*Source: Mohsin & Hossain (2015)*

The table 2 explains that majority of the hill people believe that the accord was signed only to control the decade long conflict between the Peace Force and the Bangladesh Army. Only 29.5% of the people think that the accord addressed the real issue. From this illustration, it can be said that the tribal people were not politically on the same page regarding the satisfaction about the accord and its objectivity. Therefore, we can assume that the interests of the tribal people were not properly addressed in the accord and since PCJSS signed the accord, they might also have different interests other than who do not or did not agree on the objectivity of the accord. Many of the tribal people have accused the PCJSS leaders of compromising political sentiment and the spirit of Pahari nationhood on exchange for a ‘peace accord’ which did not bring about anything peaceful to the Pahari life (Uddin, 2017).

Hence, the only political party, PCJSS seems ostensibly failed to fulfill the demands and expectations of all the communities and tribal stake holders of CHT. In such a state of dissatisfaction and misalignment of political interests, the very first political fragmentation took place on 26 December 1997 through the birth of a new political party in CHT named ‘United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF)’. A group of PCJSS A group of PCJSS members who opposed the Peace Accord and breakaway factions of Pahari Chattra Parishad (PCP), Pahari Gano Parishad (PGP), Hill Women Federation (HWF) ultimately formed UPDF with the demand of full autonomy in CHT, which was the very first demand of the tribal people in the post liberation war period of Bangladesh in 1972 led by MN Larma (Global Security.org, 2012). UPDF accuses the PCJSS of being politically bankrupt compromising the interests of the tribal mass people, and as an opportunistic party that had made their raison deter to advance self-interest by winning favor of the ruling party other than to carry the struggle forward for establishing people’s rights (UPDF, 2016). In the manifesto of UPDF, they claim that they would not want to form a new political party had there been any other political party in CHT truly representing the interests of the tribal people to establish their rights. They also predicted that the PCJSS would be liquidated in the course of history. Therefore, a stark contrast in the political interests and vision is seen between PCJSS and the UPDF. The key demands of the UPDF as outlined in their manifesto on their website are as follows (UPDF, 2017):

* Grant FULL AUTONOMY by transferring all the subjects of state administration except foreign policy, currency, national defense and heavy industry to a regional body to be elected by direct franchise by the permanent residents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
* Accord constitutional recognition to the ethnic nationalities such as Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Murung, Khumi, Chak, Khiyang, Lusai, Panko, Bawm, Tonchongya, Santal, Gurkha, Ahomi and Rakhaine living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts; and include a provision in the constitution that all the nations and nationalities residing in Bangladesh shall enjoy equal rights and dignity.
* Make provision for reserved seats for the ethnic nationalities (including separate reserved seats for women) in the national parliament of Bangladesh and make further provision for the direct election of representatives to these seats.
* Put an end to military rule effective under the guise of operation “Uttoron” and withdraw the military from Chittagong Hill Tracts.
* Stop the use of the settlers[[2]](#footnote-2), who have been settled with a political motive, as a tool of national repression and rehabilitate them honorably with means of livelihood either in their respective districts or in any other plain district.
* Recognize customary land rights and grant full right to land management in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Besides their key demands, they also have 62 other supplementary demands which are categorized into 16 different categories (UPDF, 2017). It should be noted that UPDF protested the CHT accord which did not accommodate the demand of ‘autonomy’ of this region as it was fully contrasting with the unitary nature of the constitution of Bangladesh. The accord also stated that the Bengali settlers those who were pushed in this region after 1978 would be withdrawn as part of this accord. However, UPDF restated their demand of full autonomy in their manifesto where they did not demand to withdraw the Bengali settlers from CHT (UPDF, 2016). Rather, they claimed that they would try to ensure the rights, dignity, and interests of all citizens living in CHT. The provision of full autonomy is also quite ambiguous which is portrayed differently in their manifesto and the demands. They have also participated in the local government elections in 2014 where they have succeeded to secure 5 seats where 4 of them were Chairman and 1 was Vice Chairman. In 2009, they also won 3 Chairman position during the local government election (The Daily Star, 2009). They had also run indecently during the election of 2001 (Bangla Tribune, 2018). As a matter of fact, their interests look highly self-contradictory as well as their demands. On the one hand, they are demanding full autonomy, on the other hand, they are regularly participating in the elections and other government activities in CHT. Hence, it is quite ambiguous to determine their true interests in context of CHT. Nevertheless, this can be taken as evident that their interests and political vision are quite different from PCJSS which caused the first political fragmentation in CHT.

