

**Understanding State in Margins:
Life in Peace and Conflict in South-eastern Bangladesh**

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Abstract

The research concerns dialectic relations between “state” and “margins” where state itself (re)produces the margins. Dominant historical works on the state tend to depict *state* as an organised and centralised political institution referring to the legacy of Western scholarship and European style of practice which have been critically analysed during the last three decades. Re-considering recent interest, merely in anthropology, in the study of the state, the research attempts to grasp the state in its local societal dynamics beneath the institutional framework. Particularly, it conceptualises *state* not as a single-governing entity but as a multi-layered configuration along at least two dimensions; zones of limited statehood depicted as “peripheries” and “local state” by which center governs locales. The research contextualises its arguments with the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT); a southeastern part of Bangladesh.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) borders three state territories of India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. It is the home to various indigenous people collectively known as Pahari. British colonial policy (1860-1947), post-colonial states’ attempts of building religiously (first Pakistan from 1947 to 1971) and culturally (then Bangladesh from 1971 to date) homogenous nation-state created a conflicting space of the Pahari vs. Bengalis and the CHT vs. state. Particularly after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the demand of separate ethnic identity of the Pahari was constitutionally denied. The Pahari then formed a regional organisation “United People’s party” or *Jana Samhati Samiti* (JSS) to launch democratic movement what was regarded by the state as separatist movement. The state fully militarised the CHT to control it which eventually resulted in violent conflicts. Since then, the CHT has been represented as a region of ethnic conflict and insurgency. The conflict was officially ended in December 1997 when the JSS and the state reached an agreement by signing a “peace-treaty”. The Accord was widely hailed at home and abroad but it could not bring about peace to the life of Pahari people since they still live in multifaceted conflicts.

Taking the CHT as a case of margin—as periphery and limited zone of central governance, spaces governed by “local state”, and the marginalised socio-political positioning of its people; the Pahari—the research examines roles, operations and representation of central state in various local manifestations that people everyday interact with. Given the conflicting and confrontational background, the research intends to understand *state* in the margins where people construct and imagine *state* amidst their everyday experience of life.