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Protecting the forest communities from drastic forest loss, plantation economy, climate change and landgrab

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)
Development partners: The European Union and MISEREOR

Introduction

The main issues faced by indigenous and forest-dependent people living in the forests of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the plains—especially in the north-central region of the country—revolve around forests and land. Traditional land rights are not recognized in Bangladesh. As a result, indigenous forest dwellers who once lived peacefully in the CHT and Sal forests, and who could freely collect essential resources and food from the forest, are now struggling to establish their traditional land rights. They are engaging in conflicts and confrontations with state security forces, the Forest Department, and outsiders; they are being attacked, sometimes even losing their lives, being evicted from their ancestral lands, and are being forced to abandon centuries-old traditional agricultural practices.

The traditional land rights of the forest-dwelling indigenous peoples (IPs) were first taken away by British colonial rulers through the enactment of Act Seven of 1865 (the Forest Act of 1865). With this law, the British crown established control over the forests. The British rule eventually came to an end, but their taxation policies, forest resource extraction methods, afforestation practices, and other processes continued.

Later, under various governments, development projects, rubber plantation, teak plantation, tobacco farming, horticulture, militarization, and Bengali resettlement—especially in the CHT—caused massive destruction of forests. As a result, the IPs in the CHT have been severely impacted, dramatically changing their agricultural systems and threatening the environment.

The Garo, Koch and Barman communities in the north-central districts of Tangail, Gazipur, and Mymensingh, are also living in

forest areas in a precarious situation. Most members of these communities residing in the sal forest areas do not have title deeds for their land. Consequently, closely one million indigenous people in the CHT and around 250,000 indigenous and Bengali people in the plains continue to live in a state of uncertainty and tension over land rights, often in conflict with the Forest Department, security forces, resettled Bengalis, and land grabbers.

Bangladesh has always had limited forest resources. In 2016, the Forest Department identified 17.62% of the country as forest land. However, according to the reported estimate by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the forest cover in Bangladesh was only 6.7% of the land area. The FAO estimate can be considered more acceptable, although it includes planted forests. Forest experts generally do not consider plantations as forests.

The government has taken initiatives to conserve forest land and protect forest-dependent communities. A notable policy initiative includes the Forestry Master Plan. With support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNDP, the Bangladesh government formulated a long-term Forestry Master Plan for the period 1995–2015. The government of Bangladesh updated the Forestry Master Plan for the period 2017–2036, taking into account emerging climate and socio-economic challenges, as well as new international arrangements.

The updated plan was developed by both national and international consultancy firms and sets several major goals: bringing 20% of Bangladesh's land under forest cover with a 50% canopy density; conserving remaining natural forests, hill forests, and mangroves; preventing future deforestation; preserving



wildlife and biodiversity; establishing strong coastal shelter belts through climate-resilient plantations on government land and new riverine chars; improving the socio-economic condition of forest-dependent populations; expanding forest-based industries and livelihoods; enhancing forest-related research; and strengthening institutions tasked with achieving these goals (Bangladesh Forestry Master Plan 2017–2036).

To implement the Forestry Master Plan—particularly its afforestation projects—various amendments were made to colonial forest laws. In the meantime, an initiative named Forest Resources Management Plan (FRMP) was formulated in 1997.

However, the afforestation projects undertaken by the government to implement the plan have generated controversy. Programs such as social

forestry, industrial forestry, and fuelwood plantations have, in many cases, led to significant destruction of natural forests.

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) has, for over three decades, conducted research, investigations, and documentation on the impact of forestry sector policies, plans, and projects on forests, deforestation, and forest-dependent indigenous and local communities. SEHD has published over fifty books, special monographs, and produced documentary films. The knowledge resources and disclosure of previously unknown information revealed through SEHD’s work have had a significant influence on forest-related policy and projects.

SEHD’s long-standing research has shown that artificial plantations with exotic species have negative impacts on forest-dependent people, the environment, and local climate. For this reason, protecting natural forests is essential for safeguarding the rights and

well-being of the forest communities. While Bangladesh’s policymakers—particularly relevant ministries and the Forest Department—now agree with SEHD’s findings, their implementation at the field level remains minimal.

The present project by SEHD seeks to uncover the true causes of deforestation in forest areas and to highlight best practices amongst the forest communities. The project is expected to make significant contributions towards adoption of policy and programs in favour of indigenous and forest-dependent groups. The program has been developed with information acquired through consultation, experiences, and insights collected from civil society, community representatives, local organizations, environmental and human rights activists, educators, women’s groups, IPs, and other forest-dependent populations.

SEHD has been working for over three decades to promote environmental justice and human rights for indigenous and other marginalized communities. In partnership with them, SEHD has developed knowledge resources and organized workshops, cultural events, conferences, conventions and dialogues.

This project aims to empower and build the capacity of these communities to meaningfully engage in efforts surrounding land rights and traditional rights over forests in the CHT and the north-central districts of Bangladesh.

ILO Convention 169, Article 14 states:

1. The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognized. In addition, measures shall be taken to safeguard the rights of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional

activities. Particular attention shall be paid to the situation of nomadic peoples and shifting cultivators in this respect.

2. Governments shall take steps as necessary to identify the lands which the peoples concerned traditionally occupy, and to guarantee effective protection of their rights of ownership and possession.
3. Adequate procedures shall be established within the national legal system to resolve land claims by the peoples concerned.

