



"Advocating Dharma And Ahimsa: Mitigating Human Rights Violations And Vulnerabilities Among Indigenous Communities In The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)"

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ABSTRACT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh is home to indigenous communities facing persistent human rights violations and vulnerabilities. This paper investigates the applicability of India's philosophical tenets, Dharma (duty and righteousness) and Ahimsa (non-violence), in addressing these pressing issues. The statement of the problem revolves around the enduring challenges faced by indigenous populations in the CHT, including conflicts, discrimination, marginalization, and land disputes, which perpetuate human rights abuses and societal vulnerabilities.

The major research question driving this inquiry is: How can the principles of Dharma and Ahimsa contribute to mitigating human rights violations and vulnerabilities experienced by indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts?

The objective of this study is twofold: firstly, to analyze the relevance of Dharma and Ahimsa in the context of contemporary human rights challenges, particularly those faced by indigenous groups in the CHT; and secondly, to propose strategies and interventions informed by these principles to address the identified human rights violations and vulnerabilities.

Through an interdisciplinary approach encompassing legal analysis, cultural studies, and human rights perspectives, this research endeavours to uncover insights into the potential of India's philosophical traditions to inform and guide human rights advocacy and policy-making.

The major findings of this study reveal the enduring relevance of Dharma and Ahimsa in fostering empathy, inclusivity, and social justice. Moreover, the research identifies opportunities for incorporating indigenous perspectives, drawing from India's rich cultural heritage, into the global human rights discourse. By emphasizing the importance of upholding Dharma and Ahimsa, this study advocates for a more holistic and culturally sensitive approach to addressing human rights violations and vulnerabilities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and beyond.

Keywords: Dharma, Ahimsa, Human Rights Violations, Indigenous Communities, Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Introduction

The historical background of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of colonialism, partition, and ongoing challenges faced by indigenous communities. The Chittagong Hill Tracts, located in south-eastern Bangladesh, encompass three hill districts: Rangamati, Khagrachhari, and Bandarban. Historically, this region was inhabited by various indigenous communities, including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Bawm, Sak, Khumi, Khyang, Mru, Lushai, Uchay, Pankho and Tanchangya. These indigenous communities possess unique cultural identities, languages, and traditional livelihoods deeply rooted in the region's forests and hills.

The colonial era played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of the CHT. During British rule, the region was incorporated into British India, and colonial policies, such as the 'Waste Land Rules' and forest reservation acts, resulted in the loss of indigenous territories and the marginalization of indigenous communities. These policies laid the groundwork for future conflicts over land rights and autonomy. Historical records suggest that throughout British rule in India, policies were implemented that favoured Bengali Muslim settlers over indigenous communities in the (CHT), resulting in tensions and conflicts over land and resources. This unequal treatment generated resentment among indigenous peoples and set the stage for future struggles for autonomy and recognition of indigenous rights.

Following the partition of British India in 1947 and the establishment of Pakistan (comprising of East and West Pakistan) the CHT became part of East Pakistan. However, grievances among indigenous communities persisted as they continued to experience discrimination and marginalization under the new state. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which resulted in the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, further exacerbated tensions in the Tracts. Indigenous communities were caught in the crossfire between Bengali nationalists and Pakistani forces, leading to widespread violence and displacement.

According to a report by the International Crisis Group, the region witnessed significant violence during the armed conflict between the Shanti Bahini, an indigenous guerrilla group, and the Bangladeshi military in the 1980s and 1990s. The conflict resulted in thousands of deaths and widespread displacement of indigenous communities. Despite the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord in 1997, aimed at addressing the grievances of indigenous communities and fostering peace and development, challenges persist in its implementation. Land disputes, inadequate political representation, and socio-economic inequalities continue to impact the lives of indigenous peoples in the CHT. (Uddin, 2010). Despite the formation of Bangladesh as a sovereign state following its independence, indigenous communities in the Tracts continued to face persistent challenges. Matters such as land disputes, inadequate political representation, and socio-economic inequalities persisted without resolution, leading to prolonged turmoil and discord in the area. (PCJSS, 2020)

Significance of Indigenous Communities in the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT)

The indigenous populations residing in the CHT are fundamental to safeguarding the area's rich cultural tapestry, ecological balance, and ancestral wisdom. Their profound bond with the land, forests, and water bodies forms the cornerstone of their cultural heritage and societal norms. As per data from the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, indigenous groups constitute roughly 13% of the overall populace in the CHT. Despite their numerical minority, these communities have long been pivotal in shaping the region's cultural fabric and environmental equilibrium. The indigenous populations living in the CHT possess invaluable traditional wisdom crucial for managing resources sustainably and preserving biodiversity. Their practices, notably jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation), have enabled them to sustainably cultivate crops while concurrently safeguarding the integrity of forest ecosystems.

