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Safeguarding linguistic and ethnic diversities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: A study on state policies and initiatives

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh have distinct mother tongues differentiating each of the eleven indigenous ethnic groups from one another with exclusive features and cultural traits. However, the increasing dominance of the Bengalis in the CHT appears to pose a substantial threat to the linguistic and cultural diversities of the indigenous peoples. The Constitution of Bangladesh and several national policy documents, on the other hand, explicitly mention the state's obligation to protect and promote indigenous languages and cultures. Therefore, this study aims to explore the initiatives, with a special focus on providing primary education in the mother tongue, that have been implemented by the state to provide safeguards to the native languages and discuss the probable consequences of practicing the Bangla language on indigenous languages and cultures. Twenty-one in-depth qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in this regard. This article illustrates how indigenous peoples struggle to maintain their indigeneity because of the ethnolinguistic and cultural hegemony of the Bengalis as well as deeply ingrained inequalities within the state mechanism.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples; identity; minority; language; Chittagong Hill Tracts

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh have been dealing with external domination, first by the Mughal and British empires and later by Pakistan and Bangladesh nation-states, since the seventeenth century (The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 1991, p. 10). The existence of the indigenous peoples was confronted with many threats in the past which finally resulted in ethnic conflicts with the ethnic majority of Bangladesh, i.e., Bengalis. As a consequence of the state policies implemented by the successive governments since its independence in 1971, the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous peoples has considerably been affected by the increasing number of Bengalis relocated in the CHT. To date, eleven indigenous ethnic groups live in the CHT known as Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchangya, Bawm, Pankhoa, Chak, Khyang, Khumi and Lushai. In total, there are 12 ethnic groups including the Bengalis living in the CHT (Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, 2019; Tancred, 2019, p. 5). According to the data by the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs (MoCHTA) (2019), the population of the CHT is 1,586,141 based on the 2011 Census, and 890,435 people (fifty-six percent) among them belong to the indigenous ethnic groups. However, this demographic representation was never the same before the independence of Bangladesh. According to Adnan (2004), the indigenous peoples constituted about ninety percent of the population in 1956. A striking demographic change took place after the independence of Bangladesh when the Bengalis started shifting in the CHT.

Consequently, indigenous peoples of the CHT are directly facing the gradual domination of the majority culture especially the use of the Bangla language in their regular life. Moreover, according to Article 3 of Part I of the Constitution of Bangladesh, Bangla is the state language of the country. It is also the medium of instruction in the public education system, which makes Bangla an obvious language for the indigenous people to learn as the only means to ascertain their position in the mainstream society and claim their rights given the fact that social and economic benefits are often associated with the official language(s) of a state (Dorian, 1999). However, the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the protection of indigenous languages and cultures through several articles within, despite no official recognition of 'indigenous' identity, it explicitly addresses the state to "protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" in Article 23A of Part II. The Constitution also ensures "equality of opportunity to all citizens" in Article 19 (1) of Part II and prohibits discrimination

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"against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" in Article 28 (1) of Part III.

Moreover, in November 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February to be celebrated as International Mother Language Day. It was an acknowledgement of the effort of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) in commemorating the historic event of the Language Movement of 1952 (United Nations, 2020). It also implies the responsibility of the state to safeguard linguistic diversities within the state boundary by creating opportunities for speakers of all languages. It is important to mention that three out of eleven indigenous languages in the CHT are classified as 'definitely endangered' (Bawm language) 'severely endangered' (Sak or Chak language) and 'vulnerable' (Kokborok or Tripura language) by the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (UNESCO, 2020). It leads to a very rational question; that is, does Bangladesh, a country that has a glorious history of language movement and sacrifices for establishing the rights of its people, fully safeguard the linguistic and ethnic diversities of the indigenous communities in CHT?

Besides, providing safeguards to indigenous languages through education in the mother tongue is a fundamental responsibility of the state. Indigenous children in the CHT are supposed to receive primary education in their mother tongue as

mentioned in Article 33 (b), Section 'Kha' of the CHT Peace Accord, 1997 (The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 2000, p. 62). Moreover, the National Education Policy 2010 highlighted specific policy recommendations on providing education in mother tongue and promoting indigenous languages and cultures. Some of the key recommendations addressed in this policy include:

- Promote and develop the languages and cultures of the indigenous and small ethnic groups.
- Facilitate learning in the mother languages of the indigenous peoples and small ethnic groups at the primary level of education.
- Measures will be taken to ensure the availability of teachers from ethnic groups and to prepare texts in their own languages so that ethnic children can learn their own indigenous languages. In these initiatives, especially in preparing textbooks, the inclusion of respective indigenous communities will be ensured.
- Special assistance will be provided to the marginalized indigenous children.
- Indigenous people and other communities who observe different religious faiths, other than the four major religions, will have opportunities to learn about their own religions and concerned values. (Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 3-22)