10 years after the political faction in PCJSS that led to the emergence of UPDF, another fragmentation took place in CHT in 2007. A faction of PCJSS was separated from the original PCJSS and formed a new party named PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma). The breakaway was caused due to political leadership feud where the newly formed PCJSS claimed that the old PCJSS has shifted away from the vision of MN Larma. Therefore, a reformed PCJSS is required to sustain the political interests and vision of MN Larma. This faction does not have any formal constitution or manifesto rather they are mainly concentrating on increasing its support-base at the grass root level. Some recent activities of it indicate that the party aspires to emerge as a dominant party and play its due role in CHT politics (Global Security.org, 2012). As part of their aspiration, in the 2014 local government election, PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma) secured 4 positions in the Union Council among which 2 were Chairman, 1 was Vice Chairman, and 1 was Female Vice Chairman.

However, the faction in PCJSS is seen as conspiracy by the Chairman of PCJSS. In his opinion after the three factions of PCJSS in 10 years of signing the accord, he shared that, “I got a feeling from the experience of the last 11 years that there is a conspiracy to destroy the existence of Jumma people and their political, cultural and land rights” (The Daily Star, 2008). It needs to be taken into consideration that he avoided the difference in political interests that has been very evident since the signing of the agreement.

Lastly, another fragmentation has been seen in 2017 which came as political faction in UPDF. On 17 November 2017 in a press conference, a new organization with an 11-member committee named UPDF-Democratic announced its establishment claiming UPDF to be an undemocratic and corrupt organization (Dhaka Tribune, 2017). Similar to PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma), this newly formed party has also no formal manifesto or specific demands. Rather they accused UPDF about extortion, abduction and murder. They announced that they would protest these types of injustice and continue the movement for tribal people’s full autonomy (The Daily Star, 2017).

The allegation of extortion has not only been subjected to UPDF in recent years. Mohsin & Hossain (2015) argue that in the post-accord CHT, the security situation has gone worse which led to the emergence of unidentified armed groups.

“These groups are involved in collecting tolls from vehicles plying the roads. Extortions and toll collection are also on the rise in the region. People allege that formerly they had to pay toll only to the PCJSS, which they could justify since they were fighting for their rights. But now there are several groups and they collect tolls under different pretexts. The PCJSS and the UPDF are also active in this business of toll collection. People find hard to justify this toll collection in the name of different causes.”

A report in the Daily independent 2017 (the year UPDF has been polarized) also suggests that extortionists are collecting tolls from businesspersons, locals and employees allegedly on behalf of activists of the regional political groups—the UPDF, PCJSS, and PCJSS (reformist) ahead of the anniversary of the foundation of UPDF to be observed in December (The Independent, 2017). So we can assume based on this observation and faction of UPDF that divergence in interest may not only in political vision of the political parties, rather those might also have economic interests too.

The political instability of CHT in the post-accord period did not stay within the demarcation of political fragmentation, rather political killing has been significantly too high in the post-accord period. Killing, counter-killing the activists and leaders of other political parties have become regular incidents in CHT. For example, in Rangamati in 2018, 22 people were killed in conflicts between three political parties which are UPDF, UPDF (Democratic), and PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma) (Dhaka Tribune, 2019). The number of casualties has been found extremely high in case of UPDF. From 1998 to 2018, a total of 278 UPDF leaders have been killed while more than 1200 have been wounded. Earlier, the trend of blaming was usually between UPDF and both factions of PCJSS. However, the recent attacks are blamed on UPDF (Democratic) (Dhaka Tribune, 2018a).

In such a scenario, it can be suggested that after the CHT accord, the situation in CHT has neither been politically stable, nor been non-violent. Difference in political interests have pushed PCJSS to be split into 3 parties within the 10 years of CHT accord signing whereas in the next 10 years, a split political party, UPDF has been split into two over political and presumable economic interests. According to Uddin (2017), “Before signing the peace accord, all Pahari political leaders were fighting together for the same demands: regional autonomy of the CHT and the socio-political rights of the Pahari indigenous people. But after the accord, we found that Pahari political leaders and activists split into JSS, UPDF, JSS Reformist, etc. I think we are divided today because of this accord.”