Furthermore, indigenous cultures and languages contribute to the rich tapestry of Bangladesh's cultural heritage. Festivals, rituals, and traditional ceremonies are integral to the social fabric of indigenous communities and serve as a means of preserving cultural identity and solidarity.

As per research conducted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the indigenous communities have crafted sophisticated agro forestry systems. These systems not only safeguard biodiversity but also ensure food security and livelihoods for the local populace. Such traditional methods play a pivotal role in bolstering ecosystem resilience and alleviating the effects of climate change.

Moreover, indigenous groups in the CHT maintain a profound spiritual bond with their ancestral territories, integral to their cultural heritage and lifestyle. These lands serve as sacred sites, where rituals, ceremonies, and traditional festivals are held to honour ancestors and preserve cultural heritage. In a landmark decision by the Bangladesh government in 2011, the Chakma Rajbari, a historic palace belonging to the Chakma royal family, was declared a protected cultural heritage site. This acknowledgment not only underscores the importance of indigenous cultural heritage in the CHT but also fosters tourism and cultural interchange, thereby enhancing the socio-economic growth of indigenous communities.

The traditional governance systems of indigenous communities, such as the Chakma circle system and the Marma Rajshahi, have provided mechanisms for conflict resolution and community cohesion for centuries and these indigenous institutions continue to play a significant role in maintaining social order and promoting communal harmony in the region. The historical narrative of the CHT region is marked by colonial legacies, partition, and ongoing challenges faced by indigenous communities. Despite centuries of adversity, indigenous peoples in the CHT have demonstrated resilience and determination in preserving their cultural heritage and asserting their rights. (PCJSS, 2020)

Colonial Legacy and Land Dispossession

The colonial period significantly influenced the indigenous peoples of the CHT, characterized by the imposition of British governance and the implementation of land tenure systems that prioritized colonial agendas. Indigenous communities' customary land rights were disregarded by the British administration,

leading to widespread land dispossession and conflicts over land ownership. The implementation of the Waste Land Rules in the late 19th century by the British authorities resulted in the classification of vast swathes of indigenous lands as "wasteland," which could be leased or sold to non-indigenous settlers or corporations. (Mohsin, 2003). This approach resulted in the forced removal of indigenous populations from their traditional lands and the disruption of their means of subsistence.

During the era of British colonial rule, forest reserves and tea estates were instituted, resulting in the forced displacement of indigenous communities from their native lands. These lands were frequently obtained through coercive tactics or deceptive agreements, thereby stripping indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories and means of sustenance. (Ashrafuzzaman, 2014)

Post – Independence Policies and Conflicts

After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the indigenous people residing in the region encountered fresh obstacles as successive governments pursued development agendas that marginalized their rights and interests. Infrastructure projects, such as hydroelectric dams, highways, and industrial zones, were vigorously pursued by the government, often infringing upon encroachments onto indigenous lands occurred without sufficient consultation or compensation. This situation escalated tensions in the region. The construction of the Kaptai Dam in 1962 resulted in significant land loss for indigenous communities, submerging approximately 655 square kilometers of land, including 22,000 hectares of cultivable land. The dam displaced around 100,000 tribal people, with 70% being Chakmas. Rangamati town, the capital of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the Chakma Raja's palace were also submerged, leading the Chakmas to refer to the Kaptai reservoir as the "Lake of Tears." (Amnesty, 1991)

The Chakmas, distinct in ethnicity, culture, and religion, resisted their inclusion in East Pakistan post-Partition and later in Bangladesh. After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the Chakmas mobilized to advocate for the rights of indigenous groups in the hills. The formation of the Shanti Bahini in 1972 aimed to achieve autonomy for the Chakmas through armed struggle. However, ongoing violence by the Bangladesh Army forced many Chakmas to seek refuge in India over the years.

In 1987, around 45,000 refugees sought shelter in Tripura within a fortnight, recounting tales of rape, murder, and displacement. The Bangladeshi government agreed to repatriate 24,000 refugees, but fearing persecution, many Chakmas refused to return. President Hussain Muhammad Ershad informed Bangladesh's parliament in mid-July 1986 that around 1,000 people had died in the violence over the previous decade. However, the Shanti Bahini reported the death toll to be ten times higher, highlighting the severity of the situation. (Mohsin, 1997)

The Hill Tracts District Council Act of 1989 was enacted to establish Hill District Councils (HDCs) in the CHT, aiming to devolve administrative powers to local authorities. However, the implementation of the Act faced numerous obstacles, including disputes over land rights and representation, leading to prolonged conflicts between indigenous groups and the government.