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Given the context highlighted above, some essential research questions came into being. They are (i) what specific initiatives have been implemented by the state to ensure the practice of the native languages of diverse indigenous ethnic groups in the CHT? (ii) what are the direct impacts of practicing Bangla on the linguistic and cultural diversities of the indigenous peoples? To find answers to these questions, this qualitative study examined the range of actions implemented by the state agencies toward protecting indigenous languages, and also the impact of majority culture and language on indigenous languages and cultures. This paper consists of five major parts. The first section presents the existing literature on relevant concepts and studies. The second part discusses the methods applied to collect data from the field. This is followed by the findings and discussion in separate sections. The final section presents the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the context of this study, it is important to clarify the relevant concepts that have been employed in the discussion. Therefore, concepts such as identity, ethnicity, indigenous peoples, multilingualism and multilingual education have been succinctly described in this section. Also, some relevant studies on language shift and challenges in education for indigenous peoples are presented to have a contextual understanding of the study.

Identity

Identity, like many other terms in social sciences, is a highly ambiguous one that scholars use to indicate a plethora of notions based on their perceived contexts and theoretical understandings. Academics often discuss different identities emanated from ethnic, national, religious, class and individual features and traits etc. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 6-8) classified five major approaches in which the scholars of social sciences and humanities have used the concept of identity: a) identities as non-instrumental processes of social and political actions; b) identities as collective experiences of sameness among group members; c) identities as essential and basic aspects of selfhood; d) identities as processual, interactive products of social and political actions; and e) identities as unstable, multiple, fluctuating and fragmented forms of the 'self.' They further argued that these five approaches to perceive identity can be divided into 'hard' and 'soft' conceptions of identity - where 'hard' uses of identity principally prioritize sameness among people over time while 'soft' uses of identity explicitly reject the notion of sameness by theorizing identities as fluid, multiple, flexible and open-ended. These multiple conflicting meanings of identity do not lead one to make a substantial conclusion about it. However, Heywood (2011, p. 183)

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proposed a relatively simplified definition of identity by describing it as a 'sense of selfhood' which is, to a certain degree, solid and persistent while this sense can be perceived individually, shared with a particular group of people or the whole humanity. Connecting language models with identity formation, Evans (2015, p. 15) argued that language plays a crucial role in developing different forms of identity ranging from a comparatively steady sense of selfhood to dynamic and evolving multiple self-concepts (identities).

Ethnicity

Following the traditional approach, Schermerhorn (1996, p. 17) defined ethnicity as a collective entity within a greater society that has actual or imagined common descent, a shared history, and distinct cultural traits (language, religion, nationality, kinship pattern etc.) that signify a certain group of people. However, Dorian (1999, p. 25) and Gill (2014, p. 23) argued that ethnicity is a socially constructed identity that is fluid. Therefore, people may voluntarily want to change their ethnic affiliation for particular motives or external factors that may force them to change their ethnic identity. On a similar note, Schaefer (2008, p. 457) claimed that defining ethnicity or ethnic groups based on 'shared' ancestry, culture or language and conceptualizing the term as a 'thing' or an 'entity' can misguide someone to develop a 'static' understanding. Ethnicity is rather the

result of dynamic and processual interactions between individuals. Eriksen (2010, p. 17) defined ethnicity as a product of social connection among a group of individuals who regard themselves as distinguishable from other groups of individuals whom they are conscious of. These distinct groups must have some sort of social relations to be considered as distinct ethnicities.

Explaining the link between languages and the maintenance of ethnic identity, Dorian (1999, p. 26) argued that social and economic opportunities are often tied to the official language(s) of a state that may influence the speakers of unofficial languages or ethnic minorities to reduce the differences between themselves and other ethnicities by learning and using the official language(s) in everyday life. In contrast, recurring political and/or economic domination by state mechanism may have an opposite effect creating consciousness amongst minority ethnic groups to defend their ethnic identities and languages.

Gill (2014, p. 24) identified three distinct perceptions in connecting the role of languages in the maintenance of ethnic identities in multi-ethnic societies. First, some advocates believe that protecting languages is an indispensable part of ethnic identity. Second, proponents of national unity argue that promoting minority languages and ethnicities in a multi-ethnic society may divide the nation. Third, some believe that language is

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not the only marker of ethnic identity, other cultural aspects can also endorse the exclusivity of an ethnic group.

