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This case study examines the process of tourism development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where multidimensional concerns related to Indigenous communities are coming to the fore. This area contains valuable natural resources that provide huge potential for the growth of tourism.

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Table of Contents

Summary	2
Background.....	2
‘Development’ Efforts and Growth of Tourism	3
The Actors Involved.....	4
The Impacts	6
Concluding Remarks	6
References	7

Summary

This case study examines the process of tourism development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where multidimensional concerns related to Indigenous communities are coming to the fore. This area contains valuable natural resources that provide huge potential for the growth of tourism. However, accounts of discrimination and violations by the state towards Indigenous peoples indicate the potential for inequality and exploitation while developing tourism. Eleven Indigenous groups live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a historically conflict-ridden area where there is tension between the dominant ethnic Bangalee and the Indigenous groups due to the latter's limited control over their way of life and the environment. Structurally, the state endorses mass tourism, where powerful actors – government, military, politically influential individuals, and companies – are engaged in determining the ‘development’ for the Indigenous people and modernising the place as a part of capitalist ventures to gain profits. Given that state actors or private investors wield power and control over tourism, exploitation ranges from Indigenous peoples' lack of control over the planning to limited participation in tourism. Therefore, this case study explores the implications of tourism development for Indigenous peoples, analysing the state’s economic intervention in favour of the Bangalee people, who are an ethnically dominant group in Bangladesh. Moreover, this case study raises questions about how the ‘development’ is taking place and identifies the practice of ‘development’ in an Indigenous setting and how the Indigenous peoples are situated in this capitalistic venture in a post-conflict setting. The case study is based on empirical findings collected through an ethnographic study as part of a PhD. The study followed ethical guidelines approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Committee in 2017.

Background

Tourism is a growing business all over the world, generating multiple opportunities and benefits for the state and the different people involved in this process. Tourism is substantially connected to the physical environment, and economic aspects, where the environment, society, culture, and economy experience change due to the infrastructural development in the host community and capitalist modernised growth (Saarinen and Nepal, 2016). Bangladesh, being an emerging country in the tourism sector, holds the potential to enhance the development of tourist destinations with a focus on economic development due to its picturesque landscapes and diversified culture. Generally, domestic tourism still prevails in Bangladesh, with many visiting Chittagong Hill Tracts. Chittagong Hill Tracts is a region with mountains and green terrain where indigenous livelihood, culture, and nature create a complex nexus, mainly due to the history of conflict between Bangalee and Indigenous peoples (Rasul and Thapa, 2007). With the recent growth of tourism in a post-conflict Indigenous setting, it becomes important to understand the way tourism is taking place, who is mainly involved, and the impacts involved on the Indigenous peoples. This is the focus of this case study.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts region, resting in the south-east of Bangladesh, comprises three hill districts named Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban (Gain, 2000). This region shares the border with India and Myanmar, covering about 10% of the country's total land surface, where 11 Indigenous groups live. They are known as 'tribal' or 'small ethnic groups' people instead of Indigenous people in official documents of Bangladesh, which has contributed to the ignition of identity politics and the violation of the human rights of Indigenous people. In contrast, Indigenous people prefer to be identified as '*adivasi*' (Indigenous), '*pahari*' (hill people), and '*jumma*' (slash and burn farmer). This case study uses the term 'Indigenous people', as this is how the people generally prefer to be recognised. However, the state has not accepted the way the Indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts want to be known, preventing them from having an equal identity as the dominant ethnic Bangalee people, who represent 99% of the total population of Bangladesh (Gerharz, 2014; Chakma and Chakma, 2023). To protest the denial of identity and threat of possible annihilation, Manabendra Narayan Larma, an Indigenous political leader, formed a political platform named the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) in 1972. Aside from PCJSS, one armed wing was also developed, the *Shanti Bahini* (peace forces). From the 1980s on, there was a violent conflict between the military and peace forces, until the signing of the peace accord in 1997. However, the denial of fulfilling the promises of the peace accord still holds the Indigenous people in a situation where they cannot exercise their autonomy over their land or the development projects taking place in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Though a post-conflict zone, Chittagong Hill Tracts has become a popular tourist destination over the years due to its potential to showcase natural beauty, Indigenous peoples, and culture. The way tourism is developing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts reflects modernised development ideas, which mainly focus on economic profits through the commercialisation of nature. The development of tourism follows mass capitalist expansions, which shape the natural environment as a gateway for tourists from different cities through the commercial development of hotels and resorts. The intention behind modernised tourism is to 'develop' the region economically and introduce the Indigenous peoples to new ways of life and livelihoods. However, in this process of making tourism, Indigenous peoples are under the control of different powerful groups and remain marginalised in the decision making process, although they are mainly the host groups for tourists. Thus, this case study highlights how tourism is growing, who is mainly involved, and what the impacts of tourism are on Indigenous peoples and their environments.