Final Beneficiaries

The final beneficiaries—IPs, other forest villagers and forest-dependent people living on the forest commons and forest areas—are from two geographic settings:

IPs and forest villagers in the CHT:

Eleven indigenous groups of the CHT are Chakma, Marma, Chak, Bawm, Khyang, Lushai, Khumi, Pankhua, Mro, Tanchangya and Tripura. According to 2022 census the IP population of the CHT is 920,248, which is little less than the half of the CHT population. Table 1 shows IP and Bengali population in the CHT.

Table 1: The CHT IPs

Districts	Population ¹	
	IPs	Bengalis
Rangamati	372,875	274,711
Bandarban	197,983	283,123
Khagrchhari	349,390	364,729
Total	920,248	922,563

Source: Population and Housing Census 2022.

The largest of the IP groups in the CHT is the Chakma with a population of 483,365, followed by Marma (224,299) and Tripura

(156,620). The population of the other IP groups ranges between 380 (Lushai) and 52,463 (Mro).

The current distribution of IPs and Bengali population in the CHT, which is 10% of Bangladesh's land area and only hilly regions of the country, is very disturbing for the original inhabitants there. Even in 1947, when India was partitioned, Bengalis in the region constituted only 2.5% of the total population. And even in the 1960s the total population in CHT was less than half a million. Population dislocation has been a major concern in the CHT since the establishment of the Kaptai Dam in 1960s. Then other major incident that led to major displacement and relocation of the IPs was an insurgency war fought between the Bangladesh military and the IP rebels for two decades. It was in the 1980s that about half a million Bengali settlers were taken to live alongside the IPs of the CHT. This caused massive displacement of the IPs—around 100,000 hill indigenous people were ejected under the settlement policy from their traditional land. About half of them became refugees in India and half got scattered throughout the CHT to become internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Militarization of the CHT—with more than 400 temporary camps [scattered throughout the CHT] and six cantonments—and violence including bloodshed during the insurgency war between 1977 and 1987, massive destruction of forest and over-exploitation of nature have dispossessed the IPs of their traditional land and restricted them from use of customary land to great extent. With heavy military presence and Bengali settlers in every corner of the CHT, life and livelihood of the IPs are put into high risk. It seems man-nature nexus in the CHT has been torn forever.

In addition to the original IP inhabitants there are Bengalis who have been living in the hills for generations and they are considered forest villagers and locals. They are guesstimated at around quarter million. The final beneficiaries in the CHT under the action thus stands at 1.17 million. These final beneficiaries are either directly linked to land and forest or are impacted by drastic forest loss, plantation economy, development actions, climate change, militarization and Bengali in-migration.



IPs and other forest villagers of Tangail, Gazipur and Mymensingh districts:

Garos, Kochs and Barman are three IP groups in these three districts in the North-centre. A large percentage of these IPs in these three districts used to live in the forest villages. Additionally, a big Bengali population has been living in forest villages particularly in sal forest of Tangail, Gazipur, and Mymensingh districts since the times of Zamindars (landlords or tax collectors, assigned by the British Raj). Most of the people living in forest villages in sal forest areas in the plains land do not have title deeds for the land they occupy. The following table shows distribution of IPs in three districts in the North-centre.

Table 2: IPs and Bengali composition in Tangail, Gazipur and Mymensingh districts

Communities	Tangail	Gazipur	Mymensingh	Total
Garos	20,000	900	40,693	61,593
Kochs	18,305	12,826	7,809	38,940
Bormons	2,500	6,393	500	9,393
	40,805	20,119	49,002	109,926*

Sources: SEHD survey, 2014; Caritas Bangladesh survey 2021; Koch Community Development Association inventory 2023-2024.

** According to the population census 2022 the IP population in these three districts is 61,133, which is 0.40% of the total population of 15,200,063. The Kochs and Bormons, almost all of them Hindus, are in phenomenal assimilation process and many are enumerated as Bengalis.*

The three IP groups seen in table 2 live in approximately 310 villages in the sal forest areas of Tangail, Gazipur and Mymensingh. The majority of these forest villages are in Tangail and Gazipur districts. The Bengalis are scattered throughout hundreds of the forest villages in the sal forest areas. Tangail and Gazipur district together has an official sal forest cover of 188,050.11 acres of which about 40% are reserved forest. The forest area in Mymensingh district is 38,860.14 acres. What is appalling about these official statistics is hardly 15% of the sal forest survive today and a huge amount of forest land has been grabbed for industrialization, different establishments, and agriculture.



Landgrab by outsiders has seriously affected the IPs and forest villagers that used to be surrounded by forest in the past. But today most of the villages stand in denuded forest land.

Most of the people living on the forest land from the times of Zamindar have no title deeds for the land they use. SEHD's survey of 44 villages in Modhupur sal forest in Tangail district in 2017 under an EU-funded project found that only 13% Bengali and 4.19% indigenous Garos have title deeds for their homestead land. For high land where they grow banana, pineapple, spice and other garden crops only 4.83% Bengalis and 2.61% Garos have title deeds. For the low land 9.67% Bengali and 11.17% Garos have title deeds. Survey of other sal forest areas is likely to find similar picture. Drastic forest loss and landgrab have severe multiplier effects on the forest villagers and environment. This also aggravates the climate change effects.