Indigenous peoples

In the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (also known as C169), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) defined indigenous peoples based on the following criteria:

(a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;

(b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (International Labour Organisation, 2020)

The convention also stated that self-identification as indigenous should be regarded as a basic principle to ascertain the status of indigeneity (the quality of being indigenous) of a group. Jacob, Liu and Lee (2015, p. 40) mentioned that very few indigenous peoples constitute the majority population while most of the indigenous peoples are considered minorities in the contemporary nation-state systems.

Multilingualism and multilingual education

Maher (2017, p. 3) defined multilingualism as a societal condition where individuals of different language groups exchange information, ideas and thoughts with each other in more than one language besides the official language(s) of a nation-state. Competence in speaking different languages varies for individuals in such cases. Multilingualism has, in general, two aspects: societal and individual.

Multilingual education is a relatively new concept. The member countries of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a resolution in 1999 (30 C/Res. 12) and defined the concept of 'multilingual education' (MLE). Multilingual education stands for the use of three languages at the minimum as the medium of instruction in education: the mother tongue(s), a regional or national language and an international language (UNESCO 2020). Later, the concept has been updated as mother

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tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) where the mother tongue is primarily used as the medium of instruction in the classroom and, after developing a solid literacy foundation in the mother tongue, children eventually acquire proficiency in national and international languages as they progress in primary education (Wisby, 2015, p. 4). This ensures that certain components are essential for the sustainable success of MTB-MLE programs which include:

1) a guiding policy framework coordinated by the government and adhered to by all pre-primary and primary education providers (public and private);
2) a strategic plan based upon the policy framework;
3) ensuring that schools are places of safety;
4) ensuring that language learning is stigma free;
5) strong advocacy at all levels from the government, media, and other stakeholders; and
6) sustained funding for quality teachers, curriculum materials, and adequate school infrastructure for the delivery of education. (Jacob, 2016, p. 1)

Jacob (2016, pp. 1-2) further mentioned about four key areas crucial for optimal MTB-MLE delivery. They are: a) extensive support from government, families, communities and development partners; b) qualified teachers; c) needs-based and student-centered; and d) an outcomes-based curriculum.

Language shift among the Chakma people

Afreen (2013) discussed the phenomenon of language shift taking place among the Chakma people in the CHT. They are the largest among the eleven indigenous ethnic groups in the CHT, and the number of formally educated Chakma people is higher than any other indigenous ethnic group. Language shift takes place where the speakers are bilingual and live with different language-speaking people. Afreen (2013) showed that Chakma people are bilingual and they use Bangla in their daily life, as Bengali people constitute the majority of the population in the CHT. She also mentioned that the usage of the Bangla language as the medium of instruction in the education system also acted as a significant factor to prompt language shift among the Chakma-speaking people. However, she primarily focused on the experience of the Chakma people. Information and in-depth analysis about the rest of the ethnic groups could provide more insights into this phenomenon, which inspired the author to conduct the current study.

Challenges in education for ethnic minorities in Bangladesh

Kalam (2003, p. 16) found that, in the secondary education system, it was particularly difficult for ethnic minority students in Bangladesh to

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follow the instructions given in Bangla because they were not as competent as Bengali students in understanding and comprehending the Bangla language. It also affected the ethnic minority students' performance vis-à-vis their Bengali peers in several criteria including completion of education, dropout rate, class attendance and academic results in different examinations. However, the author selected ethnic minority students who were not residents of the CHT area, which is why the contexts of the CHT were not included in this paper.

Durnnian (2007, pp. 3-6) found that the dropout rate among the indigenous children in the CHT was significantly higher than the national rate and language played the most pivotal role in this case. In addition to highlighting the fact that indigenous children did not receive education in their mother tongue, he emphasized the design of the school curriculum and overall education system, which did not promote ethno-cultural diversities at any level. He further mentioned that most of the school teachers in the CHT were Bengalis while many schools did not even have any indigenous teachers at all. This created discrimination against indigenous students as schools failed to identify and cater to the educational needs of indigenous children.

METHODS

This study followed the case study method of qualitative research where semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, narratives, document review and informal conversations were employed as tools to collect the primary data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Adoption of the case study method was very helpful in this regard as it intended to investigate the state initiatives in safeguarding indigenous languages and how the use of the state language affects the indigenous languages and cultures through in-depth explorations of the perceptions constructed by the peoples residing in the CHT.

Altogether, twenty-one in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the three hill districts: Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban, where research participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds including government officials, teachers, students, NGO workers, indigenous language experts, journalists, political activists etc., and their ages ranging from 20 to 65 years with 80% identified as indigenous peoples and 20% identified as Bengali ethnicity. Two local indigenous inhabitants worked as research assistants in two phases who helped to identify the willing research participants from the three hill districts, which ensured representation of all the ethnic groups in the research process. All the interviews were conducted in the Bangla language as

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indigenous peoples live in multilingual societies where most of them have to use Bangla for communication, education, business and other purposes. In some cases, questions were explained by research assistants in the respective indigenous language and then the participants replied in Bangla.

