

## **Cultural assimilation and survival strategy of ethnic people in Bangladesh: Bangali dress on ethnic physique in Chittagong Hill Tracts**

### **ASSIMILATION CULTURELLE ET STRATÉGIE DE SURVIE POUR LES ÉTHNIES MINORITAIRES AU BANGLADESH : LE COSTUME BENGALI PORTÉ PAR LES MINORITÉS DANS LA RÉGION MONTAGNEUSE DE CHITTAGONG**

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**Abstract:** Ethnic communities in Bangladesh have been displacing from their traditional way of life since the British colonial period. Authoritarian policies of the State of Pakistan and Bangladesh victimized the indigenous minorities; therefore their existence is disappearing. As a result, ethnic people become passive and helpless in their own-nurtured land. They are increasingly outnumbering by the mainstream Bangali population in formerly ethnic inhabited zone Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) due to population movement policy of the state. Given the situation, the ethnic people have adapted few strategies for their survival in the disservice socio-economic structure. Bangali costume instead of tradition costume is one of the strategies adopted by the ethnic minority in CHT. The paper will focuses on how dress can be a visible signifier that symbolizes the cultural assimilation, and how dress can be a weapon of strategy for survival of minority against the majority.

**Key words:** Pahari; Bangali; Ethnicity; Military Forces; Peace Accord

**Résumé:** Depuis l'époque de la colonisation britannique, les communautés ethniques au Bangladesh se sont éloignées de leur mode de vie traditionnel. Les politiques autoritaires du Pakistan et du Bangladesh répriment les minorités indigènes et leur présence disparaît peu à peu. Le résultat est que ces peuples deviennent passifs et faibles dans leur propre région. Dans la région montagneuse de Chittagong, à côté du courant principal du Bengali, qui était une zone peuplée autrefois, leur nombre est en croissant soutenue à cause de la politique de déplacement démographique de l'Etat. La situation exige et les peuples ont donc adopté plusieurs stratégies de survie dans cette structure socio-économique défavorable. Le costume bengal à la place de

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costume traditionnel est l'une des stratégies adoptées par les ethnies minoritaires dans cette région. L'article va centrer sur comment le costume peut être un signe visible qui symbolise l'assimilation culturelle et comment il peut devenir un outil de stratégie de survie pour les minorités face à la majorité.

**Mots-Clés:** Pahari; Bengali; Ethnicité; forces militaires; l'Accord de paix

## INTRODUCTION

Chittagong Hill Tracts (also known as CHT) is the only hilly region of Bangladesh which is not only hard to access from the plain-lands of Bangladesh, it differs significantly from the socio-economy and mainstream culture of Bangladesh. The total population of the area is about 1.5 million which is around 1% of the total population of Bangladesh. The region is a mixed populated zone, the origin of the indigenous ethnic people of CHT is India, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh; the origin country of major ethnic groups was either in India or Thailand or Myanmar, and the new immigrants of the CHT—the settler Bangali had moved to CHT from plain districts of Bangladesh. The Chittagong Hill Tracts is traditionally home to twelve different ethnic groups dominated by the Mongoloid population, such as, Chakma, Marma, Tripura, and Rakhaine; and the major religion is Buddhism, some ethnic people are Hindus and some are animist. Presently new immigrants Bangalis (mixed race) become the majority (about 53 percent) in CHT, and are Muslims by religion. The background of the settler Bangalis was unlikely to CHT, most of the settlers was poor, homeless, landless, and day laborers; some of them were alleged criminal. Poor Bangali people whose home and land was swallowed by river erosion and other stormy had migrated in CHT under a government scheme during 1979-1984 that not only changed the demography of CHT, furthermore almost all economic and administrative power was grabbed by the settler Bangali with the support from the law enforcing agencies (mainly, military forces). Eventually, hill economy, and their distinct culture have been destructed and displaced, many of which are no more visible. As a result, the ethnic identity turned into endangered. However, the paper will focus on Bangali dress- a visible signifier in CHT that not only symbolize the cultural assimilation in CHT, it also been adopted by the ethnic people as a survival strategy.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF CHT