The agreement reached in 1997 between the Bangladeshi government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), representing indigenous political interests, marked a significant step towards addressing the enduring concerns of indigenous communities. The Bangladesh government agreed to take back the Chakma refugees in Tripura and rehabilitate them. In 2003, it was reported that the Bangladesh government had stopped giving rations to 65,000 refugees who had returned from Tripura. They were now internally displaced, refugees once more. Nearly two decades after the accord, a roadmap to implement it is still pending. The signing of the CHT Peace Accord in 1997 marked a significant milestone in addressing the long-standing grievances of indigenous peoples. The accord recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands and promised the withdrawal of military forces from the region. However, the complete execution of the accord has been hindered by delays, bureaucratic obstacles and persistent disputes over land rights and self-governance. The historical narrative of the Tracts is marked by centuries of resilience, strife, and adaptation as indigenous communities grappled with colonial exploitation, governmental neglect, and socio-economic marginalization. However, despite the accord, challenges remain in its full implementation, including issues related to land disputes, political representation, and socio-economic development.

Human Rights Violations in the CHT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh has been plagued by persistent human rights violations, stemming from various factors such as land disputes, militarization, forced displacement, and marginalization. These violations not only undermine the rights and dignity of indigenous communities but also perpetuate cycles of conflict, poverty, and insecurity.

Despite the passing of 26 years since the ratification of the CHT Agreement between the Bangladesh Government and Chittagong Hill Tracts Association in 1997, intended to resolve the CHT issue through political and peaceful methods, the accord remains largely unexecuted. The current Awami League government, having been in power for 15 years since 2009, has neglected to prioritize the execution of the fundamental provisions delineated in the agreement. Despite numerous opportunities, the government has not taken decisive actions to honor its obligations, and instead, activities conflicting with the accord's

principles persist, indicating a lack of sincere endeavour to address the grievances of indigenous communities.

An example illustrating this issue is the CHT Association's circumvention of the CHT Implementation and Monitoring Committee on September 28, 2022. The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs established the 'Inter-Ministerial Committee on CHT Agreement Evaluation, Progress, and Monitoring,' spreading misinformation that 65 out of the 72 provisions of the Hill Agreement have been implemented. However, only 25 clauses have been fully executed, while the remaining 47 are either partially implemented or completely disregarded. Despite holding meetings in 2023, including the 7th and 8th sessions of the CHT Agreement Implementation and Monitoring Committee, no significant progress has been made in implementing the decisions made in previous meetings. As a result, the committee's effectiveness has been weakened because of the government's lack of cooperation and negligence. (Chakma, 2023)

To conceal the government's failure to implement the agreement, efforts to discredit proponents of the agreement have intensified. Leaders and activists of the Jana Sanhati Samiti, advocating for executing the agreement, have been unjustly labelled as 'terrorists,' 'separatists,' and 'armed miscreants.' In addition, anti-human rights activities such as illegal arrests, extra-judicial killings, and house raids have escalated, further undermining efforts towards peace and reconciliation.

In 2023 alone, 240 instances of human rights violations were documented, including incidents perpetrated by security forces, army-backed armed groups, communal settlers, and land grabbers. These violations encompassed a wide range of abuses, including persecution by administration and security forces, activities of army-supported armed groups, encroachment and dispossession by settlers, and instances of sexual harassment, violence, rape, and murder against Jumma women and children.

It is clear that despite the ratification of the Chittagong Hill Tract Agreement, the conditions in the area continue to be critical with indigenous communities continuing to suffer from systemic human rights violations and marginalization. Urgent action is required to hold the government accountable for its commitments and ensure the full implementation of the agreement to achieve lasting peace and justice in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

(a) Persecution by the administration and security forces: In 2023, security forces and law enforcement agencies were involved in 135 incidents, leading to 643 human rights violations. These violations included arbitrary arrests and temporary detentions of 31 individuals, physical abuse, injury, and harassment of 245 people, and the fabrication of false cases against 53 individuals. Additionally, military operations were conducted in 64 villages, leading to the inspection of 84 households by the army. Furthermore, 31 families faced threats of eviction, and 5 new camps were established.

(b) In 2023, armed groups supported by the military were involved in 57 incidents, resulting in human rights violations against 1,055 individuals and residents from 30 villages. These violations encompassed 19 fatalities, 17 instances of physical assault, 21 kidnappings, and 22 detentions. Additionally, 6 individuals were handed over and transferred to law enforcement custody following detention and 195 people faced forced removal from the villages of Bom and Marma families. Furthermore, residents of 25 villages endured harassment and were threatened with eviction.

(c) Encroachment and dispossession by settlers: In 2023, sectarian and fundamentalist groups, along with Muslim Bengali settlers and land grabbers, were involved in 24 incidents resulting in human rights violations against 19 families and 210 Jummas. These incidents led to 6 fatalities and the destruction of 18 houses through arson.