Participants were informed that the data collected from this study would only be used for academic purposes. The research objectives and procedures were thoroughly explained in both verbal and written forms to ensure the informed consent of the participants. The author briefed them about the application of recording devices and asked for permission every time before recording the interviews or group discussions. In addition to that, notes were taken by the author and research assistants during the interviews and the discussions. Secondary data were collected from a systematic review of published literature, such as, academic books, journal articles, NGO reports, newspaper articles and editorials, government documents and electronic resources.

Severe mistrust is a common phenomenon among the Bengalis and indigenous peoples in this region; hence conducting interviews and group discussions in such a condition was an extremely difficult undertaking for the author in some cases. Being a Bengali himself and an 'outsider' to the indigenous peoples, it was not an

easy task for the author to secure access in such a conflict-prone environment and ask questions that are very sensitive for both the Bengalis and indigenous peoples as ethnic conflicts often spark from trivial matters in this region. Personal relations and contacts were employed to gain access in this case. Furthermore, the presence of frequent military camps and other security forces makes the indigenous peoples uncomfortable talking about their experiences. The episodes of abduction, unlawful killing, arson, land grabbing and oppression by the Bengali settlers and security forces have become part of life for the indigenous peoples, which is why the discussion about linguistic and cultural domination could evoke past trauma of the participants. Therefore, to minimize the risk of harm, respondent confidentiality were maintained very rigorously throughout the study, and participants were thoroughly informed that they had the right to withdraw at any point of the interviews or discussions.

To maintain the rigor of the study, several strategies were implemented. First, after each interview or discussion, the author and research assistants participated in follow-up discussions and went through the interview notes to better understand the perspectives of the participants. Second, after finishing the fieldwork, all the audio recordings were transcribed by the author and then

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cross-checked with the field notes to confirm the accuracy of the information. Third, the interview transcripts, field notes and other materials were systematically organized, and after reading all the documents word by word, unnecessary data were cleaned up. Fourth, the remaining data were codified to generate similar patterns and interconnecting themes within them (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Next, those themes were interpreted and coherently presented in this paper. Expert consultations were sought at every stage of this process including developing interview and discussion guides, and the findings had also been discussed with fellow researchers for better analysis. In addition, a reflexive journal was always carried by the author to incorporate the reflections as a researcher during the entire process.

An ethical dilemma, faced throughout the study, was acknowledging the indigenous peoples as *Adibasi* (Bangla term for indigenous peoples) as the Constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Act, 2011 (Act XIV of 2011) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh officially classified the indigenous peoples as "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" in 2011. Although the indigenous peoples prefer to identify themselves as *Adibasi* or *Pahari* (hill peoples) to express their collective identity, the term *Adibasi* carries a political demand of ensuring indigenous rights that many Bengalis perceive as a threat toward building a hegemonic ethno-nationalist identity based on the Bengali nationalism. Government officials often deny the existence of 'indigenous peoples' in Bangladesh in various international forums and discussions (Jahan, 2015). However, the civil society, academics, researchers, media, local NGOs and international human rights organizations who are outspoken about indigenous rights often address the ethnic minorities of the CHT as *Adibasi*. In addition, ethnic minorities of Bangladesh have explicitly mentioned in various national and international forums in recent years that they prefer to be recognized as *Adibasi* instead of 'tribal' or 'small ethnic groups' (Ahmed, 2019; Rahman, 2011). The author also found the authenticity of this statement in the field study as participants often mentioned that the repudiation of the *Adibasi* or *Indigenous* identity causes social, economic and political marginalization of the ethnic minorities. Therefore, to eliminate any further complications, this paper addresses the ethnic minorities of the CHT as 'indigenous peoples' following the working definition of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) of the ILO.

FINDINGS

The status of written languages among the indigenous peoples

Even though all the indigenous ethnic

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groups have their distinct languages, not all of them have the written form or scripts of their vernaculars. It is evident from this study that seven out of eleven indigenous ethnic groups possess distinct scripts while others have not yet developed any writing systems of their spoken languages. For example, Chakma and Tanchangya people use the same alphabet, though their spoken languages are different while Marma and Chak people have unique alphabets of their languages. In 1985, Menlay, a religious preacher who started teaching a new religion named Krama, developed the script of Mro language which is now widely used to represent the spoken form of Mro language. On the other hand, Tripura and Bawm people developed their alphabets based on the Roman script. It is also noteworthy to mention that despite these languages having scripts, the indigenous peoples do not have traditions or functional institutions to practice their spoken languages in written forms. In most cases, only a tiny portion of the population with specific knowledge or interests practices the written forms of these languages.

