

# Murder in the Hill Tracts

*'We are on the eve of total annihilation.'*

**Upendra Lal Chakma**

*'We want the land and not the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.'*

**Bangladeshi army officer**

The Jummas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) consist of 10 different tribes, numbering 600,000 people. They differ from the majority Bengali population of Bangladesh in culture, religion, language and ethnic origin, and are the original inhabitants of the CHT. The two largest peoples are the Chakma (350,000) and the Marma (140,000) who are both Buddhist, followed in size by the Hindu Tripura (60,000). Together these three make up 90% of the tribal population of the CHT. The literacy rates in the CHT are the highest in Bangladesh, partly because of the Buddhist emphasis on the scriptures.

The Hill Tracts are hilly and rugged. They cover an area of about 13,204 km<sup>2</sup> (5,098 miles<sup>2</sup>). Flat land suitable for intensive agriculture is rare. As a result, shifting cultivation is a common form of agriculture. It is known locally as 'Jhum cultivating', hence the generic name 'Jumma' to describe the tribal peoples of the area. Jhum cultivators clear and burn the surface vegetation before planting a mixture of crops to provide a variety of foods all year round. At the end of the annual cycle the land is left to grow back and the Jummas move on to a new area.

This system has worked for centuries, and is the only truly sustainable way to farm in the hilly regions. It requires large areas of land as only a small fraction of a community's land is in use at any one time.

In 1947, 98% of the population of the CHT was Jumma. Now it is only 50%, and the Jummas are in danger of becoming a minority in their own land.

## The history

Under British colonial rule the Jummas enjoyed relative autonomy. In 1860 the British established a superintendent to police the area and recognised three tribal chiefs as rajahs (rulers). The CHT was formally granted autonomy in 1900 with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, which confirmed that the CHT region was self-governing in internal affairs, and prevented non-tribals from settling in tribal areas.

However, after the partition of India in 1947, the Pakistan government allowed Bengali Muslims to move into the CHT, causing great resentment amongst the Jummas. As a result there was a gradual movement of tribal peoples into India. The special status of the CHT was abolished in 1964 but the CHT regulation was never formally annulled.

In the 1960s the Pakistan government built the Kaptai Dam in the heart of the CHT to generate electricity. It submerged 40% of the cultivatable land and displaced





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one third of the population. As many as 40,000 tribal people fled to India, where many still live in the north-eastern state of Arunchal Pradesh. There too they are denied their rights, not accepted as citizens of either India or Bangladesh. After Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, the Jummas asked for the restoration of their autonomous status. This was refused by the government who saw it as a secessionist threat and launched violent military raids in the area. Again many tribal people fled to India, and their lands were given to Bengalis who were moved into the CHT.

In response to these attacks from the government, the Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS), a Juma political party, and its military wing, the Shanti Bahini, were formed. The Shanti Bahini waged a war against government troops. Government 'counter-insurgency' and retribution attacks on the Jummas again forced many to flee. By 1990 approximately 57,000 Jummas – 10% of the population – were living in camps in India and 30,000 were hiding in the forests of the CHT.

### Bengali settlers

The movement of Bengali settlers into the CHT has been engineered by the Bangladesh government as a means of assimilating and integrating the Jummas into mainstream Bengali culture. Although this had been happening unofficially for some time, in 1979 the 'Bangladeshi Population Transfer Programme' was launched. This was backed by an increased military presence. The settlers were offered cash, land (belonging to the Jummas) and other incentives. The government saw the CHT as empty land on to which they could put the landless Bengali poor. Between 1977 and 1987 about 300,000 Bengalis were moved into the area.

Although the government has promised that no more Bengalis will be moved there, reports claim that there is still a steady stream of Bengali men going to the CHT, mostly surreptitiously, who are marrying Bengali women already living in the area.

Since 1988 many of the Jummas have been moved into 'cluster villages' to isolate them from the Shanti Bahini. They are 'guarded' by the military, their movements are controlled and they need permission to travel. Not surprisingly many describe these 'villages' as concentration camps. Instead of living in their scattered hamlets they are forced to live crowded together, short of food and land.

### Human rights abuses

Because the area was for a long time closed to outsiders, many of the human rights abuses that occurred in the CHT have gone unreported. However, in November 1990 an independent body of international experts, the CHT Commission, went to the CHT at the invitation of the Bangladesh government who wanted to counter previous accusations against them. This plan backfired; the evidence of human rights abuses was overwhelming.

The commission found that villages were regularly burned, people tortured and killed, women raped and places of worship destroyed. There were over 600 reported cases of serious human rights violations in 1990 alone. The commission was shocked by the

number of military in the area (approximately one for every six tribal people), and the constant state of terror the Jummas live in.

In 1992 Survival reported that an estimated 1,200 tribal people had been burnt alive in their homes by the military. In 1993 over 100 Jummas were massacred and up to 500 injured when the army and Bengali settlers joined together to attack a peaceful demonstration.

Due in part to pressure from Survival, the situation improved somewhat after 1993, although abuses still occurred, including killings, disappearances and military rape. Kalpana Chakma, 23, the leader of the Hill Women's Federation, was abducted from her home by security forces in June 1996; she is still missing. An official enquiry has not publicised its findings.

Attempts at negotiations between the JSS and the army, which began in 1992, resulted in a prolonged ceasefire between the military and the Shanti Bahini. During this time, however, there were many reports of ceasefire violations, and the military maintained its heavy presence in the CHT.

In December 1997 the Jummas signed a peace deal with the government of Bangladesh. This deal includes the setting up of a regional council led by Jummas to administer the CHT, and gives them some control over the land in the CHT. The deal is not an end to the problems of the Jummas, but it is hoped it will be major step in the right direction. A Juma representative told Survival, *'We take this agreement as a positive step: we have achieved something, even if it isn't very much. We are very grateful to Survival and the international community for keeping pressure on the Bangladesh government. The Bangladesh government would never have come to the negotiation table otherwise.'*

### Background reading

Survival, *Genocide in Bangladesh*, Survival report, London, 1983.  
MRG, *The Adivasis of Bangladesh*, Minority Rights Group report, London, 1992.  
AIPP, *Indigenous peoples of Asia: Many peoples, one struggle*, Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact, Bangkok, 1996, available from Survival.

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For copies of other background sheets or more information about Survival's work contact:  
Survival, 6 Charterhouse Buildings,  
London, EC1M 7ET, United Kingdom.  
Tel: 020 7687 8700, Fax: 020 7687 8701.

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