(d) Sexual Harassment, Violence, Rape, and Murder: In 2023, acts of violence against Jumma women and children by various parties, including state and non-state actors, occurred, leading to 25 women experiencing human rights abuses. These incidents included 12 cases of rape, 7 attempted rapes, and 2 cases of abduction and attempted trafficking of women and children. Tragically, one individual lost their life as a result of these egregious violations. (PCJSS Annual Report, 2023)

Land Disputes and Dispossession

Land disputes and dispossession rank as key human rights infringements endured by indigenous populations in the CHT. The encroachment on indigenous territories for development ventures, commercial endeavours, and agricultural expansion has resulted in the displacement of communities from their traditional lands without fair compensation or consent. According to reports, there are approximately 2,500 unresolved land disputes affecting indigenous communities in the region. These disputes have resulted in the dispossession of over 60,000 acres of land from indigenous peoples. The construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s resulted in the forced displacement of thousands of indigenous families, primarily from the Chakma community, without proper resettlement arrangements or compensation for their loss of land and livelihoods. Despite decades passing, many displaced families continue to struggle for justice and adequate rehabilitation.

The lands, forests, hills, ponds, streams, and small rivers are vital for the survival of indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). However, a significant portion of indigenous lands in the region has been unlawfully seized or occupied by Bengali outsiders or settlers, estimated to be around 500,000 in number, who were brought into the CHT by the government. The Land Commission, established in 1999 as per the

Accord reached in 1997 to address land disputes with indigenous Jumma people, has been hindered from functioning effectively due to the government's lack of sincerity. Despite the appointment of six chairmen at different times, the Commission has struggled to operate.

Although some contradictory clauses in the 2001 Act were amended in 2016 after 15 years of negotiation and pressure by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the Commission has yet to devise rules to apply the Act for resolving land disputes, despite the CHT Regional Council submitting drafted Rules in 2017. The 2016 amendment to the 2001 Land Commission Act failed to establish rules for resolving land disputes, leaving indigenous peoples susceptible to land grabbing, eviction, and intimidation. Despite claims by the honourable delegate of Bangladesh that 1555 development projects have been approved for the CHT's development, indigenous peoples continue to lose their land and face displacement from their traditional territories. Without securing their land rights, indigenous communities cannot benefit from these development initiatives, no matter how many projects are undertaken. (Chakma, 2021)

Militarization and Security Concerns

The heavy military presence in the region has instilled a sense of fear, intimidation, and insecurity among the indigenous population. Military camps, checkpoints, and armed personnel have become synonymous with human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and instances of torture, frequently without facing any consequences. It is estimated that approximately 60,000 military personnel are stationed in the CHT, exacerbating tensions and perpetuating human rights abuses.

Between June 13 and June 15, 1986, a tragic event unfolded in the Pablakhali, Kawbakhali, Bara Merung, and Bhoiraba areas of Dighinala Upazila in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts. During this time, Bangladesh security forces and Muslim settlers launched a violent raid on these areas. The consequences were devastating: houses were plundered and set on fire, food supplies were stolen, and women were subjected to rape. The attack resulted in the destruction of 29 villages, leaving approximately 43,000 tribal people without homes or land. Shockingly, about 200 Jummas lost their lives in the violence. (IWGIA, 2012)

Furthermore, the raiders targeted religious sites, desecrating and damaging 15 Buddhist and Hindu temples, with four of them being completely destroyed by fire. Monks who resided in these temples faced torture and injury, with some being forced to flee to safety in Tripura. The raid also impacted vulnerable groups, such as the orphans residing in the Parbatya Chattagram Anatha Ashrama, which was run by the monks. Of the 300 orphans housed there, only 106 managed to escape to Tripura. Concerns arose about the fate of the remaining orphans, particularly concerning the adolescent females who may have been forcibly taken away, subjected to rape, and forcibly converted to Islam. Additionally, it is suspected that some Jummas were forcibly converted to Islam during the raid.

The events of the Pablakhali-Kawbakhali-Bara Merung Massacre represent a grave violation of human rights and underscore the ongoing tensions and conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It serves as a poignant reminder of the need for justice, accountability, and initiatives aimed at fostering peace and reconciliation in the area. On April 10, 1992, a tragic massacre unfolded in Logang cluster village situated in Khagrachari District, Bangladesh, representing the most devastating incident in a single day within the region of (CHT). The accused perpetrators were reportedly the Bangladeshi security forces and Muslim settlers. (Amnesty International, 1986) The tragedy unfolded when around 1,500 indigenous Jumma families were forcibly relocated to Logang, essentially turned into a concentration camp, while their ancestral lands were given to Muslim settlers. The massacre was triggered by an altercation where indigenous women were assaulted by armed settlers, leading to the death of an indigenous man who tried to intervene.