On the contrary, Khumi people have been working on developing the alphabet of their language by collecting ancestral scripts from Myanmar. It was also mentioned by a participant that, in some cases, they use the Mro alphabet. Similarly, Lushai people consider themselves as part of Mizo ethnic group of Mizoram

(India) and occasionally use the Mizo alphabet to write their language. A limited number of Pankhoa people sometimes use the Roman script to write their spoken language. Khyang people are also envisaging developing the alphabet of their language. Small population size is a common feature of these ethnic groups that stands as the primary obstacle in developing the scripts of their spoken languages.

Opportunities for using native languages in everyday life

As Bengalis constitute the ethnic majority in the CHT, indigenous peoples are therefore indirectly forced to practice Bangla for communication, education, business and other purposes. Moreover, Bangla and English are used as official languages in Bangladesh. It is, therefore, significant for indigenous peoples to acquire the capacity to speak, read and write them. Also, different indigenous ethnic groups have been living here together in mixed language communities for a very long time. All these factors narrow down the opportunities to use native languages only at home and with people of the same ethnic group living nearby.

On the other hand, most of the indigenous peoples, who developed writing systems of their spoken languages, lack proper opportunities to learn and practice the written scripts. For example, the written Chakma language is only exercised by traditional 'Baidya' or 'Ojha' ('healers'

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who practice herbal medicine-based treatment) for archiving purposes. In parallel, only a few Marma people who received education in the Kyangs (Buddhist temples) in their childhood can read and write the Marma language:

> Can you read and write your spoken language?
> We had a tradition of learning the Marma language in the Kyangs (Buddhist temples), the monks used to teach us the Buddhist values and customs through books written in the Marma language; it was more like Maqtabs (mosque-based elementary education in Arabic). Sadly, that practice has lost its appeal as parents find no value in learning the Marma language that can be applied in real life. It can be said that the use of the Marma alphabet among Marma people is next to nothing nowadays.

A similar case is written Bawm language, which was first developed by the Christian missionaries about a century ago and taught in church schools, however, the situation had changed since many missionaries shut down their activities in Bawm-inhabited areas. There is also an exception; that is, around 60 percent of Mros in Bangladesh are literate in their language (Tripura, 2020). It became possible because the followers of the Krama religion are expected to learn

the written codes in Mro language, and also the Mro Language Committee set up around 150 community schools with donor support to teach Mro children acquiring this language.

Role of state agencies to safeguard indigenous languages

There are three 'Cultural Institutes for Ethnic Minorities' functioning in the CHT. The activities of cultural institutes in Rangamati and Khagrachari districts are predominantly limited in organizing short-term language training programs with a handful of participants, mostly on Chakma, Marma and Kokborok languages, and occasionally publishing a few numbers of books, journals and dictionaries. Limited funds and shortage of staff make it difficult for these institutes to conduct large-scale projects on indigenous languages, as mentioned by the officials of these institutes.

The Cultural Institute for Ethnic Minorities of Bandarban is more consistent than the other two institutes. This institute conducts regular language courses (two months in length) on Marma, Bawm, Mro and Tanchangya languages. One of the major successes that this institute accomplished in 2006 was publishing textbooks for first-graders in three different indigenous languages. The institute was also working on preparing textbooks for grade II, III, IV and V students in various indigenous

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languages which stopped because of the lack of funds.

The International Mother Language Institute, another state agency, is responsible for conducting regular research programs and protecting endangered languages from extinction. This institute was also expected to complete an ethnolinguistic survey and publish the reports by 2014, but it has published only one of the ten volumes by 2018 (International Mother Language Institute, 2018, p. 8).

State initiatives to ensure primary education in the mother tongue

The 1997 CHT Peace Accord established three Hill District Councils (HDCs) in three districts of the CHT region. Hill District Councils are mandated to deliver primary education in the mother tongue for indigenous children. The GoB is also accountable to ensure primary education in the mother tongue for indigenous children as recommended in the National Education Policy 2010. In 2012, the GoB decided to publish textbooks in different ethnic languages so that the indigenous students would have the opportunity to study entirely in their mother tongue from pre-primary to the second grade of primary education and then gradually study Bangla from third grade. To start with, five ethnic languages were selected, three from the CHT region – Chakma, Marma and Kokborok (the native language of Tripura people). Therefore, the Ministry of Primary and

Mass Education (MOPME), National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), and HDCs were responsible together to prepare and publish the textbooks within January 2014. However, these agencies failed to meet the deadline once in 2014 and again in 2015. After much delay, in 2017, the government started distributing textbooks in these languages. Interestingly, one participant mentioned that during the selection process the government agencies should have started working on the endangered languages first:

> It is like applying oil on an oily head! Some of these languages are relatively enriched than those which are already vulnerable. The speakers of the vulnerable languages are afraid of losing their languages soon. They should have been given priority by the government.