Targets of the Project

a. Civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), environmental groups and human rights defenders: There are a good number of indigenous CSOs, CBOs, and human rights groups that are rooted among the IPs and work to protect the customary land rights of indigenous, forest-dwelling, and forest-dependent populations, as well as to improve their economic conditions. Some notable indigenous organisations include: Joyenshahi Adivasi Samaj Kalyan Sangstha (working among the Garo and Koch communities of Modhupur), Bangladesh Koch Adivasi Sangathan (working among the Koch communities of Gazipur, Tangail, and Mymensingh), Trinomul Unnayan Sangstha (based in Khagrachhari), Moanoghar (an educational institution based in Rangamati), Jabarang Kalyan Samiti and Bangladesh Tripura Kalyan Sangshad (based in Khagrachhari), MroChet (a social organization of the Mro community based in Bandarban), Tahzingdong (working for development and rights of the IPs), Humanitarian Foundation (based in Bandarban), and Gram Unnayan Sangathan (also based in Bandarban).

b. Women's groups: Prominent among the women's groups working among the indigenous communities with special attention to IP women in the project locations



are Achik Michik Society (AMS), working mainly among Garo and Koch women in Modhupur, Tangail; Bolipara Nari Kalyan Samity, a civil society organization led by IP women and based in Bandarban; Ananya Kalyan Sangathan, an NGO run by IP women in Bandarban; Women Resource Network (WRN) promoting rights of the IP women in the CHT; Khagrapur Mohila Kallyan Samity, based in Khagrachhari Hill District; and Hill Women Federation, a women’s organization promoting rights of women in the CHT.

These organizations work for development of the IPs and women and promote indigenous cultures, values and traditions. Many of them are also engaged in the promotion and documentation of good practices and innovations related to natural forest conservation, environmental protection, and mitigation of climate change impacts. However, these organizations require capacity building in order to strengthen their voice in the pursuit of rights. This includes improving their skills in research, survey, investigation, and analysis. By involving these organizations in research and other project activities, their capacity will be enhanced, enabling them to better absorb and utilize the knowledge resources generated from the project’s research and investigations. SEHD, with over three decades of experience working with IPs will be able to successfully implement the project.

c. Movements, traditional organizations, and solidarity networks: CHT Headman Network, a traditional organization of 376 headman in three hill districts (a headman is a sub-chief or head of a mouza [in the CHT] charged with the collection of revenue and justice administration at the mouza level); CHT Women Headman/Karbari Network, a traditional organization of 20 women headman and 550 women karbari in three hill districts (a Karbari, is a village chief or elder, an office that is traditionally hereditary); Movement for the Protection of Forest and Land Rights in the CHT, a body known for claiming right to land of the IPs in the CHT; Chittagong Hill Tracts Citizen’s Committee (CHT-CC); and United Council of Indigenous Organizations of Greater Mymensingh (UCGM), a body to promote rights of the IPs to land and forest in North-centre of Bangladesh.

These organizations play important roles in raising voice for customary rights over land. However, most of them are



not registered, and some deliberately choose not to register for strategic reasons. SEHD will work closely with these organizations to enhance their capacities. On one hand, these groups will be able to easily access and use the knowledge resources developed throughout the project, on the other hand, those involved in these organizations will have opportunities to build their skills and expertise by working on complex issues surrounding customary rights over forests and forest land.

d. National CSOs supporting the IPs on land and forestry issues: At the national level, there are several institutions that work with SEHD and indigenous communities on issues related to forest land and climate change. These organizations will actively participate in the implementation of the project activities.

e. Academes and media: Universities and media will be particularly involved in the research and investigation components of the project. Departments of sociology, anthropology, communication, journalism, and environmental science, as well as journalists, will be engaged during the course of research and investigations and developing research methodologies. Reports generated from investigations will be sent for publication in newspapers. Books and other materials produced from the research will be used in various academic courses at universities, thereby enriching educational institutions and indigenous communities with knowledge related to forests and forest-dependent peoples.

f. Relevant state agencies and government administrations: Important state agencies dealing with land and forest in the CHT and North-centre include Ministry of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD), The CHT Regional Council, three CHT district councils, Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, Bangladesh Forest Industries Development

Corporation (BFIDC), Bangladesh Rubber Board and the administrations (Deputy Commissioners' office, upazila councils, union councils, etc.) and CHT Land Commission (yet to be functional).

Overall objective(s)

To protect customary rights of the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and forest villagers living on the forest commons and forest land in Tangail, Gazipur and Mymensingh districts in the North-centre and in three districts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Specific objective(s)

Enhanced advocacy for the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and forest villagers on their customary rights to land and forest commons and on the protection of natural forest, in the North-central districts and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Output(s)

- a. Increased awareness of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Indigenous Peoples (IPs), forest villagers, Academia and State actors on current status of customary rights to forest and land and on the consequences of forest loss and climate change, in the North-central districts and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).
- b. Increased awareness of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), rights defenders and State actors on the legal framework protecting customary rights to land and forest commons.
- c. Increased public awareness and understanding on human rights abuses against Indigenous Peoples (IPs), forest villagers and forest dependent people and on the consequences of forest loss and climate change, in the North-central districts and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

- d. Strengthened capacities of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and forest villagers in advocating for the customary rights to forest commons and land and on the protection of natural forest.
- e. Increased opportunities for development of strategic relationships between Non-State and State/ International actors to stop degradation of forest and environment and to promote land rights.

Key Activities of the Project

a. Research, Survey and Analysis

1. Surveys: Of four surveys to be conducted two will focus specifically on customary forest land and landgrab in both regions. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), indigenous communities have held customary land rights since time immemorial. However, their customary rights have severely diminished in recent decades. The planned surveys will generate both quantitative and qualitative data and analyses that will be accessible to everyone to be able to understand the situation better. In Tangail, Mymensingh, and Gazipur districts, the Garo, Koch, and Barman indigenous communities—who predominantly live in sal forests—remain deeply anxious over their traditional rights. The surveys will reveal the status of their customary rights to forest and land and the extent of landgrab.