Before it was occupied by the British in 1860, it was an independent region bordering Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. Naming the independent mountainous region as CHT, British administration incorporated it with Chittagong/Bengal region in 1860. Culturally, physiologically and religiously it possess more connection with the nearby part of India and Burma rather than Bangladesh. Accordingly the ethnic people of CHT intended to become a part of un-Islamic country India (and/or Burma) rather than the then (Islamic Republic of) Pakistan in 1947 when British ruler partitioned India into India and Pakistan based on two-nation theory (religion based). Against the majorities will CHT was annexed with Pakistan (Bangladesh was east part of Pakistan till 1971), Pakistan took seriously the unwillingness of ethnic people to be a part of Pakistan and desire to be part of India and had adopted hostile attitude toward the indigenous hill people of the CHT. Since 1947 these non-Muslim indigenous was treated as pro-Indian and 'uncivilized'.

Since the British rule in this area (from 1860-todate), there had been many changes in the traditional life-ways of the Pahari people (the ethnic people who live in the hills of CHT); i.e., economy, social values and culture. From the independence of Bangladesh (1971-) there have been massive encroachments of the migrants from the plain districts of Bangladesh to the CHT either by the government's encouragement or by assistance, who consequently came into conflict with the ethnic people and caused a great sufferings not only in the livelihoods but also their distinct cultures. The

Paharis had been reacting to the influx of the Bangali settlers by armed resistance. The Bangladesh government responded to the resistance by means of military operation (in the name of counter-insurgency [*operation dabanol*]). However, after about two decades of bloody violence in CHT a Peace Accord was signed by the GOB and representative of Pahari people on 02 December 1997. The accord was warmly welcomed throughout the world and the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh received the UNESCO Peace Prize (1998) for the accord, but there is no significant change in the life of Pahari people in CHT (even after 11 years).

## LOCAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CRISIS IN CHT

Local Pahari people who differ significantly from the Bangali people in terms of their appearance, language, religion and socio-cultural organization identify some causes behind the crisis in CHT. According to the ethnic people, because of the construction of hydro-electric dam (Kaptai dam), demographic change and army intervention in everyday life, ethnic people have been suffering a lot. They not only displaced from their own homeland, Jum land, and administration, they also displaced from their traditional way of life and culture.

**Hydro-electric project (Kaptai dam):** In 1960 Pakistan government constructed a dam in Rangamati that not only displaced the Paharis from their subsistence but also hindered their self-determinism and faced them into the identity crisis. At least 40,000 Paharis had to take refuge life in India where they had been neither Indian nor Bangladeshi. The Kaptai dam submerged 40 percent of their best cultivable land. In short, Kaptai dam smashed their backbone of economy, political institution and culture.

**Scapegoating and Independence of Bangladesh:** Since Pakistan did not support the ethnic culture, they were happy to have an independent country- Bangladesh. Many Paharis had joined the freedom fighters of Bangladesh to fight against Pakistan for Bangladesh in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, they thought they would enjoy their rights in Bangladesh and. Although few of Paharis including King of Chakma had to support Pakistan during the war, most ethnic people desired for the independence of Bangladesh. But, the ethnic people had been treated as collaborator of Pakistan and many ethnic houses were looted and ethnic people were killed during the liberation war and post-war. Therefore, the Paharis neither got Pakistani favor nor the Bangladeshi kindness. Because, they are neither Muslims nor human; all government treat us as 'animal of the zoo', one local (55) said.

