

**Resisting Displacement: The Mro Community Stands for Land
Justice against Corporate Intrusion in The Chittagong Hill Tracts of
Bangladesh**

By

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Abstract

Indigenous land dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh has been shaped by a long history of colonial governance, state-led development, settlement programs, militarization, and, more recently, tourism development. Focusing on the Mro community's resistance to the proposed Marriott hotel and resort on Chimbuk Hill, I examine how historical and contemporary experiences of displacement, land loss, unequal power relations, and political influences shape Indigenous resistance to development. Rather than treating the Marriott conflict as an isolated land dispute, I situate it within the Mro community's longer experiences of dispossession in the CHT.

Using a qualitative research approach, I draw on academic scholarship, historical and legal documents, human rights reports, media coverage, and Indigenous advocacy materials. My findings show that the conflict is about more than opposition to a luxury hotel; it reflects broader concerns about ancestral land, livelihood, cultural continuity, and meaningful participation in decisions about development. Mro protests and advocacy demonstrate how resistance has also become a way of asserting their relationship with the land and challenging unequal decision-making.

From this analysis, I develop the concepts of “normalization of loss” and “resistant continuity.” The first describes how repeated dispossession makes the threat of future land loss increasingly familiar, while the second explains how memories of those losses can strengthen collective resistance rather than produce acceptance. Together, these concepts show how the Mro struggle over Chimbuk Hill connects past experiences of dispossession with present demands for land rights, recognition, and greater control over their future.

Keywords: Mro, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Indigenous resistance, land dispossession, tourism development, Marriott resort.

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List of Abbreviations

AIPP	Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact
BELA	Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
BIPF	Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CHTRC	Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
FPIC	Free, Prior and Informed Consent
HDC	Hill District Council
HRFB	Human Rights Forum Bangladesh
IPs	Indigenous Peoples
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
MJF	Manusher Jonno Foundation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PCJSS	Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Mro Community Resistance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

When a road is built, a forest cleared, or a tourism resort planned, the question is not only what is being created, but also what may be lost. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southeastern Bangladesh, as elsewhere, development rarely arrives as a neutral promise of progress. It appears instead as a transformative force that reorganizes land, authority, and belonging. Roads that cut through forested slopes, tourism zones demarcated with administrative precision, and new infrastructure all reshape both the physical and political landscapes. Beneath these projects also lies a recurring tension: who defines development, and who bears and resists its effects?

Across the Chittagong Hill Tracts, development has historically functioned not merely as economic policy but as a mechanism of control over land.¹ From colonial forest regulation to post-independence state-building initiatives, interventions in the hills have consistently redefined Indigenous land as a resource awaiting “improvement.” As elsewhere, what is often described as modernization simultaneously restructures systems of governance, access, and control. Land becomes measurable, leasable, and administratively legible; communities become subjects of regulation rather than decision-makers.²

I begin this thesis by acknowledging that contemporary tourism-led development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts cannot and should not be explained and understood solely in contemporary economic terms. Instead, I examine it as part of a longer political history in which development operates as a language of authority and domination. The hills are not vacant or underutilized spaces, they are inhabited landscapes embedded with memory, customary law, and Indigenous sovereignty.³

¹ Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,”

² CHTC, “Life Is Not Ours: Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh,” 1991.

³ Raja Devasish Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, 21, no. 1 (2004). Here, I use the term “customary law” here to reflect the terminology commonly used in Bangladesh's legal and policy frameworks, although many scholars prefer “Indigenous law” to emphasize the full legal and normative systems of Indigenous communities.

In this research, I use the case of the Mro community's resistance to a proposed luxury five-star Marriott hotel and resort in Chimbuk Hill, Bandarban, as a contemporary lens through which these tensions and power dynamics become visible. While the specific events surrounding that project are discussed in later chapters, I situate here the Mro struggle within broader theoretical and historical debates.

While existing scholarship demonstrates how development, tourism, militarization, and administrative governance have contributed to Indigenous land dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, my thesis builds on these insights by asking how repeated experiences of dispossession shape resistance itself.⁴ I argue that these recurring experiences produce what I conceptualize as the "normalization of loss," through which displacement and land alienation become embedded in everyday expectations of development. Yet this normalization does not necessarily produce resignation. Instead, accumulated experiences of injustice are carried through collective memory, ecological grief, land-based identity, and political awareness, producing what I call "resistant continuity." I draw here on Cunsolo and Ellis's concept of ecological grief, which describes grief arising from experienced or anticipated losses to valued environments, species, and landscapes, as well as Markkula and colleagues' research with Sámi communities, which shows how ecological grief can be connected to threats to Indigenous livelihoods, land-based knowledge, cultural practices, and the transmission of these relationships across generations.⁵ Resistant continuity emerges in response to the normalization of loss, as accumulated experiences of injustice are transformed into collective memory, political awareness, and sustained action. Together, these concepts demonstrate that dispossession is not only a material loss of territory but also an emotional, political, and temporal process that shapes how Indigenous communities anticipate loss, preserve continuity, and sustain resistance across generations.