This case study is built on the work of my PhD that employed an ethnographic research methodology to conduct fieldwork in Bandarban in 2017, with a short visit to Rangamati. The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Macquarie University Ethics Committee. As a Bangalee, the researcher entered the Indigenous community through Aunt Naly, who served as a gatekeeper. She is the founder of a local non-governmental organisation in Bandarban, and she assisted the researcher in locating a native research assistant and arranging lodging with a Marma Indigenous family. Over time, the researcher's frequent visits to the study locations and interactions with local Indigenous people helped her become familiar with the traditions and practices of many Indigenous populations. She took part in and observed the participants' daily lives. Individuals from different Indigenous communities helped her reach participants by using their networks.

'Development' Efforts and Growth of Tourism

Development involves planning and implementation following modernisation to progress economic growth, livelihoods, and the well-being of people. The modernisation theory of development is debated, yet it is a persistent form of development implicated mainly in promoting capitalistic ideas of growth. Due to the economic focus, it has never been denied. In the case of Chittagong Hill Tracts, the history of development and the economic focus dates back to the pre-independence era of Bangladesh, which started in the 1950s (Rosy, 2020).

From the 1950s on, Chittagong Hill Tracts experienced growth-based development projects and interventions for economic development by the then government. In 1951, Karnaphuli Paper Mills (KPM) was established in Chandaghona, Chittagong – an administrative area of Kaptai within Rangamati Hill District. This was a step towards development during the Pakistan era, before the independence of Bangladesh. Later, the construction of the Kaptai dam (1957–1962) was another development initiative to produce electricity for the country. Both projects had different impacts on people and the environment. The wastage from the paper mills polluted the river Karnaphuli, resulting in a reduction in fish production as well as the land fertility of surrounding areas. Similarly, 100,000 indigenous people were evicted from their ancestral land as the dam inundated about 40% of the total cultivable land of the Rangamati district (Parveen and Faisal, 2002). These people had to move to different places without receiving proper relocation or compensation for the loss of land and other assets. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the then President General Zia formed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB) in 1976 to initiate development programs on a large scale in terms of road construction, telecommunication, electrification, and moving hill people into 'cluster' villages. Through this

process, the government took control of the land and ‘developed’ it through their preferred ways of modernisation (Gain, 2013).

Similarly, the development of tourism started to come to the forefront after the signing of the peace accord in 1997 in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. All three districts under the Chittagong Hill Tracts have mountainous landscapes, reserve forests, rivers, waterfalls, and Indigenous peoples, rightly ‘fitted’ to grow tourism for commercial purposes. Hence, the Chittagong Hill Tracts’ growing tourism industry serves as an example of mass tourism, which is driven by technological advancements and corporate interests. Everything related to tourism has the potential to be commercialised, which has an adverse effect on people, culture, and natural areas. The major focus of tourism development is on infrastructural development through the construction of parks, hotels, resorts, and restaurants (Rosy, 2022). To take a break from mundane city life, tourists come to the Chittagong Hill Tracts to enjoy nature and visit some common tourist destinations such as *Chimbuk Hill*, *Golden Temple*, *Meghla*, *Nilgiri*, and *Nilachol*. While entrance to these locations was free a few years ago, visitors now have to pay to enter. These places went through renovations and have a new look now to accommodate more tourists with modern seating arrangements (Fig. 1), refreshments, parking facilities, and resorts to stay at night with prior permission from the authorities. Tourists also buy cultural commodities – such as shawls, mufflers, bags, blankets, and bed sheets – as souvenirs (Fig. 2). Indigenous women make these products using hand looms, which attract many Bangalee tourists as these products represent Indigenous culture and are unavailable in city areas. Overall, the expansions with modern amenities and culture have been helping to generate the attention of city-based tourists in Bangladesh for the last decade, making people more interested in exploring new places. As a result, the government or military expanded the areas gradually, allocating more lands to these destinations that used to be under Indigenous people’s control.