To collect primary data, surveys will be conducted on 1,500 households in the CHT and 1,000 households in the plains.

Two surveys will be carried out in the two regions to assess the consequences of unregulated deforestation, afforestation, plantation economy, climate change, and landgrab. Indigenous and forest-dependent peoples in the CHT and north-central districts are among the most affected by these factors. They are constantly fighting to establish

their land rights and frequently come into conflict with the Forest Department, security forces, and outsiders. For these surveys, 1,500 households in the CHT and 1,000 households in the plains will again be surveyed for primary data.

In addition, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and cases of individuals will be documented to show their life impacted by forest loss and climate change. The final survey reports will be made publicly accessible for everyone to use.

2. Building inventory and interpretation of legislations and instruments that protect customary rights to land and forest commons:

There are a number of local and international legislations and instruments to safeguard the customary rights of the IPs and forest-dwellers to land and forest commons and to protect the environment. Alongside national laws, the Government of Bangladesh is also committed to the implementation of the international instruments it has signed. The implementing organization of the project, SEHD, has already identified these laws and conventions. With the assistance of legal experts, the research team will analyse the key aspects of these laws and conventions and publish them for use of everyone. This will serve as an important resource for human rights and development workers, as well as for state and non-state agencies.

3. Documentation and promotion of best practices for climate change adaptation and environmental protection:

The minority ethnic communities and other populations living in forest areas hold several good practices, traditional customs, and indigenous technologies that contribute significantly to environmental protection and play an important role in climate change adaptation. These include village common forests (VCFs), community food banks, spiritual beliefs,

cultural values, traditional agriculture, organic farming (without chemical fertilizers), handloom weaving, and more. With the support of partner organizations, the research team of the implementing organization will identify these best practices, document them, and publish them in a book. This publication will be particularly useful for communities, environmental activists, the Forest Department, and other government agencies.

4. Investigation of human rights abuses against IPs, other forest villagers, and forest dependent people: Reports of landgrab, forest cases, killings, arson, attacks, and various forms of abuse frequently come from forest areas. Over the 42-month duration of the project, 12 investigations into structural abuses of human rights violations will be conducted. Investigative reports will be published in national newspapers and in various project publications. The implementing organization, SEHD, possesses specialized expertise in investigating incidents of deforestation, impacts of deforestation, and human rights violations against small ethnic minorities and marginalized communities residing in forest areas. Various government and non-government organizations, universities, and media outlets will also assist in the implementation of this activity.

5. Documentary film: An investigative documentary film will be made on the adverse impacts of commercial scale plantations such as rubber, teak, pulp, and tobacco. The best practices and innovations of forest-dwelling IPs and other forest villagers to combat adverse impacts will also get an attention in the film. The applicant has already made 12 documentary films and seven of them are on land, forest and forest-dwelling communities. Most of the filming will be carried out along with research, investigations and other events.

b. Skills and Capacity Building Training Training will be provided to environmental

activists, personnel of non-governmental and governmental institutions, representatives of various indigenous organizations, and development workers to enhance their knowledge and capacity in research, documentation, dialogue, and raising awareness on environment, climate change, and good practices. The implementing organization, SEHD, has already developed a wide range of training materials on environment, forests, and climate change. Under this project, additional training materials will be developed starting from the first year. With these resources in hand, four trainings will be conducted on the impacts of climate change, landgrab, plantation economy, conversion of public forest land into agricultural land, and social forestry. Two trainings will be organized on diversity, tolerance, and peace in Bangladesh. One training will focus on effective use and dissemination of knowledge resources. Trainers will include selected officials from government and non-government organizations, university faculty, development consultants, economists, and project staff. Participants of these trainings will become skilled in field research, documentation, investigation, and survey work, and will be better equipped to engage in actions related to securing their rights.

c. Convention and Photography Exhibition

A convention and a photography exhibition will be organized in the final year of the project to share the knowledge resources developed through research on forests, deforestation, climate change, and their impacts. Discussions and dialogues in the two-day convention will focus on the rights of the forest-dwelling communities. Distinguished representatives from government and non-government sectors, experts, development and human rights activists, environmentalists, and members of the media will participate in the

convention. Alongside the convention, a seven-day photography exhibition will be held, where visitors will be able to view photographs on issues such as forests, deforestation, the impact of plantation economy, the effects of climate change, the livelihoods of forest-dependent people, and examples of best practices.

d. Publications, Documentary and Production

Four reports on deforestation, customary land rights, and the impacts of forest loss from data, findings, and analysis generated through research, surveys, investigations, inventories, and documentation; a report on national laws and conventions that safeguard the rights of forest-dwelling communities; a volume of investigative reports; a volume on best practices; a training manual on forests, forest commons and customary land rights; a photography exhibition catalogue; a documentary on plantation economy and the impacts of climate change; three issues of newsletters; a strategy paper on legislative and policy reform; and a brochure.

e. Kick-off and Final Workshops of the Project

A day-long kick-off workshop at the beginning of the project and a three-day workshop at the end will be organized. At the outset, all stakeholders will be invited to share their opinions and suggestions. In the concluding three-day workshop, all knowledge resources developed during the project will be distributed, and a strategic plan will be formulated to ensure the sustainability of the project outcomes for the future.

f. Coordination and Solidarity Network Meetings

Four coordination meetings will be organized over the 42-month project period to ensure effective implementation of the project. SEHD's forestry network members, community

representatives, government and non-government organizations, university faculty members, and journalists will participate in these meetings. The meetings will focus on project activities, implementation plans, and strategies to strengthen the solidarity networks. A steering committee will be formed with the participants in these meetings.

