

SHORT NOTE

Ethnic tourism and livelihood opportunities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

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Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a region of Bangladesh, has become the center of discussion not only within the country but also internationally for various reasons: its rich natural diversity, the cultural diversity of its 12 ethnic communities, their movements and struggles, the history of 'insurgency-counterinsurgency', peace accords, and tourism based on natural resources, which make the region unique. Discussions about tourism in the region are also long-standing. However, this debate has two perspectives: some researchers believe that development of tourism will create employment opportunities for the local population, stimulate economic growth, and drive economic dynamism. On the other hand, another group sees tourism as a threat to nature, the local environment, and cultural heritage. Yet, the ethnographic research-based discussion in this article does not focus solely on the benefits or limitations of tourism. Instead, the paper explores how the local population adapts to the increasing tourism in the CHT. Another point worth mentioning at the outset is that identifying the 'local population' (Partha 2021) of the CHT has become increasingly complex in the current context.

Although the 'local population' of the CHT is often identified solely on the basis of ethnic characteristics, the relationship between tourism and the local population remains unclear. The local population is not only divided among 12 ethnic groups but also differs within each group in how they adapt to tourism due to factors like class, political affiliations, and gender differences. Additionally, a large number of Bengali settlers who arrived in the 1980s were administratively recognized as a local community here. Historically, since the colonial period, the Bengali population began settling in this region for business and administrative purposes. Many of these people are now involved in tourism. In recent decades, even 'non-locals' have invested in the tourism industry. Therefore, referring to tourism in the CHT as 'Hill Tourism' or 'Ethnic Tourism'—implying that it exclusively benefits the 'hill' communities—is a simplistic view that obscures the complex tourism reality in the region. It is essential to explore the interrelationships involved.

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