Although books in three languages have been published, this project has some major deficiencies. First, most of the indigenous teachers in the CHT can speak their native languages but they are unable to read or write them. Also, not all the teachers are recruited from indigenous ethnic groups, a substantial number of teachers come from the Bengali community. There are training programs for indigenous teachers that merely provide basic knowledge of the alphabet. The teachers who attended these programs do not find them helpful to develop an

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in-depth understanding of the written languages, let alone decipher the textbooks and prepare lessons for students. So far "only 38.60 percent of the 4,204 ethnic community teachers in the three hill districts have attended a 14-day training on their respective languages in the last three years" (Chiran, 2020). On the other hand, one participant mentioned that it is challenging and costly to recruit teachers for different indigenous languages:

> Why do you think it is difficult and costly?
> There are schools where students come from different ethnic backgrounds, for example, Chakma, Marma and Tripura ethnicities. Now, if the government wants to recruit teachers for such schools, then the cost will be huge as these schools need teachers for students of each language group. So I think it is a slow process and it will take some time to ensure education in the mother tongue for all indigenous children in the CHT.

It is relevant to mention here that the GoB has not implemented the MTB-MLE method in any government primary schools to date. Therefore, some research participants have severely criticized the current practice in government primary schools by identifying it as 'learning the mother tongue.' According to them, it was supposed to be 'education in mother tongue' or MTB-MLE for at least the first three grades of primary education. Additionally, teachers find it extremely difficult to conduct lessons in multi-ethnic classrooms and there is no precise guideline on how to conduct the teaching-learning process in mixed language schools. Therefore, the indigenous students are, indeed, experiencing difficulties in this puzzling education system.

Moreover, the national curriculum for primary education promotes Bangla language and Bengali culture that carry no relevance to the context of indigenous children:

> You mentioned difficulties you faced in school. Can you please give us some examples?
> When we were studying in primary schools, we could not understand most things because of the language barrier. Textbook contents were also unfamiliar to us. For example, there was a poem in the Bangla textbook that describes the Palmyra Palm tree, we could not recognize this at first because we have no such trees here in the hills. There was another article about jute fibre, also known as the golden fibre of Bangladesh, but we never saw anything like it here. One day our teacher, who was Bengali, brought a sample for us in the class, yet we had difficulty understanding why that was important for us!

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In most cases, indigenous children cannot comprehend the Bangla textbooks, yet they have to memorize everything to complete primary education. They may read and write Bangla after completion of primary education, but lack the necessary skills to comprehend the texts. Added to this, they have to learn English, which is another foreign language to them. Consequently, the indigenous children witness exceptionally limited use of their mother tongue in the learning process. It sometimes makes them indifferent to practicing their native languages, let alone learn to read and write them. Jacob, Liu and Lee (2015) also mentioned that emphasizing the national language may lead indigenous peoples to not develop a comprehensive understanding of the significance of being fluent in native languages.

Non-state initiatives

Many international and local NGOs have been active in the CHT region since the signing of the 1997 CHT Peace Accord, but very few of those have programs dedicated to ensuring education in the mother tongue. Two NGOs particularly, BRAC and Zabarang Kalyan Samiti (Zabarang Welfare Society) are actively working to develop textbooks and other educational materials based on indigenous languages and culture, although such initiatives are not wide-ranging. BRAC Non-Formal Primary Schools have been operational in the CHT since 2001 under the Education

for Ethnic Children (EEC) program. Its educational activities are conducted in two methods. The first one is known as 'Education through Mother Tongue' where basic instructions and explanations are given in mother tongue and then the subject matters are taught in Bangla. The second method is distinguished as MTB-MLE, first introduced in 2008, where students get the opportunity to read and write their mother tongue. The educational materials have also been developed by BRAC in relevance with the cultural and linguistic context of the indigenous children. Currently, BRAC is only working on Chakma and Marma languages and planning to develop such textbooks and materials for students of other native languages following the MTB-MLE method.

Zabarang Kalyan Samiti is a local NGO working to implement the MTB-MLE method in cooperation with Manusher Jonno Foundation and the Hill District Council, Khagrachari. This organization has developed textbooks and teacher guides in three indigenous languages (Chakma, Marma and Kokborok) based on the MTB-MLE method. It is currently conducting training programs for indigenous teachers and providing supplementary teachers in case of a shortage of teachers in more than 70 government primary schools. A few other NGOs also run similar teacher training programs in the CHT, but they cover only fragments of what needs to be done. It is also important

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to mention that NGOs need official permission from the Hill District Councils and other state agencies to initiate any education programs related to indigenous languages. Therefore, it is not a surprise that very few NGOs are working on this issue in the CHT.