How the Project is Implemented

This is a participatory project. The implementing organization, SEHD, the project officials and staff, the target communities, other project stakeholders, representatives selected from the solidarity network and the final beneficiaries, as well as their community-based institutions, will carry out various activities under the project.

SEHD has skilled expertise and experience in conducting research and investigative work. All personnel involved in research will receive necessary training. Additionally, support will be sought from other professional researchers and academic institutions.

During the formulation of the project, SEHD held numerous discussions, consultation meetings, workshops, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with representatives from partner organizations, target communities, and different groups among the final beneficiaries. Advice was also sought from officials of relevant government and non-government organizations to ensure successful implementation of the project activities. Furthermore, experts and faculty from the departments of anthropology, sociology, development studies, and international relations at the University of Dhaka and other public and private universities have been consulted regarding research, investigation and analysis. Extensive discussions have been held at various stages of the project development with communities among the final beneficiary groups and several relevant institutions. Consultations and

information exchange with them will continue at each stage of the project implementation.

The project director, along with other officials, will regularly monitor and evaluate the progress of the work to ensure quality while properly completing research and investigation. Assistance from professional statisticians will be sought in the analysis of data. All project officials and staff will apply their professional experience to edit and publish the outputs generated from the research.

Under the overall supervision of the project director, the project officials, other stakeholders, representative organisations and leaders from the final beneficiaries, and experts in relevant fields will organize and conduct training, workshops, consultation meetings, dialogues, and conventions. Relevant government officials, local administrations, elected representatives, professional researchers, journalists, university faculty members, human rights and development workers, and representatives of the final beneficiaries will participate as facilitators and trainers.

SEHD also possesses special experience and expertise in publications, investigative reporting, documentary film production, and organizing photography exhibitions. Under

the overall guidance of the project director, the project officials will complete all publications and other production-related tasks. Where necessary, support from professional writers, translators, and designers will be utilized in the publication process.

Implementors of the Project

Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD): SEHD is a non-profit organization established in 1993. SEHD primarily operates in two broad and interrelated areas—environment and human rights. Both areas are vast. In addition to research on the overall situation of the environment and human rights, SEHD also engages in action-oriented research, investigation, reporting, and documentation on specific issues. Building capacity of community leaders and journalists is also an important mission of SEHD. Over the past three decades, SEHD has consistently attended issues concerning forest, IPs, and other communities dependent on forest commons. Among SEHD’s portfolio of more than 100 publications and knowledge outputs of around 50 are on specifically forests and forest people. The organization has played a significant role in influencing policies



Participants in a consultation in Modhupur in 2022 for preparation agenda of forest and forest communities.

and strategic shifts within the government, multilateral development banks (MDBs), and corporates. SEHD has always been committed to advancing intellectual clarity and public consciousness regarding the environment, forests, indigenous and ethnic peoples, and marginalized communities.

Associates: The project involves nine associates: three from the North-central region—Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad (JAUP), Achik Michik Society (AMS), and the Bangladesh Koch Indigenous Organization and six from the CHT—the CHT Women Headman Karbari Network, the CHT Headman Network, MroChet, Movement for the Protection of Forest and Land Right in CHT, Annanya Kalyan Sangathan (AKS), and Bolipara Nari Kalyan Samiti (BNKS). All these organizations have deep understanding about their regions, indigenous communities, and local issues. Most of these associates have been working with SEHD for decades and participated in the development of this project. They have supported the project by sharing their experiences, insights, and information to help understand forests, forest-dependent communities, and their conditions and struggles. They will play an important role in selecting participants for training, workshops, conferences, research, surveys, and investigations. The associates—especially those from the CHT—will be actively involved in research on best practices within indigenous communities. At the same time, the partners will also assist in documentary film production and photography.

Academics, experts, researchers, and media: University faculty members, relevant experts, media professionals, and professional forest experts will assist the project staff in research, survey analysis, investigative work, and documentary film production. Legal experts and university teachers will be particularly involved in analysing national laws and international conventions, and in

formulating recommendations and strategies for legal and policy reforms. They will also serve as trainers in training sessions and workshops.

State agencies, administrations and other parties: Political parties of the hill communities in the CHT, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council, Hill District Councils, Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institute, Bangladesh Forest Department, elected representatives of local government, and Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC) will stay involved in the implementation of different activities of the project. These institutions will, on the one hand, provide important data and information, and on the other, some of their officials will directly participate in trainings, dialogues, and conferences as trainers, speakers, and participants. Through this engagement, they will gain a clearer understanding of indigenous and other forest-dependent peoples and will be better equipped to work on their behalf in the future.

Solidarity network on forest and land: A forest peoples' network has been formed with participants in a workshop to design this project. Some other individuals from the forest areas in both the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the plains have been accommodated in the network at a later stage. Members of this network will provide guidance for the project and will remain directly involved in its implementation.



Selection of publications of SEHD and others on forest and forest communities

Bon O Bonojibi Manusher Agenda

By Philip Gain. 112 pages, 2025, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). It is an issue-centric agenda of the people who are dependent on or related to forest. The agenda briefly explains the historical and current condition of the Indigenous Peoples who have lived in the forests of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) or elsewhere for centuries, highlights insurmountable difficulties they face nowadays, and their strengths and weaknesses. A significant part of the agenda is a set of recommendations for the protection of forest and forest people.