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Fig. 1. *Nilgiri* in Bandarban with a modern sitting arrangement. Source: Photograph taken by the author during the fieldwork.

Private investors have been building luxurious resorts following ethnic styles of housing with modern amenities. This allows the tourists to experience serene nature in a quiet place, alongside the hustle of crowded common tourist destinations, with a glimpse of Indigenous people, their crafts, and their lives. Due to the fact that roads pass through the communities where Indigenous people reside, tourists have the opportunity to witness Indigenous people doing their daily chores or in the *jum* field. The construction of roads and bridges contributed to the easy access to these destinations. Over the years, military and government involvement shaped the tourism industry in different ways, from giving the places a modern turn to creating complexities for the Indigenous people and environment.

The Actors Involved

There are two ways to understand if Indigenous people can participate in the development of tourism – (1) participation in decision making; and (2) direct participation in tourism. Power is a defining factor in understanding



Fig. 2. Ethnic crafts at *Shoilopropat* (waterfall) in Bandarban. Source: Photograph taken by the author during the fieldwork.

how the relationships between different actors provide access to both of these options. In the case of Chittagong Hill Tracts, the resources – physical, natural, and cultural – attract outsider actors to concentrate on making tourism. The main tourist destinations are developed by various actors – civil administration, military, and individuals. Moreover, government administrative offices organise the places and build small cottages or resorts applying their control over these things.

According to the participants of this research, among many actors, Indigenous people remain the least prioritised actors in this whole process due to their limited access to power, money, and other facilities. The participation of different actors – Indigenous people, government institutions, the military, politically powerful individuals, or business groups – in tourism development planning highlights their uneven roles. The government and military develop tourism plans without consulting with local Indigenous people. This was criticised by the people interviewed in Bandarban, particularly development and human rights workers, for not consulting Indigenous institutions or people before implementing development plans. While answering why the government institutions do not consult Indigenous people, one government employee mentioned that Indigenous people ‘are incapable of making decisions for their own development’, which is why they take care of the development needs of the people and their surroundings. However, this assumption has proven to be wrong. Back in 2016, when the Bangladesh government decided to acquire 699.98 acres of land in Khagrachhari district for developing tourism, the Indigenous communities started protesting against it (Barua and Dewan, 2016). They feared losing *jum* (slash and burn cultivation) land and horticultural land, destroying their only source of livelihood. With the protests coming from community members, Indigenous rights groups, and activists, the government had no choice but to withdraw the plan. Thinking that Indigenous people lack knowledge about their needs or cannot fathom the potential implications of tourism within their environment reflect unequal power dynamics existing between multiple actors.

The involvement of Indigenous people in tourism is quite limited, as they rarely own hotels or resorts. At best, they work as hotel staff and sell fruits and ethnic crafts at tourist places. Their participation in tourism is in the lower tier, with a lack of decision making rights, where profit hardly reaches. The powerful actors invest money and share the profits by making a chain of ‘development’. The participants of this research discussed the liaison between government administration, militaries, and private investors in order to grab land, exclude Indigenous people from broader development, and take control over their nature. One Bawm Indigenous participant from Bandarban informed –

The conflict regarding our land rights is still unsolved. Through tourism, our land can be taken away, and we can become evicted from our place. It happened in Nilgiri, where militaries grabbed the land, developed tourism, and restricted Mro Indigenous people’s mobility. Moreover, the central government controls the tourism department, although they are supposed to hand over the responsibilities to us. If we get the responsibilities, then we might get some profits out of tourism. As we are not involved, you can understand who is benefiting.

The quote indicates that among all the actors involved in tourism, the Indigenous people who are the hosts are the most deprived ones. When a place is developed as a tourist destination, the issues related to Indigenous people should be taken care of. In contrast, in the name of ‘development’, these aspects are overlooked.

The Impacts

Despite the government's justification, development initiatives have varying effects on Indigenous people and nature due to exploitation by powerful actors. Indigenous people live near tourist areas, and their livelihood depends on *jum* or shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation is the prime livelihood strategy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which is also a part of Indigenous culture, and is at risk of alteration and change. With the creation of eco-parks, sanctuaries, and resorts, the land they use for agricultural production is turning into a recreational area for others, which has an impact on livelihood patterns. These people have to look for other sources of income when the state, military or other powerful actors take their lands. Thus, many of them switched from shifting cultivation to horticultural gardening.