Subsequently, the military used this incident as a pretext to launch a violent attack on Logang, resulting in numerous deaths among the indigenous Jummas. Numerous individuals were brutally attacked, either hacked to death or shot as they tried to escape. Meanwhile, their residences were set on fire, trapping women, children, and elderly individuals inside. The precise number of casualties remains unclear due to the removal of bodies by the army immediately after the massacre. However, eyewitness accounts suggest that over 400 indigenous people may have been killed, with hundreds of homes destroyed and thousands fleeing to seek refuge across the border in Tripura, India. (Massacre in CHT)

In 2007, the killing of indigenous activist Choles Ritchil by members of the Bangladesh Army sparked widespread protests and international condemnation. Ritchil was advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and opposing land grabbing by influential individuals with military backing. His death highlighted the vulnerability of indigenous activists and the need for greater accountability for human rights abuses committed by security forces. (Human Rights Watch, 2009)

On March 15, 2022, at 3:30 a.m., a significant incident occurred in the Dighinala sub-district of the (CHT), involving a young man named Milon. Milon's case shed light on the ongoing challenges and difficulties faced by indigenous communities in the region. (Amnesty International, 1986) Milon, a resident of Dighinala, was reportedly targeted by security forces during a late-night operation. The circumstances surrounding the incident remain unclear, with conflicting reports from local authorities and eyewitnesses. According to some accounts, Milon was accused of involvement in activities deemed subversive by the authorities, while others claim he was arbitrarily targeted without evidence. The case of Milon underscores broader concerns regarding the treatment of indigenous peoples in the CHT, including allegations of arbitrary arrests,

extrajudicial killings, and human rights abuses perpetrated by security forces. Such incidents have fuelled tensions and distrust between indigenous communities and government authorities, exacerbating longstanding grievances and contributing to a sense of insecurity and marginalization among the local population. The case of Milon in Dighinala serves as a clear reminder of the challenges faced by indigenous communities in the CHT and the urgent need for transparent and accountable governance, respect for human rights, and meaningful dialogue to address the root causes of conflict and promote lasting peace and reconciliation in the region. (IWGIA, 2012)

Forced Displacement and Resettlement

Forced displacement and resettlement have been recurrent phenomena in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, driven by development projects, conflict, and land grabbing. Indigenous communities have been uprooted from their traditional lands and relocated to government-designated areas, often without their free, prior, and informed consent, leading to loss of livelihoods, cultural disruption, and social disintegration. Approximately 100,000 indigenous people have been forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands, leading to loss of livelihoods and cultural heritage. Despite promises of compensation and resettlement assistance, many displaced families continue to face socio-economic hardships. The Baghaihat massacre in 1986, where hundreds of indigenous villagers were killed and thousands displaced by Bengali settlers with the support of security forces, remains a dark chapter in the history of the CHT. The survivors faced immense challenges in rebuilding their lives and communities, while the perpetrators largely escaped accountability, fuelling further resentment and distrust.

Marginalization and Discrimination

Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts continue to face systemic marginalization and discrimination in various spheres, including access to education, healthcare, employment, and political representation. Structural barriers, cultural prejudices, and institutional neglect perpetuate disparities and inhibit the realization of indigenous rights and opportunities. Reports indicate that around 70% of indigenous people in the CHT live below the poverty line, compared to the national average of 24%. (Mohsin, 1997) Additionally, indigenous peoples face barriers to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, exacerbating socio-economic disparities. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action policies, indigenous peoples in the CHT remain underrepresented in government institutions, educational institutions, and decision-making bodies. Discrimination based on ethnicity, language, and cultural identity persists, limiting the social mobility and prospects for indigenous youth and future generations.

Vulnerabilities Faced by Indigenous Communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

Socio-Economic Struggles- Indigenous communities residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts encounter notable socio-economic hurdles that impede their progress and welfare. These obstacles encompass poverty, insufficient access to education and healthcare services, as well as restricted economic prospects.

Poverty and Unemployment- Indigenous populations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts grapple with disproportionately high poverty rates compared to the national average. Findings from an International Labour Organization (ILO) investigation reveal that more than 70% of indigenous households in the CHT fall below the poverty threshold. Moreover, unemployment levels, especially among indigenous youth, are notably elevated, exacerbating economic instability and fostering social exclusion.

Lack of Access to Education and Healthcare- Access to quality education and healthcare services remains limited in many indigenous communities in the CHT. Schools and healthcare facilities are often poorly equipped and understaffed, making it challenging for indigenous children to receive a quality education and adequate medical care. Consequently, indigenous populations experience lower literacy rates and a higher prevalence of preventable diseases.

Cultural Erosion and Identity Crisis- Cultural erosion and identity crisis are significant concerns for indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as external influences and assimilation policies threaten their traditional languages, customs, and ways of life.

Language Loss and Assimilation- The imposition of the Bengali language and culture by the Bangladeshi government has led to the gradual erosion of indigenous languages and cultural practices in the CHT. Many indigenous children are taught in Bengali-medium schools, leading to a decline in fluency in their native languages. Additionally, government-led development projects often prioritize Bengali culture and neglect indigenous cultural heritage, further marginalizing indigenous identities.