Impacts of the Bangla language on indigenous languages and cultures

In most cases, indigenous children have to cope with Bengali teachers and classmates in the schools. In such an environment, they have to use the Bangla language more than their native languages. As a result, the degree of practicing Bangla is increasing fast that ultimately declines the frequency of practicing their native languages. Also, indigenous students who study at secondary, higher secondary and university levels identify no application of their native languages at any stage of their education. In higher education institutions, indigenous students become more interested in learning Bangla and English than their native languages. Education thus limits the opportunities for indigenous languages and cultures to survive, let alone facilitating to flourish.

Simultaneously, because of frequent communication with the Bengali people, Bangla words are directly affecting the indigenous languages, and, in many cases, replacing the traditional native words to express many daily life objects. The frequency of Bangla words used in regular conversations was also mentioned by a participant:

Indigenous peoples nowadays speak in the 'khichuri' language here.
What do you mean by the 'khichuri' language?
Khichuri is a dish where you mix many things together. If you notice properly, you will find that indigenous peoples use 40 percent Bangla words, 20 percent English words and 40 percent native words even when they have conversations with people from the same ethnic group. When we speak with people like you, we do not use our mother tongue at all.

Another fact is that, with the increasing use of the Bangla language among indigenous peoples, the Bengali people often classify most of the indigenous peoples either as members of Chakma or Marma ethnicities since they collectively constitute the majority among the indigenous peoples. It refers to a situation where distinct cultural differences among different ethnicities are declining in the absence of their native languages, and thus they are identified with those ethnic groups who possess a greater number of people. The United Nations (2020) also mentioned that the loss of a native language causes the disappearance of

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the "tangible and intangible heritage" of a group of people.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from this research that the initiatives implemented by the state are inadequate to provide safeguards to linguistic and cultural diversities of the indigenous peoples in the CHT. Moreover, the distinct ethnic identities of the indigenous peoples are now overshadowed by the growing population of Bengalis and the increasing use of the Bangla language in their everyday life. That is why the scope of practicing indigenous languages is narrowing down rapidly and indigenous peoples are therefore being forced to develop their literacy in Bangla. Thus, if this process continues, it may ultimately force some of the indigenous languages to be critically endangered soon with only a few remaining speakers with the possibility of going missing gradually as vernaculars even at the personal level. It may also cause 'language death', a situation in which the community of speakers of one language loses its last speaker by gradually shifting towards a second language (Crystal, 2014, p. 1).

Looking from a different perspective, it is intriguing that while the Constitution of Bangladesh and several national policy documents precisely mention the responsibility of the state to promote indigenous languages and cultures, there are some contradictions within the Constitution itself. For instance, the Constitution explicitly mentions that the people of Bangladesh should be known as 'Bangalees' as a nation in Article 6 (2) of Part I while identifying other ethnic groups and indigenous peoples as "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" in Article 23A of Part II. On one hand, these statements deny the existence of indigenous peoples and other ethnicities in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the state is categorizing the indigenous peoples as second-class citizens, depriving them of exercising their agency and thus denying "equality of opportunity to all citizens" as stated in the Constitution.

When indigenous peoples of a nation-state struggle to speak their languages, it indicates that the state is silently accomplishing an inherent ethno-nationalist scheme. The denial of indigenous identity in the Constitution of Bangladesh also indicates that the state is deliberately perpetuating discrimination and inequalities against the indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities of Bangladesh to establish a cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group. Jahan (2015, p. 8) discussed the "monolithic construction of nation" in Bangladesh where both language and religion played crucial roles in developing the dominant form of Bengali nationalism. She further argued that the construction of Bengali nationalism tended to negate the existence of cultural pluralism and followed an assimilationist approach

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to create a monolithic nationalist identity in Bangladesh. The history of ethnic conflicts between indigenous peoples and the Bengali people is also significant in this regard. Therefore, language is a tool that the state is employing both to deny the 'indigenous' identity and create a monolithic nation-state.