Having their division, all of the parties have their strong support in their own area as they have exhibited their popularity in the last local government election in 2014 in CHT. The following table can show their strength in their areas (Kapaeeng Foundation, 2018) UPDF (Democratic) was not a part of this election as it has emerged later.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Political Party | Chairman | Vice Chairman | Female Vice Chairman | Total |
| PCJSS | 7 | 7 | 9 | 23 |
| UPDF | 4 | 1 | 0 | 5 |
| PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma) | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |

*Table 3: Elected local government officials’ distribution among regional political parties in CHT.*

Despite their differed interests, if we take the very key difference between all these political parties in CHT, we can see that there are mainly two factions at the end of the day. One is pro-accord faction which comprises the PCJSS and the PCJSS (Reformist/MN Larma), and the other is anti-accord faction which comprises UPDF and UPDF (Democratic). However, whatever the case might be, at this point we can come to this judgement that the unstable situation of CHT indicates that the political settlement in CHT could not accommodate the political interests of all the tribal stakeholders and hence, this unaccommodated divergence in political interests has led to the extensive political fragmentation and conflict in CHT.

**Identifying the Actors in Interests in Communal Violence**

As we know already that there are eleven ethnic communities and one homogenous Bengali community live in CHT, it can be inferred that their multi-ethnic co-existence is widely multi-cultural and multi-lingual. The demographic distribution of the community tells us that communal demography has rapidly been changing. The following population trend can help us understand the demographic distribution in CHT (Mohsin & Hossain, 2015).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Hill People (%) | Bengali People (%) |
| 1872 | 98.27 | 1.73 |
| 1901 | 92.81 | 7.19 |
| 1959 | 90.39 | 9.61 |
| 1981 | 59.17 | 40.83 |
| 1991 | 51.34 | 48.66 |

*Table 4: Population trend in CHT*

*Source: (Mohsin and Hossain 2015)*

The table 4 explains that once a tribal majority CHT has been changing into Bengali majority, certainly in a very significant number after 1959. One of the main reasons of this abrupt demographic shift can be referred to the forced Bengali settlement after 1979. According to one estimate, approximately 400,000 Bengalis were settled in the CHT between 1980-1984. This massive demographic was viewed with alarm by the local people and considered part of a government policy of ethnocide (Mohsin, 2003). Although it was a part of counter-insurgency measures in CHT which resulted not only in extensive push settling Bengali people in this region, but also it evicted a large score of tribal people who later took refuge in India. The perception of tribal people in this political ethnocide that it was deliberately done by the government to colonize this area in order to bring substantive demographic shift in CHT (Mohsin & Hossain, 2015). However, PCJSS demanded the constitutional ban on Bengali settlement and further withdrawal of the Bengali settlers. Least to say, their demand has not addressed yet. Therefore, communal tension between the tribal communities and the Bengali community still persists in CHT.

In this contentious backdrop, it needs to be reminded that communal violence in CHT has not been ceased in the post-accord period. Intermittent communal violence has been a regular phenomenon in CHT whereas abduction, Rape, land grabbing also added different dimensions of communal violence to the lives of people.

The perpetrators of communal violence in CHT are multi-actors. From Bengali settlers to regional political parties in CHT, from local law enforcement agencies to the Bangladesh Army, from different community organizations to unidentified miscreants, everyone has been engaged in communal violence in CHT. According to Odhikar (2018), from 2012-2018 ethnic minorities have seen 131 communal death, 237 of them were injured, 116 of them were abducted, 82 women of the ethnic minorities have been raped, 2 incidents of land grabbing have taken place. The following tables show the actor distribution of the communal violence in CHT in the last 6 years.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Alleged Perpetrators | Number of Victims | | | | |
| Killed | Injured | Abduction | Rape | Land Grabbing |
| Bengali Settlers | 4 | 42 | 1 | 52 | 2 |
| Youth/s from ethnic minority groups | 1 |  |  | 112 |  |
| PCJSS | 17 | 28 |  |  |  |
| UPDF | 8 | 3 | 70 |  |  |
| Jana Sanghati Samiti (MN Larma Group) | 3 | 1 |  |  |  |
| Jana Sanghati Samity (JSS) Santu Group | 5 | 1 |  |  |  |
| UPDF and PCJSS (MN Larma  Group) |  | 6 |  |  |  |
| PCJSS and UPDF jointly | 8 | 19 | 4 |  |  |
| Intra Party clash of JSS | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| Clashes between Pahari and Bengali |  | 5 |  |  |  |
| Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) and Bangali Chhatra  Parishad (BCP) |  | 15 |  |  |  |
| Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) and Bangali Settlers |  | 8 |  |  |  |
| Two groups of Mro National Party (MNP) | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| Police |  | 10 |  |  |  |
| Army Men | 6 |  |  | 2 |  |
| BGB Members |  |  |  | 2 |  |
| Joint Force (Army, Police, and Ansar) |  | 6 |  |  |  |
| Law enforcement agency |  | 11 |  | 1 |  |
| Unknown miscreants | 77 | 82 | 41 | 14 |  |
| Total | 131 | 237 | 116 | 82 | 2 |