Impact of Modernization and Globalization- The swift advance of modernization and globalization has triggered notable transformations in the lifestyles and values of indigenous communities. Heightened access to mainstream media, technology, and consumer culture has prompted a departure from age-old customs and traditions. Younger members of these communities are increasingly drawn to urban centers in pursuit of improved prospects, resulting in a detachment from their traditional lands and cultural heritage.

Environmental Degradation-Environmental degradation poses a significant threat to indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as deforestation, land degradation, and climate change threaten their livelihoods and traditional way of life.

Deforestation and Land Degradation-The CHT has experienced extensive deforestation in recent decades due to logging, agriculture, and infrastructure development. Deforestation not only destroys vital ecosystems but also disrupts indigenous peoples' traditional land management practices and access to natural resources, leading to loss of biodiversity and cultural heritage. Land degradation further exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for indigenous communities to sustain their livelihoods.

Lately, there have been accounts of water contamination and health hazards caused by industrial pollution from mining operations and chemical factories in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Indigenous communities residing near these polluted sites experience higher rates of respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, and reproductive health issues due to exposure to toxic substances. Despite their protests and demands for environmental justice, frequently, the perspectives of indigenous communities are muted or suppressed or ignored by authorities and corporations.

Role of Dharma in Upholding Human Rights

Dharma, a foundational concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, and various indigenous belief systems, plays a significant role in guiding ethical conduct, fostering social harmony, and upholding human rights. This section explores the multifaceted dimensions of dharma and its application in promoting justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity.

Concept of Dharma in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indigenous Beliefs

In Hinduism, dharma encompasses the moral and ethical duties prescribed for individuals based on their societal roles and responsibilities. It emphasizes principles such as righteousness, duty, and cosmic order, which are believed to govern the universe and maintain harmony. Similarly, in Buddhism, dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha, emphasizing the path to enlightenment, liberation from suffering, and compassionate action towards all sentient beings. Indigenous belief systems in the Chittagong Hill Tracts also uphold principles akin to dharma, rooted in reverence for nature, respect for ancestors, and communal well-being. These beliefs emphasize interconnectedness with the land, reciprocity with the natural world, and stewardship of resources for future generations.

In Hinduism, the concept of dharma is illustrated in the Bhagavad Gita, where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna on his duty as a warrior and the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities without attachment to the results. This exemplifies the ethical framework of dharma, emphasizing righteous action and detachment from personal desires. The Jumma indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts practice a form of shifting cultivation known as jhum, guided by principles of sustainability and ecological balance. Their agricultural methods are intricately linked with spiritual convictions and ceremonies that pay homage to the spirits of the land, ensuring soil fertility and abundance. This demonstrates the embodiment of dharma in aligning human interactions with the natural world.

Ethical Imperatives and Responsibilities

Dharma imposes ethical imperatives and responsibilities on individuals and communities to uphold justice, compassion, and human dignity. It emphasizes the moral obligation to treat others with fairness, kindness, and respect, irrespective of social status, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. The principles of ahimsa (non-violence), Seva (selfless service), and karuna (compassion) underscore the ethical framework of dharma, guiding individuals towards actions that alleviate suffering and promote well-being.

In Buddhism, the practice of Metta (loving-kindness) meditation cultivates compassion and empathy towards oneself and others, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and mutual respect. By cultivating qualities such as compassion and generosity, individuals embody the ethical imperatives of dharma and contribute to the promotion of human rights and social justice. (Thera, 1994)

In the Mahabharata, a Hindu epic, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one's duty (Svadharma) with detachment and righteousness, even in the face of moral dilemmas and conflicts. This exemplifies the ethical imperative of dharma in guiding individuals towards actions that are conducive to the greater good and in alignment with universal principles of righteousness. (Payyanur, 2024)

Application of Dharma in Resolving Conflicts

Dharma provides a framework for resolving conflicts and promoting reconciliation through dialogue, mediation, and forgiveness. It emphasizes the importance of seeking peaceful resolutions to disputes, fostering understanding and empathy among conflicting parties, and restoring harmony within communities. The principles of Satya (truthfulness), Samadana (conciliation), and Dana (generosity) guide the process of

conflict resolution, enabling individuals to transcend personal biases and grievances in pursuit of collective welfare.

In the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, indigenous leaders and grassroots organizations often invoke principles of dharma to advocate for the resolution of land disputes, resource conflicts, and ethnic tensions through inclusive dialogue and consensus-building processes. By drawing upon shared values and cultural traditions, indigenous communities strive to address grievances, restore trust, and promote social cohesion, thereby upholding the principles of dharma in fostering peace and justice.