Stolen Forests

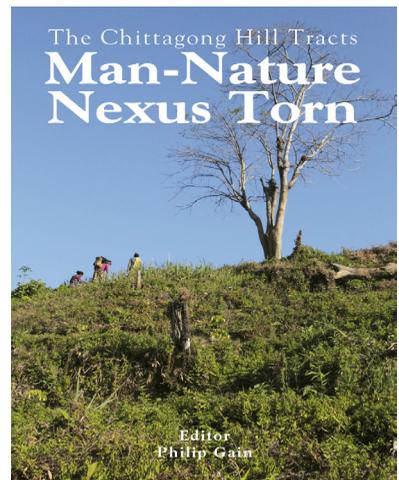
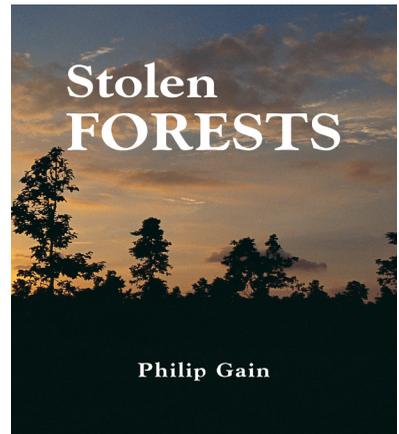
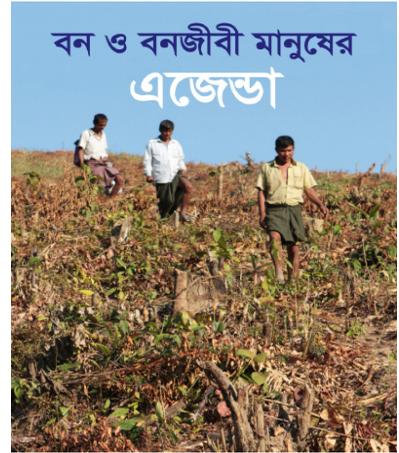
By Philip Gain. 216 pages, 2006, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). This is a book of images and critical texts about the disaster in forests of Bangladesh. This book reflects the author's predilection for images of forests; and to him forests are not just about trees and the wildlife they support but also the communities that live in the forests, their knowledge, education, history, traditions, technology, culture, and lots more.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Man-Nature Nexus Torn

Edited by Philip Gain. 368 pages, 2013, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). It is a report on the state of environment in the CHT. The book compiles facts, analyses, thoughts, critiques, maps, and images about how the natural heritage and the ecology of the CHT has been torn to pieces.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk

Edited by Philip Gain. 120 pages, 2000, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The book compiles write-ups of Raja Devashish Roy, Meghna Guhathakurta, Amena Mohsin, Prashanta Tripura and the editor himself and provides information, photographs, and arguments on how the land, life, and



nature in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are at risk.

Bon, Bonbinash O Bonobashir Jibon Shangram

Edited by Philip Gain. 263 pages, Bangla, 2004, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The book compiles information and insights shared at a seminar in June 2003, organized by SEHD and the write-ups of different authors. The book also annexes seven declarations that the Adivasis, environmentalists, activists, and development workers have adopted at different times during the last decade.

Parbotto Chattograme Jumchash

By Prashanta Tripura and Abantee Harun. 117 pages, Bangla, November 2003, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). This book is a output of the authors' research and discussion concerning jum or swidden cultivation in the CHT.

Bangladesher Biponno Bon

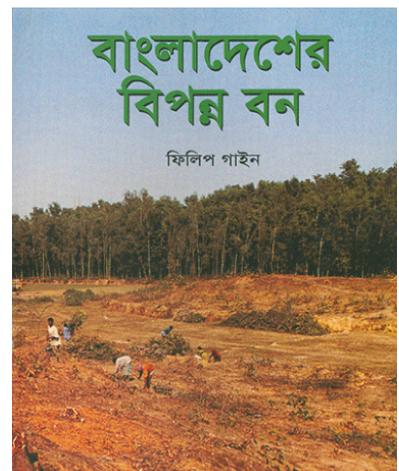
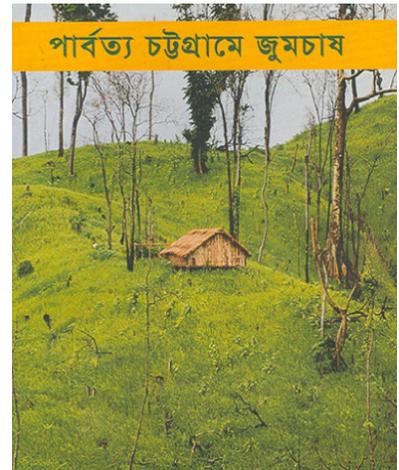
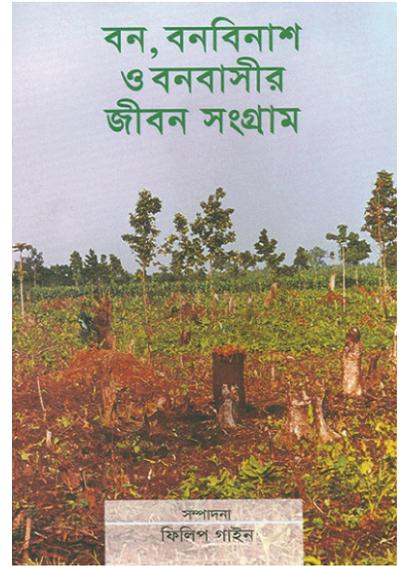
By Philip Gain. 276 Pages, Bangla, 2005, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The forest of Bangladesh has drastically shrunk over the years. The book is an outcome of extensive investigation and analysis of the author that he carried out for a decade. It's an updated Bangla edition of his book, The Last Forests of Bangladesh.