**Insurgency and counter-insurgency:** However, after the independence of Bangladesh, Pahari leaders submitted memorandum to the first prime minister of independent Bangladesh in 1972 but their appeal for regional autonomy and constitutional recognition was rejected rather they were called to become Bangali which was totally unacceptable to them and that unexpected proposal had disappointed the whole Pahari community as a whole. After the assassination of the First Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1975 by the military forces the overall situation of Bangladesh became restless; people's security and rights were controlled by the military. Being hopeless and distressed, *Shanti Bahini* (armed wing of Jana Samhati Samity [JSS] who have been working to establish the indigenous peoples' rights in Bangladesh) had started armed resistance in CHT against settler Bangalis and law enforcing agencies in CHT to establish the rights of ethnic people in Bangladesh since 1976. Terming this movement as 'insurgency' the government of Bangladesh had deployed huge number of military forces to control the conflict situation in CHT in the name of 'counter-insurgency'.

**Population movement:** Military government of Bangladesh planned to balance the population in CHT so that the government can easily control the Paharis. From 1979 to 1984, at least 0.4 million Bangali people were migrated into CHT from plain districts of Bangladesh who were mostly poor and

Muslim by religion. These new immigrants Bangali people took the overall control of CHT with the support of law enforcing agencies. The Paharis had been reacting to the influx of the Bangali settlers by armed resistance. The government of Bangladesh termed this movement insurgency, had deployed huge number of military forces to control the conflict situation in CHT in the name of counter-insurgency. However, the situation then went into worst forms violence, the situation was totally uncontrollable. Many Bangali, Pahari and Military people were killed in armed conflict during 1979-1997.

***Un-implementation of the Peace Accord:*** The landmark 1997 Peace Accord that ended the twenty year insurgency led by the *Shanti Bahini* (armed wing of JSS) and counter insurgency led by the military forces and Bangali settlers already entered its 12 year with few signs of implementation. Vital clauses that have remained unimplemented by the last two political governments, and remained in a stage of stagnation present time. Land Commission, withdrawal of all “temporary camps” of Army, BDR, APBn (Armed Police Battalion), and handing over of full control of local civil and police administration to three hill district councils are major unimplemented clauses. Although the peace accord received worldwide acceptance and recognition; and the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh was awarded Peace Prize from UNESCO in 1998 for the peace accord, it itself did not bring any significant change for the local people of CHT. According to the local, pre-accord and post-accord situation has no significant distinction to them.

## **PRESENT SITUATION IN CHT**

Pahari people have lost their home land, their Jum land, and their livelihoods and resources. Pahari ethnic culture, religion and free movement of both sex become limited due to Bangali passage and dominancy. Bangali people perceive that, the outsiders (Paharis) are consuming the resources of Bangladesh who are non-Muslims, ‘ferocious’, and ‘*upajati*’ (sub-nation). On the other hand, Pahari people think that Bangali people are destroying the resources what they have had nurtured for many years and their livelihoods as well. Presently, the Bangali are the majority in CHT (more than 53%); political and economic activities are controlled by the Bangali people.

Although there exist all kinds of law enforcing agencies and civil and hill administration military forces practice the supreme power in CHT. Local people don’t enjoy any significant impact of peace accord in CHT. Except few religious activities Pahari people hardly celebrate their traditional and cultural programs. Pahari culture is assimilating into the majority culture and Pahari ethnic culture, religion and free movement become limited due to Bangali movement in and around ethnic locale. Bangali interference becomes intolerable to the Pahari people in their traditional way of life. Besides the political and economic problems what have not been taken into consideration yet by many researchers is that of cultural aspects, which is the fundamental of self-determinism and self-esteem of a nation. In short, it can be said that even after 11 years of signing of the historical peace accord, CHT is neither a peaceful nor a secured place to its natives, and ethnic people still feel alienated in their own-nurtured land.