The concept of dharma serves as a moral compass for individuals and communities, guiding them towards actions that uphold human rights, promote social justice, and foster harmony with the natural world. By embracing the ethical imperatives of dharma and applying its principles in everyday life, individuals can contribute to the creation of a more just, compassionate, and sustainable society, grounded in the values of righteousness, compassion, and respect for all beings.

Ahimsa: Non-Violence and Conflict Resolution in Chittagong

Chittagong, a region characterized by cultural diversity and historical complexities, has experienced both instances of conflict and continuous endeavours for peace building based on the principle of ahimsa, or non-violence.

Ahimsa in Religious and Philosophical Traditions

Ahimsa holds a significant place in religious and philosophical traditions in Chittagong, influencing societal norms and guiding ethical conduct. Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous belief systems emphasize compassion, respect for life, and non-violence as fundamental principles.

In Chittagong, the teachings of Hinduism highlight the importance of ahimsa as a virtue central to righteous living. The Bhagavad Gita, revered by Hindus, emphasizes the concept of non-violence as a key aspect of spiritual practice, influencing the ethical framework of individuals and communities.

Non-Violent Resistance and Peace building

Non-violent resistance and endeavours for peace have been pivotal in addressing conflicts and promoting reconciliation in Chittagong. Grassroots movements, civil society organizations, and indigenous leaders have employed non-violent tactics such as protests, dialogue, and community organizing to advocate for peace and social cohesion.

In recent years, indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have mobilized non-violent resistance against land grabbing and environmental degradation. Through peaceful protests, advocacy campaigns, and legal action, indigenous activists have sought to protect their ancestral lands and natural resources, asserting their rights and demanding justice.

Challenges and Opportunities in Practicing Ahimsa

Despite the potential of ahimsa in conflict resolution, its practice in Chittagong faces various challenges. Deep-rooted historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and political tensions pose obstacles to non-violent approaches. Moreover, the lack of trust, communication barriers, and external interference further complicate efforts towards peace building.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, signed in 1997, aimed to address longstanding grievances and promote peace in the region. However, challenges persist in the full implementation of the accord, including disputes over land rights, resource allocation, and political representation, highlighting the complexities of practicing ahimsa in a context marked by entrenched conflicts and power dynamics.

Grassroots initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and community-led peace building efforts offer avenues for building trust, promoting understanding, and addressing underlying grievances in a non-violent manner. Ahimsa stands as a guiding principle for endeavours in conflict resolution and peace building within Chittagong, where diverse communities strive to navigate complex socio-political landscapes. By embracing non-violence, fostering dialogue, and addressing root causes of conflict, individuals and communities in Chittagong can work towards building a more peaceful, inclusive, and harmonious society grounded in the principles of compassion, respect, and non-violence.

Strategies for Tackling Human Rights Violations in Chittagong

Chittagong, renowned for its diverse cultural heritage and intricate socio-political environment, has grappled with various human rights abuses over time. To tackle these pressing concerns, a range of approaches have been embraced to address such violations and foster equity, empowerment, and cohesion.

Legal and Policy Reforms

Legal and policy reforms stand as pivotal mechanisms in tackling human rights infractions by furnishing a structured framework for accountability, safeguarding, and recourse a notable illustration of such reforms is evidenced in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997, which represents a significant milestone in addressing human rights violations within the region. This accord delineated a comprehensive blueprint for safeguarding indigenous rights, dismantling armed factions, and decentralizing authority to local communities, thereby laying the groundwork for initiatives centered on reconciliation and peace building.

On April 13, 2022, the Armed Police Battalion Headquarters issued a directive to deploy police gradually in 240 camps previously occupied by the army in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Initially, police presence was planned for 30 camps to enforce decisions proposed in the 5th meeting of the CHT Accord Implementation and Monitoring Committee.

However, this directive contradicts Clause 17(a) of Part D of the CHT Accord, which mandates the withdrawal of all military camps from the CHT upon signing the Accord and the return of PCJSS members to normal life. Furthermore, Clause 17(b) emphasizes transferring abandoned camp lands to their rightful owners or the Hill District Councils.(IWGIA, 2012) Since the appointment of Abul Hasnat Abdullah MP as the Convener of the CHT Accord Implementation and Monitoring Committee in January 2018, five meetings have been held. Despite discussions to hand over policing responsibilities to the Hill District Councils and withdraw temporary camps, the government has not acted on these decisions.

In May 2022, a high-level meeting in Rangamati led to the inauguration of an APBN regional office, indicating a unilateral decision to establish APBN camps on land previously occupied by the military, in direct violation of the Accord. This move seeks to divert attention from the government's failure to implement the Accord by focusing on issues of terrorism and violence in the CHT. Moreover, the GOC Major General Saiful Abedin falsely accused PCJSS of non-compliance with the Accord, despite evidence showing full cooperation. His inflammatory speech further aggravated tensions, leading to dissatisfaction among the Jumma people.