*Table 5: Situation of ethnic minority: 2012-2018*

*Source:* (Odhikar, 2018)

From the above distribution, we can see that the extent of communal violence is not same for all actors. If we exclude the ‘unknown miscreants’ from our calculation since it is not identified who are the perpetrators, then the major actor distribution for communal violence would be as follows.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Violence/Top Five Alleged Actors | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Killing | PCJSS-17 | UPDF-8 | PCJSS and UPDF jointly-8 | Army Men-6 | Jana Sanghati Samity (JSS) Santu Group-5 |
| Injured | Bengali Settlers-42 | PCJSS-28 | PCJSS and UPDF jointly-19 | Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) and Bangali Chhatra  Parishad (BCP)-15 | Law enforcement agency-11 |
| Abduction | UPDF-70 | PCJSS and UPDF jointly-4 | Bengali Settlers-1 |  |  |
| Rape | Youth/s from ethnic minority groups-112 | Bengali Settlers-52 | Army Men-2 | BGB Members-2 | Law enforcement agency-1 |
| Land Grabbing | Bengali Settlers-2 |  |  |  |  |

*Table 6: Actor distribution of communal violence in CHT*

The actor distribution shows that violence on ethnic minority or communal violence does not represent a single actor or a particular group of actors as perpetrators. Rather it represents a wide range of actors where regional political parties and people from ethnic minorities themselves are top of killing, abduction, and raping. The second highest actors for killing, injury, and abduction also consist of the regional political parties. It is interesting to note that in the previous section, we have seen stark contrast between political interests and vision among the factionalized political parties in CHT. However, when it comes to adopt the means of violence, the political parties seem to make coalition with each other and carry out violence together. In the previous section, it has been observed that political parties blame each other for political killing whereas when it comes to the communal violence, the parties make ally with their rivals, even the subsection of the rivals. For example, as illustrated in the table above, the joint coalition of PCJSS and UPDF has resulted into 8 killing, 19 injury, and 4 abductions. Moreover, if we look at the previous table, we see that UPDF has allied with both the factions of PCJSS when it comes to adopting violence on ethnic minority. We also see that there is one other group of PCJSS which is JSS (Santu group), though not politically factionalized, however, it is itself a different entity when it resorts to communal violence.

Rape as a means of communal violence has been mostly used by the youths from ethnic minority, and the by Bengali settlers. From a gender perspective, rape has been used as a wartime strategy to oppress and identify the other, or the enemy (Mohsin & Hossain, 2015). During the battle in CHT, 10% of the tribal women in refugee camp in India were reported as rape victim. Certainly, in the post-accord CHT, rape has remained as a significant instrument of communal violence in CHT. As a matter of ferocity, the law enforcement egencies have also been involved in rape violence in last 6 years. As it is illustrated in the table that the memebrs of Bangladesh army, Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB), and other law enforcment agencies have committed 5 rape incidents in last 6 years. According to Mohsin and Hossain (Conflict and Partition, 2015), over 94 percent of the alleged cases of rape between 1991 and 1993 were by security forces in CHT. Of these, over 40 percent of the victims were under 18 years of age.

The other communal violence also includes the civil society organizations such as Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) and Bangali Chhatra Parishad (BCP) where they have been found as attacking and wounding each other. The same stake has also been high for Bengali settlers where they were engaged in more in raping and injuring the ethnic minorities.

The above discussion provides us a glimpse of communal violence that took place between 2012 and 2018. If we look back to 1998 and see the number of large-scale communal violence, we find that there have been 15 large scale major communal violence in between these years in CHT (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, 2016). To add more information and systematic categorization for our understanding, we can look at the communal violence that took place between 1998 to 2014 as presented by PCJSS (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, 2016).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Forms of Atrocity | Security Forces (SF) | Bengali Settlers (BS) | SF + BS | UPDF + PCJSS | Total |
| Killed | 28 | 24 | 2 | 101 | 155 |
| Tortured | 737 | 280 | 311 | 148 | 1473 |
| Arrested | 358 | 4 | 6 |  | 368 |
| Harassed | 249 | 71 | 17 | 104 | 441 |
| Case logging | 106 | 48 |  | 74 | 228 |
| Houses looted and destructed | 73 | 409 | 651 | 37 | 1170 |
| House set fire | 15 | 265 | 980 | 55 | 1315 |
| House ransacked | 37 |  |  | 11 | 48 |
| Raped | 10 | 44 | 12 | 1 | 67 |
| Sexually harassed | 15 | 21 | 1 |  | 37 |
| Kidnapped | 3 | 20 |  | 328 | 351 |
| Land grabbed | 23 | 75 | 19 |  | 117 |
| Total | 1651 | 1261 | 1999 | 869 | 5770 |