*Given the present scenario, the life of ethnic people living in CHT becomes difficult. They not only cannot lead their life in their traditional ways, they already have given up many of their customs and costumes. Since they are out numbering in their own land, they adopt some survival strategies so that they can curtail their visibility before Bangali people in public places. Dress is one of the strategies of survival adopted by the ethnic people (mostly by the educated segment of ethnic people in urban areas. The following section will find answer how a dress can be a strategy for survival in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.*

## **BANGALI PERCEPTION OF PAHARI BODY AND SEXUALITY**

While representing the ethnic people of CHT, outsiders (both Western and Bangali) have consistently stressed nakedness (superiority-inferiority complex). Nakedness carried connotations of primitiveness, indecency and sexual titillation. The naked bodies become an object of scientific study in CHT by Westerners and Bangalis (see for details, Schendel 2000). Bangali and other outsiders observed Pahari customs, as 'sexual behavior' and morality of 'uncivilized' backward people. Pahari people often projected onto the hill people an 'unrestrained sexuality' by the outsiders.

Since 1960 whenever a high official visits hill tracts they 'needed' a woman, still the sexual exploitation of hill women continued. Kauffmann lamented that the Pakistan government would not 'tolerate that there are citizens in its territory whom outsiders could call 'primitives' or even 'savages' (Feb 04, 1956; see for details, Schendel 2000). Abducted ethnic women leader briefly described the situation: "On the one hand, the woman faces the steam roller of rape, torture, sexual harassment, humiliation and conditions of helplessness inflicted by the military and Bengalis, on the other hand she faces the curse of social and sexual discrimination and a restricted lifestyle" (see also, Guhathakurata 2004). Since the abducted organizing secretary of the Hill Women's Federation (HWF) Kalpana Chakma (23) was outspoken about the torture and sexual abuses committed by the law enforcing agencies in CHT she was abducted on 12 June 1996 prior to 7th parliamentary election from her home of New Lalyaghona village of Baghaichari upazila under Rangamati district. Her whereabouts still remained unknown even after 12 years the abduction.

Before the Bangali settlement in CHT, rape, sexual assault, or ragging was almost unknown in CHT, what is frequent in the plain districts of Bangladesh. After the establishment of Bangali settlement in CHT, ethnic people not only lost their economy and livelihoods, they also lost the harmony in interpersonal relationship. They were needy but they were happy too. But over the years Bangali interference becomes intolerable to them in their traditional social structure. Since the British period, while visiting the natural beauty of CHT, most officer or civilian desired to have sex with ethnic women. To them ethnic women is a romantic sexual entity for the mainstream people. Not only the visitors' desire of having sex with the ethnic women, the settler Bangali and law enforcing agents forcibly raped many helpless ethnic girls/women either in their home or in an isolated jungle or crops land. While a girl/woman works lonely around their locality, for example, collecting woods from the jungle or bathing in the river, or going/returning from the school/ bazaar she could not manage to escape her if any law enforcing agent or settler Bangali attempt to rape her or sexually assault. There are few ethnic families whose relative(s) were neither raped nor sexually harassed.

## **THE CHANGING PATTERN OF DRESS OF PAHARI WOMEN**

Bangali settlement not only changes the demography of CHT, the increasingly outnumbering ethnic people have adapted few strategies to survive in their own-nurtured land. Changing pattern of dress wearing by the ethnic people symbolize the cultural violence in CHT. To understand the cultural aspects of dress relating to cultural violence I am focusing on women's costumes as the survival strategy against cultural assimilation and violence. Although dress of both male and female signifies the same meaning, I am focusing on females costumes since it is more visible than male's dress. Male person have already given up their traditional clothes for western-style shirts and trousers. Still the ethnic women maintain their traditional dress at home and remote areas. They preserve their traditional designs to help future generations pick up designs from it.

Regarding sexuality and sexual harassment women become the most victims and subject too. Furthermore, since the beginning of human society women are the most valuable and invaluable issue because of not only their reproductive ability but also their role in economy and society. Accordingly, the principle questions of the present paper are as follows:

- How dress can act as a weapon of majority against minority?
- How dress can be a weapon of strategy for survival of minority against the majority?
- How the dress not only covers the body, it also represents the hidden transcript of the minority society?