Modhupur: The Vanishing Forest and Her People in Agony

By Philip Gain. 160 pages, 2019, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The book puts together the findings of a survey on 44 forest villages and investigative reports on massive destruction of the Modhupur sal forest and life of its live people who inhabit the forest villages. An updated Bangla edition of the book, 'Modhupur: Aronner Artonad' was published in 2023.

Traditional Uses of Ethnomedicinal Plants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

By Sarder Nasir Uddin, edited by Dr. M. Matiur Rahman. 891 Pages, 2006, published by Bangladesh National Herbarium. This book is an outcome of a project formulated by the



Bangladesh National Herbarium and sponsored by the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs.

The Last Forests of Bangladesh

By Philip Gain. 224 pages, 2002, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The book compiles the author's journalistic write-ups and analyses on the forests of Bangladesh that have been brutalized through encroachments, plantations, and export-oriented prawn cultivation.

Bangladesh Land, Forest and Forest People

Edited by Philip Gain. 284 pages, 2013, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The book compiles research articles, investigative reports and stories of the forest and forest peoples contributed by researchers, writers and journalists. These articles and reports explain appalling condition of our forest and its underlying factors.

The Environmental Impacts of the Pulp and Paper Industry in Bangladesh

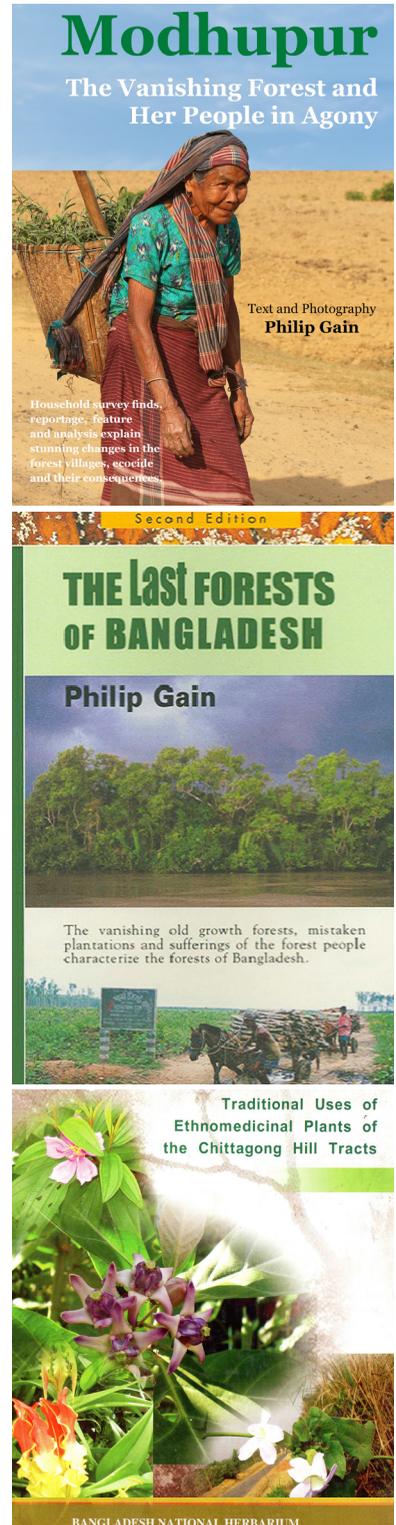
By Asfara Ahmed. 44 pages, 2013, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). This is an investigative monograph of the author on the pollution from the pulp and paper industry in Bangladesh focused on the Karnaphuli Paper Mill (KPM) that went into operation in 1953 and has been a polluter ever since.

Bon O Boner Adhibasi

Edited by Philip Gain and Shishir Moral. 76 pages, Bangla, 1996, published by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). This book is an outcome of a national seminar on forest, forest people and forest culture held in 1994. It compiles what Adivasi leaders, environmentalists, development and human rights activists and the intelligentsia on critical issues relating to land, forest and Adivasis shared in the seminar.

Land and Forest Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

By Raja Devasish Roy. 62 pages, 2002, published



by International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, Nepal. This is a discussion paper on land and forest rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This paper provides historical perspective of the fallout of the armed conflict on people and natural resources, and most to capture the opportunities made available by the CHT accord of 1997.

Indigenous Peoples and Forests in Bangladesh

By Raja Devasish Roy and Philip Gain. It is an article that discusses the state of the forests in Bangladesh, land and resource rights of indigenous peoples, rubber and teak plantations in place of natural forest patches and their consequences, forestry policies, and indigenous forest management. The article was published in a report 'Forests and Indigenous Peoples of Asia' by Minority Rights Group International in 1999.