*Table 7: Communal attack on Jumma People*

*Source:* (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, 2016)

The table 7 also depicts that neither the Bengali settlers, nor the security forces, nor the political parties are the sole agent of communal violence in CHT. Rather, political parties are more into killing, and kidnapping where the Bengali sellers are more into land grabbing, torturing, looting, destroying house, and raping. It seems that political parties use their strength for killing and abduction whereas the Bengali settlers use their demographic power to grab, loot, and destroy houses as well as raping. The instruments used by the security forces for communal violence in CHT are also their points of strengths. For example, torturing, arresting, harassing looting, destroying, ransacking houses are the top violence committed by the security forces in CHT.

As discussed earlier, multiple interests might drive the actors of the communal violence to perpetrate on the tribal people. The political parties have their own interest from establishing full autonomy to gaining political hegemony in CHT. As a matter of fact, they collect tolls, extortion, supply arms to people which have been found in the study of Mohsin and Hossain (2015). The security forces are believed to be pursuing the aim of ethnocide in CHT and bring about a major demographic shift in this region. It needs to be remembered that the population census of CHT has not been published by the government of Bangladesh since after 1991. Uddin (2017) asserts from his field study that the number of Bengalis in CHT could be more than the tribal people. It could have happened since there has been continuation of Bengali settlement and migration in this region even after the signing of the accord. Although it was not written in the accord that the Bengali settlers would have been withdrawn or the migration or settlement of Bengali people would be stopped or controlled, however, he also suggests that it was in force while dialogue was going on and both parties were convinced in principle to gradually shift them from the CHT through a new rehabilitation program. However, on the one hand this type of rehabilitation program has never been initiated, on the other hand, the security threat of the Bengali settlers added a new dimension to their interests. As land has been the single most contentious issue so far in the history of CHT, most of the communal violence between the ethnic minorities and Bengali community were on land issues. Newspaper reports illustrate that the primary motive behind repeated attacks on the tribal people is to seize their lands and other properties. Thousands of people lost their lands to Bengali people after every communal violence. According to Uddin (2017), There have been violent conflicts in CHT mainly due to the Bengali settlement. Over the years the issue has becoming more complex since the second generation of Bengali settlers have been coming up with newer claims, demands, and arguments. The interests of the tribal communities and the Bengali settlers have never been addressed in an accommodative way. “For example, the emergence of the SAA (Somo Adhikar Andolon, or Equal Rights Movement) which was formed and led by Bengali settlers is a direct outcome of the accord. This is because the accord provided the Pahari indigenous people with legal instruments to exercise some power in the CHT. And the Bengali settlers perceived it as a potential threat to their exercise. Therefore, they formed the SAA which has made the relationship between the Bengalis and Paharis more hostile and violent.” This type of development in CHT exhibits that the accord could not align the interests of all living communities in CHT. Hence, the non-alignment of community interests, both in CHT accord and in daily lives of heterogenous communities in CHT breeds the ground for communal violence every now and then. The inability of the stakeholders and decision makers in this process has resulted into the failure of a long negotiated political settlement process.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that in an apparent and extensive homogenous country Bangladesh where the Bengali community sums up to almost 98% of the total population, the rest 2% of the heterogeneous community was supposed to add a new ethno-linguistic cultural diversity in the whole demographic landscape. However, the situation has been quite different. Nevertheless, through a political settlement in CHT, it was attempted to align the interests of all the communities and stakeholders living in CHT so that the region comes back to a peaceful situation. But the extent of heterogeneity, diverse political and communal interests coupled with private and community rights over the lands and properties were too much broad to accommodate in CHT accord. The aim of a political settlement is to accommodate various interest groups and powerful actors, to align their vested interests and to satisfy all the groups together through a win-win situation where political stability and sustainable peace will be ensured. But we can see that a political settlement process may not always bring such stability and peace if there are too many diverse actors and multiplex of their interests. The CHT is a case in point. The aftermath of political settlement shows that it was either a win-loss situation from government perspective or a loss-loss situation from community perspective where people from all communities are victim of political instability and communal violence. It should further be studied as to how these actors can be accommodated and their interests can be addressed so that this region can experience political stability and sustainable peace.

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1. By communal violence, I mean the violence taking place between Bengali and tribal communities and between the different tribal communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Settlers are referred to the Bengali population in CHT who have come or migrated to CHT after 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)