**Bangali Dress:** In plain districts, Bangali women usually wear salwar-kameez or sari which is different from the Pahari dress. Salwar-kameez and sari both covers almost all parts of the body. Recently borkha (Purdah) is prominent in Bangladesh which covers the whole female body except two eyes; in some case, two eyes are also covered by black sunglasses. However, Bangali people used to see women in covered dresses which is prescribed and admitted by the law of Islam.

**Pahari dress:** There are twelve ethnic groups in CHT. Each community has their own costume. The costume of Chakma man is plain. They usually wear a long loincloth. The Marma man wear lungi made of coarse cloth and a shirt. Chakma woman cover the lower part of their body with a piece of loincloth or lungi with unstitched end. It is also called pinon (skirt) wrapped around the lower part of the body and extending from waist to ankle. Its traditional color is black or blue, with a red border at top and bottom. One end of the pinon has designs and is called chabuki. While wearing the pinon, chabuki is always placed on the left. The second piece of cloth is a breast-band, woven with colored designs, that is tightly wrapped around the upper body. This is worn with a variety of necklaces, bracelets, anklets, rings, and other ornaments. The upper part of the dress is called khadi. There are two types of khadi - ranga (colourful) and chibiktana (plain). The ranga khadi is made up of various colourful designs and is usually worn by young girls. The chibiktana khadi is for common use and has no designs. These days Chakma women also wear blouses along with pinon and khadi. Chakma women are skilled weavers and can make their own cloth.

The main dress of Marma women is called thami, which is like a lungi with an unstitched end with half-sleeve blouse in the upper part of the body. The thami is full of colourful traditional designs. Tripura women wear risa at the chest, which is an unstitched piece of cloth. It displays a variety of designs of birds, butterflies, flowers and leaves. They often use tatting with tiny beads at both ends. Elderly women wear a white cloth as turban. Tanchangya women wear five kinds of dresses: pinon, khadi, junnasilum, fa-dhari and khobong. Their pinons have no borders but have colourful designs on red ground. Their pinons have broad black borders but with a short width. The khadi worn by Tangchangya women at their chest is similar to the khadi of Chakmas. Mro women wear only wanglai. They wrap it around their waists. It is made of a black piece of cloth with colourful embroidery on one side. Mro women do not wear anything at their chest. Mro women use tapung made of coarse cloth woven in their own looms to carry their babies on their shoulders.

In CHT, settler Bangali people have been observed crazy when they saw any Pahari girl/women with their traditional dresses that do not fully cover their whole body. The Pahari girls/women can understand and get hurt by such indecent behavior (by Bangali) which is totally unprecedented in CHT and uneasy to them. When Pahari women goes to any office, bazaar, or school they become worried about the Bangali people. They cannot avoid but heard some bad comments which are intolerable to them. Sometimes the wicked men comment the girls/women that reach to their brothers or parents or relatives' ear which also turn into quarrel.

**Bangali dress on Pahari body:** Given the above mentioned disservice situation, Pahari women are seen to have adapted their traditional dress, consisting of pinon (skirt) and khadi (breast cloth) by adding from cover to decoration. Elite Pahari women educated in Bangla system occasionally choose their own

dress particularly for public appearances or when they lived outside the CHT. Covering the body could also be a protective measure to the minority Pahari women to avoid Bangali nuisances.

## REASON OF WEARING BANGALI DRESS

When a Pahari woman goes outside she always wishes if any bad Bangali man would not disturb/ see her. Since the Bangali presence is somewhat annoying to the Pahari people, especially Pahari women, hesitate to move wearing their traditional dresses before Bangali Muslims. If a visitor just looks at any office at the district level, if there are any female Pahari employees, he/she will see them with Bangali dress either sari or salwar-kameez. In other place rather than the CHT (i.e., Chittagong, Dhaka or any other cities) they suffer 'nakedness' if they wear Pahari dresses.