This situation has resulted in rampant human rights violations in the CHT, with 52 incidents reported from January to May 2022, affecting 127 Jumma individuals Security personnel bore responsibility for extra judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and property destruction. Additionally, Muslim settlers perpetrated sexual assaults, arson attacks, and land encroachments, exacerbating the plight of indigenous communities.

Furthermore, armed groups like the KNF have intensified violence, allegedly supported by the army and ruling party, aiming to disrupt Accord implementation and sow discord among the Jumma people. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for the government to uphold its commitments and address the escalating crisis in the CHT. (IWGIA, 2022)

Community Empowerment and Participation

Strengthening community empowerment and encouraging their active engagement in decision-making processes are crucial tactics for tackling human rights violations in Chittagong. By enhancing the ability of marginalized communities to assert their rights and campaign for justice, these endeavours promote resilience, unity, and social unity.

The Hill Women's Federation (HWF), an indigenous women's organization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, is actively involved in community empowerment and advocacy for women's rights. Through grassroots initiatives, capacity-building programs, and advocacy campaigns, the HWF empowers indigenous women to address issues such as gender-based violence, land rights, and political representation, contributing to greater gender equality and social justice in the region.

Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Mechanism

Dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms are indispensable for addressing human rights violations and fostering reconciliation in Chittagong. By enabling inclusive discourse, nurturing empathy, and resolving conflicts through nonviolent avenues, these endeavours contribute to nurturing trust, enhancing social cohesion, and averting further discord.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC), instituted to oversee the implementation of the Peace Accord, serves as a conduit for dialogue and conflict resolution among diverse stakeholders in the region. By convening representatives from governmental bodies, indigenous communities, civil society entities, and the military, the CHTC facilitates participatory decision-making processes and facilitates the amicable resolution of disagreements through dialogue and consensus-building.

Promoting Sustainable Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in Bangladesh is renowned for its distinctive ecological diversity and the presence of indigenous communities with rich cultural heritage. Nevertheless, a history of marginalization, land disputes, and environmental degradation has hindered sustainable development in the

area. Advancing indigenous rights and ensuring land tenure security are essential for sustainable development in the CHT. Ongoing land disputes and encroachments on indigenous lands have led to conflicts and worsened environmental degradation. Therefore, enacting reforms that recognize indigenous land rights and guarantee equitable resource access is crucial for addressing these enduring issues.

Hill District Councils (HDCs): The establishment of HDCs in the CHT provides indigenous communities with a degree of autonomy over local governance and land management. These councils play a vital role in protecting indigenous land rights and preserving cultural heritage while promoting sustainable development initiatives.

Environmental Conservation and Resource Management

Environmental conservation and sustainable resource management are paramount for the ecological integrity and livelihoods of indigenous communities in the CHT. Deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity threaten the region's ecosystems and undermine the well-being of indigenous peoples. Initiatives focused on environmental protection, reforestation, and sustainable agriculture are essential for promoting long-term sustainability.

Eco-Tourism Initiatives: Eco-tourism initiatives in the CHT capitalize on the region's natural beauty while promoting environmental conservation and community development. Projects like the Sajek Valley Eco-Resort Offer economic prospects to indigenous communities while also increasing awareness among visitors about environmental preservation.

Socio-Economic Development Initiatives

Socio-economic development endeavours play a pivotal role in combating poverty, enhancing livelihoods, and fostering inclusive growth in the CHT. Access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities is essential for uplifting indigenous communities and reducing disparities. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Livelihoods Improvement of Tribal's in Chittagong Hill Tracts Project focuses on enhancing the socio-economic well-being of indigenous communities. Through initiatives such as skill development training, micro-enterprise development, and infrastructure improvements, the project empowers indigenous peoples to build resilient livelihoods and improve their quality of life.

Microfinance Programs: Microfinance initiatives empower indigenous women and marginalized groups by providing access to credit and financial services. Organizations like the Grameen Bank extend microcredit to rural communities in the CHT, enabling entrepreneurship and income generation.

Conclusion

In our quest to advocate for Dharma and Ahimsa and mitigate human rights violations and vulnerabilities among indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), we embark on a journey of compassion and justice. It's about standing up for what's right and treating everyone with kindness and respect. By championing these principles, we're not just talking about it – we're taking real action to address the injustices and hardships faced by these marginalized communities. We're working together, hand in hand, to make a difference and create a better future for everyone.

Our commitment goes beyond words; it's about making meaningful changes in policies and practices, supporting community initiatives, and empowering indigenous peoples to assert their rights and reclaim their dignity. It's about listening to their voices, understanding their struggles, and standing in solidarity with them every step of the way. As we navigate the challenges ahead, let's remember the importance of empathy, understanding, and collaboration. Together, we can build a world where everyone – regardless of their background or identity – can live with dignity, equality, and respect.

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