The education system of Bangladesh is also influencing the indigenous peoples to embrace the Bangla language and Bengali culture. Specifically, indigenous children are forced to learn the Bangla language and adopt Bengali culture at an early age that the state has been systematically endorsed in the education system. Contextualizing the textbooks for indigenous peoples has not yet been considered by the government. Jacob, Liu and Lee (2015, p. 47) showed that, in China, the national curriculum and textbooks disregard including histories, cultures and religious beliefs of ethnic minorities and promote the official doctrines by translating them into minority languages which are often demeaning to ethnic minority cultures. May and Aikman (2003) argued that the formal schooling system has often been used as a tool to assimilate indigenous peoples into a dominant national society by sacrificing indigenous identity, language, knowledge and cultural practices. Such ethno-nationalist schemes can be identified as linguistic imperialism. Robert Phillipson explained the idea of

linguistic imperialism using Johan Galtung's Structural Theory of Imperialism:

> Linguistic imperialism is a primary component of cultural imperialism though it must be remembered that cultural imperialism can also take non-linguistic forms…linguistic imperialism is also central to social imperialism, which relates to the transmission of the norms and behaviour of a model social structure, and these are embedded in language. (Phillipson, 2012, p. 53)

Furthermore, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is a key part of indigenous education that has been systematically ignored by state agencies. Though some of the NGOs are promoting this model, the scope of their work is limited to certain parts of the CHT. Heugh (2014) showed that the implementation of multilingual education in Ethiopia has been highly successful in increasing student achievement in regions where students received education in three languages (a local language, Amharic and English). Durnnian (2007, p.8) mentioned the positive outcome of MTB-MLE in India, Cambodia and Thailand which brought socio-cultural benefits in addition to increased student achievement. However, the GoB has not initiated any project yet to examine this model in the Bangladeshi context. Implementation of MTB-MLE

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in the government primary schools would provide the data on whether such a model is effective to safeguard indigenous languages in the CHT.

From another point of view, it can also be argued that language is not the only marker of ethnic identity. Even if the members of an ethnic group stop speaking their native language, it does not necessarily mean that they would entirely lose their sense of ethnic uniqueness as other cultural aspects may validate the exclusivity of an ethnic group. From this perspective, as a consequence of continuous interaction with the Bengali population, indigenous peoples in the CHT may lose some of their distinct ethnic features but gain new attributes. Thus, this process may trigger the creation of new, multiple identities in the future as mentioned by Eriksen (2010) and Evans (2015). Indigenous peoples may also develop a new understanding of 'selfhood' as they progress through the dynamics of changing social relations with the Bengali people.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that indigenous peoples in the CHT are being forced to be integrated into a national society that is based on the Bangla language and Bengali culture because of the ethnolinguistic domination of the Bengalis within the state. It is also clear that state agencies have been applying a dominant assimilationist

approach anyway, determined to create a mono-cultural national identity and impose a cultural hegemony over non-Bengali peoples. The continuous denial of 'indigenous' identity, delay in the full implementation of the 1997 Peace Accord along with other national policies and execution of hegemonic ethno-nationalist agenda through the education system - all these actions manifest the disinclination of the state in ensuring indigenous rights in the CHT.

Even though the GoB has published some books in three indigenous languages, it appears as politics of appeasement to make those ethnic groups content who possess greater populations among the indigenous ethnic groups, and there is still room for improvement. Interestingly, a politics of resistance has also been noted among indigenous ethnic groups against such policies. Some of the minority ethnic groups, who do not possess their own scripts, have been active to develop writing systems of their spoken languages and trying to establish their 'ethnic identity' despite the dominance of majority ethnic groups. Needless to say, it needs a collaborative effort from the government and indigenous peoples if these efforts are to be successful.

The study also reveals that identity formation among the indigenous peoples has a fluid character. First, they have a strong political stance regarding the *Adibasi* or *Pahari*

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identity, indigenous peoples in the CHT often use these terms as a form of collective identity to claim their rights which would be difficult for them as distinct ethnic groups. Second, there is a growing sense of ethnic identity formation among the groups that do not possess scripts of their vernaculars. The repeated attempts by some ethnic minorities to develop scripts of their spoken languages testify to their efforts to introduce themselves as unique ethnicities and claim their position within the state. Third, indigenous peoples also adhere to the 'Bangladeshi' identity as citizens of the state. Although indigenous peoples face dominance from the ethnic majority, they do not deny their citizenship to protest against such domination. An increasing understanding has been observed among the indigenous peoples that both the national and ethnic identities can be maintained simultaneously. Thus, indigenous peoples in the CHT are maintaining multiple identities rather than making a 'hard' decision about identity formation.

It is also evident from this study that the CHT is a security concern for the state; the abundance of military camps, the growing population of Bengali settlers and regular events of ethnic conflicts provide us with enough proof to support this claim. As a result, an atmosphere of mutual suspicion often clouds the issues of this region with conflicting facts and figures. Despite such marginalized

conditions, indigenous peoples spoke many times about the struggles in exercising their agency to change the *status quo*. Unfortunately, responses from the state are excessively time-consuming and often ineffective in terms of bringing positive outcomes for the indigenous peoples.

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