**Problems of Pahari dress:** If any Pahari women wear Pahari dress in a place where Bangalis are the majority, it implies that she is a typical Pahari (un-smart, ordinary) and easy to defeat or assault. Therefore, in the district headquarters of CHT, and other part of Bangladesh they almost have given up wearing their traditional dresses. They essentially wear their traditional dresses inside their home, and outside of their home they prefer Bangali dresses. In the Rangamati Bazaar, I saw mostly Bangali dresses; there are only some stores where Pahari dresses are available. Some of Pahari women even feel proud wearing Bangali dress in urban public places.

**Dress and identity in question:** Any people can easily identify them as Pahari by their traditional dress and then she is treated as 'upajati' ('tribe'/'sub-nation') which is insulting for them. Even in the university they don't feel easy with their own dresses. Only in the day of any occasion, some of them wear their traditional dresses if they have something to perform. Presently in Dhaka or Chittagong, from a far distance one cannot identify one Pahari woman because of her dresses (Bangali).

## BANGALI VERSUS TRADITIONAL DRESS

Pahari people enjoy and feel comfort with traditional dresses in public places; they don't feel easy if they wear their traditional dresses in outside. Just after coming back at home from office, school, or market they change the Bangali dress and wear traditional dress. All women family members wear their traditional dress inside home. So they really are not fond of Bangali dress, but they are bound to wear to escape them from troubles made by some Bangalis. The ethnic women feel comparatively free with Bangali dress in public places, because of Bangali dress's standing.

**Dress and symbolism:** Since Pahari people don't feel free with traditional dress in outside they wear Bangali dress as a dress-code. In fact, they use the Bangali dress symbolically as a sign-board for not being treated as 'upajati' and not cheated as well. However, it can be said that, because of outnumbering of Pahari people in their own land, they don't feel easy with their own dress which is made locally at home. That's why they wear Bangali dress in public places where Bangalis are the majority or dominant. If a Pahari woman wears a Bangali dress, it implies that she is educated and modern (not typical) and it is not so easy to cheat her.

**Preference or strategy:** If some of Pahari women heard that they look fine or looks-like Bangali they feel very pleased. Because, they don't want to be visible and thereby insulted by Bangali people wearing Pahari dresses. Now the question is, whether they really chose or prefer Bangali dress in public places rather than their traditional dresses. I talked to some Pahari people and went to some Pahari families, sometimes without letting them know; I observed that Pahari women essentially wear traditional dresses

**Strategy for survival:** They better like Bangali dress as a strategy so that their physical appearance would not be identically noticed and be irritated thereby by some of the Bangalis. Furthermore, if they wear Pahari dress in everywhere there is a chance to be cheated/ defeated in the shop, office, market, school/college, etc. Even educated/ modern Pahari girl/ woman cannot escape them from ragging or sexual harassment at times irrespective of their Bangali or Pahari costume.

## CONCLUSION

Dress or costume is not only cover the human body, it also overlays the mental structure of body. The picture of the deep structure of the body reflects through the costume. The degree of cultural aggression of the dominant culture in CHT can be possible to perceive through the dress. While the Pahari women essentially do not wear Bangali costumes inside their home, they wear in public places where Bangali are the majority that signifies the cultural conflict too.

Although Bangladesh is widely known as a homogeneous country, it is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country in South Asia. Although the majority of Bangladesh is Muslim, traditionally they bear a secularist mentality. Mutual misunderstanding, mistrust, envies and suspicion made the CHT a turbulent region which has had motivated also by the military forces. As we know, the historical peace accord recognized the CHT “as a region inhabited by Tribal people and also recognizes the need of preserving the characteristics of the region and development thereof”. Therefore, it should be first concern of the government how to protect the character of the region as mentioned in the historical peace accord so that like costume no other cultural trait or strategy need to be adopted by the Pahari people what they actually don’t carry in their mind, but they maintain to survive and to ease their movement which cannot be desirable in a civilized and democratic country like Bangladesh.

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