Mru: Hill People on the Border of Bangladesh

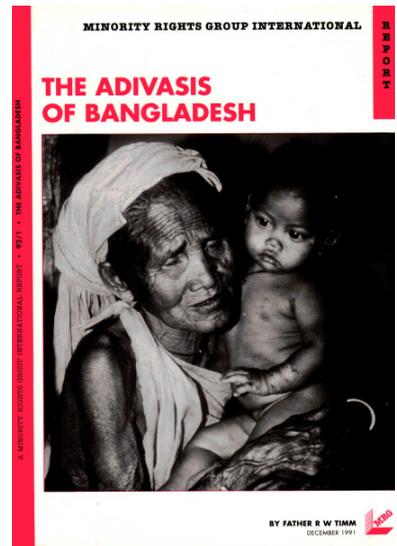
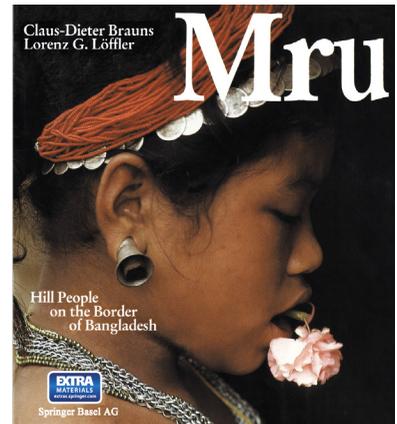
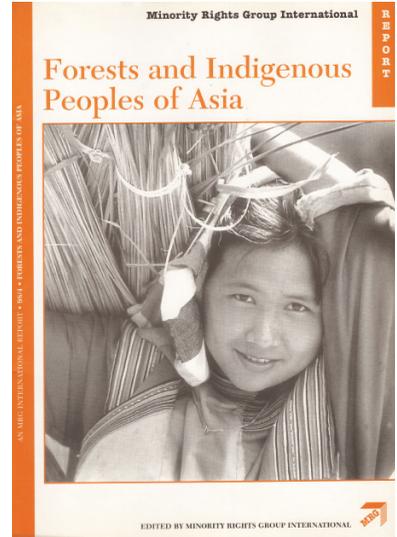
By Claus-Dieter Brauns and Lorenz G. Löffler. 250 pages, 1990, published by Birkhauser Verlag, Basel. One of the most thoroughly researched and keenly observed publications ever written not only on the Mru, but also on any indigenous community in Bangladesh. The book is the result of arduous and danger-defying efforts of photographer Claus-Dieter Brauns and ethnographer Lorenz G. Löffler.

The Adivasis of Bangladesh

By Father R W Timm. 36 pages, 1991, published by Minority Rights Group (MRG). It is a report on violation of human rights, including infringement of land rights of Adivasis across the country. The author describes the devastating encroachment onto the Madhupur Sal Forest for rubber cultivation and Bengali settlement from the plains in the CHT.

Parbattya Chattogramer Bhumi Sonkranto Protha o Riti (Land related customs and practices in the Chittagong Hill Tracts)

Edited by Shaktipada Tripura, Sudatta Priya Chakma, Chihnmlong Chak and Joy Prakash Tripura. 204 pages,



Bangla, 2013, published by the CHT Regional Council and supported by Manusher Jonno Foundation. This is a research work on the land related customs and practices of fourteen ethnic groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts—Mro, Khumi, Khyang, Chak, Pangkhua, Bawm, Lushai, Tanchangya, Santal, Ahmia, Gurkha, Chakma, Marma and Tripura.

Pushed to the Edge: Indigenous Rights Denied in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts

A research work on the CHT land published by Amnesty International (AI). 60 pages, 2013. It is based on information provided to AI researchers in interviews, including Focus Group Discussion, during three research missions to the CHT, in February and June 2011 and March 2012, focusing on hill people's rights to their traditional lands.

Documentary Films

Mandi

A 28-minute documentary film on the struggle of the matrilineal Garos and the destruction of a unique sal forest in north-centre of Bangladesh. The YouTube link to the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCNhVqCs1GU>

Biponno Bon (Stolen Forests)

A 45-minute documentary film on the devastation of forests of Bangladesh (except for the Sundarbans), produced by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). The YouTube links to the film is:

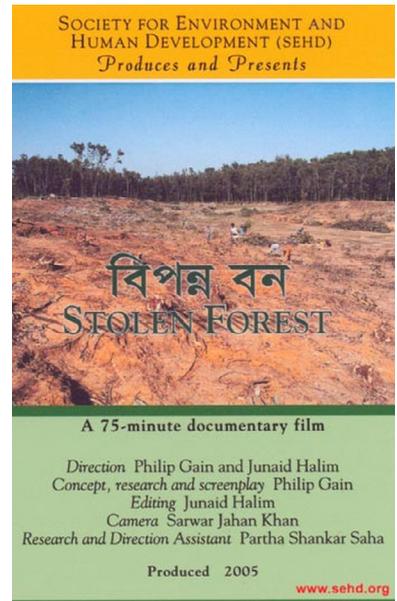
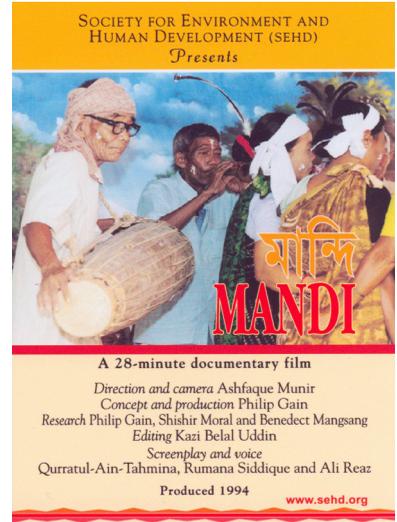
Bangla: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5BjxXgDwzM>

English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFSzanh3D9o&t=323s>

Aronner Artonad (Sylvan Tears)

A 40-minute documentary film on the destruction of Modhupur Sal Forest and agony of the forest villagers. The YouTube link to the film: Bangla: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_URtMWQxNXU&t=34s

English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Phvs7vpDn64&t=53s>





**‘Saving the trees is only the first step ...
Saving ourselves is the real goal’**

— Chandi Prasad Bhat

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Photo: Philip Gain. Layout: Prosad Sarker