Furthermore, as capitalist modernist development grows as a means of attracting large numbers of tourists, land grabbing is discovered to be a significant issue that affects people's connection to places and dependency on the environment. The loss of resources and limited access to the environment (Rasul, 2007) are the results of development projects underpinning the violent power of powerful actors. Indigenous peoples have been displaced from their ancestral lands due to the expansion of development projects over the last few decades. In 2015, the Daily Star published an article about the threats faced by 100 Indigenous families in Bandarban by the Gazi Group, a well-known consortium of private companies that had obtained 700 acres of land illegally for rubber plantations with the help of the Union Parishad, a local government unit, and the Upazila sub-district administration. According to the Indigenous people, the Gazi Group had illegally taken over more than 2000 acres of land. In addition, in Bandarban, the last 6 of 42 Marma Indigenous families were recently forced to leave their lands as they were claimed by Jasim Uddin Mantu, chairman of Sylvan Wye Resort and Spa Ltd (Barua, 2018). The amount of land claimed was approximately 100 acres of *Jum* land, of which a portion was also shared with the Bandarban Superintendent of Police, who was a government employee. Due to strong administrative support and political backing for the planned five-star resort, Indigenous people were unable to resist eviction in this area. These evictions and displacements from their own places have impacts on people's lives and livelihoods. Shedding light on this issue, one Tripura development worker from the Rural Livelihoods and Climate Change Adaptation in the Himalayas (HIMALICA) project said, 'when *Jum* cultivation is restricted by grabbing acres of Indigenous peoples' lands, these people have to shift elsewhere to maintain their livelihoods'. Thus, these evictions, when done for the commercial or development purposes of tourism, create great challenges for Indigenous people by destroying their traditional livelihoods.

The government justifies development not only for the purpose of promoting economic growth but also in order to assert territorial control over the land, primarily in order to reap financial benefits. According to Roy (2002), in order to maintain control over or supervision of Indigenous people's land, powerful actors have constructed infrastructure to reach remote locations. As the military expanded their camps all over the region, more infrastructural development occurred so that they could visit any place. However, constructing roads and bridges facilitates outsider's access to remote places. The various actors can reach untouched forests, causing the destruction of natural resources. Thus, deforestation is an outcome of infrastructural development, which can cause landslides, water crises, and an unbalanced environment. The effects are complex, necessitating planning in order to grow tourism or other infrastructure in a way that protects Indigenous people and the environment.

Concluding Remarks

This case study focused on a post-conflict setting where not only militarisation still prevails, but also powerful actors have control over land, forests, and other resources, as well as Indigenous people. These actors focus on modernised development for commercial purposes in this post-conflict setting. The setting does not restrict tourists' entry into the region, except for foreigners who need approval from the government in advance. Unfortunately, the ongoing subtle conflict limits the participation of Indigenous people in the development of tourism. The government is building roads, dams, military camps, and tourist destinations by grabbing lands, destroying forest resources, and evicting them forcefully from their own places. The experience of Chittagong Hill Tracts reflects, as documented elsewhere, how the exploitation of resources for tourism involves dispossession, as documented in Guatemala (Devine, 2017), and in West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Peluso, 2008). Whatever is done in the name of development has further business interest and is a booster for the growth of tourism. However, only the powerful actors negotiate over development projects for self-interest, marginalising Indigenous people in the decision making process. Power reflects not only on the decision making process but also on the idea that Indigenous people are less capable of making decisions on their own. This way of thinking minimises their autonomy and involvement in the process of development, with the exception of low-paying jobs in hotels and the sale of fruits and crafts made by ethnic people. In contrast, Bangalee people control the main business chain.

In addition, impacts on the environment, loss of livelihood, and eviction from ancestral lands are taking place due to infrastructural development. Thus, under the current arrangement, there are greater risks associated with tourism for Indigenous people than benefits. As examined in other settings (Devine, 2013; Colucci and Mullett, 2016), this case study invokes a look at the complexities and internal politics that determine power dynamics in controlling tourism and initiating violence against Indigenous people. Therefore, in order to ensure that Indigenous people have equal participation and share in the benefits, this case study suggests understanding the history of conflict with a focus on valuing everyone's concerns, including those of Indigenous people, and the environment.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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