⁴ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*; Shapan Adnan, "Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation: Social and Historical Perspectives on the Ethnic Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," *Contemporary Perspectives* 1, no. 2 (2007): 1–28; Andreas Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement: The Darker Side of the Feel-Good Industry*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021),

⁵ Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss," *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 4 (2018): 275–81; Inkeri Markkula et al., "Climate Change, Cultural Continuity and Ecological Grief: Insights from the Sámi Homeland," *Ambio* 53, no. 8 (2024): 1203–17,

1.1.1 Research Context: Development as Political Project

The dominant discourse surrounding tourism expansion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) often presents development as a pathway to economic growth, national integration, and regional connectivity.⁶ Government initiatives and private investment proposals frequently portray the hills as areas with untapped economic potential that can be transformed through tourism, infrastructure, and commercial investment. Within this narrative, development is largely presented as beneficial and necessary, while local resistance is sometimes interpreted as opposition to progress.

The proposed construction of a Marriott hotel and resort in Chimbuk Hill must be understood within this broader political and historical context. Announced in 2020 and initiated by R&R Holdings Ltd., a subsidiary of the Sikder Group (Bangladeshi private business group), in collaboration with the Bangladesh Army welfare, the project has been promoted as a symbol of high-end tourism development and economic progress in the region.⁷ However, members of the Mro community and their supporters have expressed concerns that the project threatens ancestral land, ecological systems, and cultural continuity. Allegations that the project proceeded without obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) have also raised questions regarding compliance with legal frameworks such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 and the Hill District Council (which I discuss further in Chapter 2).⁸

Critical development scholars such as Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson argue that development should not be understood simply as economic progress but also as a political process that reshapes governance, land relations, and state authority.⁹ Scholars such as Raja Devasish Roy, who is the traditional Chakma Circle Chief, lawyer, and Indigenous rights activist; Michel Foucault; and Hana Shams Ahmed have further examined how development operates as a mechanism through which states govern both territory and population.¹⁰ For example, Michel Foucault's concept of *biopower* illustrates how modern forms of governance extend beyond direct coercion and instead

⁶ Hana S. Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, n.d.

⁷ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Slow Demise of the Region's Indigenous Peoples* (2012).

⁸ Staff Correspondent, "Marriott Hotel Construction in Bandarban against Laws," *The Daily Star*, November 17, 2020.

⁹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*. James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, 2011.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, with Internet Archive (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978), Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*; Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

regulate social life through policies, administrative practices, and institutional frameworks.¹¹ In the CHT, land dispossession has not occurred only through direct force or visible eviction. Scholars such as Shapan Adnan and Raja Devasish Roy demonstrate how Indigenous land rights have also been undermined through administrative procedures, settlement policies, legal restructuring, and state-led development initiatives.¹² Hana Shams Ahmed, a staff writer at *The Star*, the weekly magazine of Bangladesh's *The Daily Star*, demonstrates in her ethnographic research how tourism infrastructure in the CHT often develops alongside military presence and security administration, blurring the boundaries between economic development and territorial control.¹³

In this research, I approach the Marriott development not simply as an isolated infrastructure project but as part of a broader pattern in which development initiatives reshape land relations and political authority in Indigenous territories in Bangladesh.

By situating the Mro community's resistance within the wider historical context of land alienation, militarized tourism, and bureaucratic restructuring in the CHT, my study examines how Indigenous resistance emerges in response to these overlapping processes. While previous research has explored land rights, development, and Indigenous marginalization in the region,¹⁴ I take this case study as an opportunity to synthesize these perspectives and examine the broader implications of Mro resistance with a specific focus on the contemporary experiences of the Mro community in relation to corporate tourism development.

Understanding the Mro community's resistance to the Marriott project, therefore, provides an opportunity to analyze how historical patterns of dispossession, contemporary political power dynamics, and corporate development intersect to shape current Indigenous struggles for land justice in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In doing so, my thesis demonstrates that these recurring interventions produce what I come to describe as a "normalization of loss," in which repeated

¹¹ Michel Foucault et al., *The History of Sexuality*, 1st American ed, Social Theory, 2nd Edition (Pantheon Books, 1978).

¹² Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. / "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," n.d. By Shapan Adnan

¹³ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹⁴ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Khokaneswar Tripura et al., "Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism: Tourism Stories from the Chittagong Hill Tracts," . Adnan, "Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation."

experiences of displacement, exclusion, and land alienation become embedded in everyday expectations and experiences of development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

1.1.2 Research project: Objective, Question, Methodology

I use the Marriott project as a case study to situate the conflict within a longer history of state-led development interventions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including the construction of the Kaptai Dam, the expansion of Bengali settler programs, and the growth of tourism-driven land acquisition. By examining both the broader structural context of development and the grassroots resistance strategies mobilized by the Mro community, my thesis demonstrates how Indigenous communities negotiate, contest, and challenge development initiatives that threaten their land, livelihoods, and cultural continuity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Primary Question

How do historical and contemporary experiences of displacement, land loss, power dynamics, and political influences shape the Mro community's resistance strategies and outcomes against the Marriott development project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts?

To address this primary question, I first analyze the historical events that have shaped the Mro community's resistance strategies against displacement and land loss. In chapter two: Historical and Contemporary Context of the Mro Community and Land Displacement, I examine major historical interventions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including the construction of the Kaptai Dam, the expansion of Bengali settler programs, and tourism-related developments such as Sajek Valley and the Nilgiri Hill Resort. I analyze here how earlier experiences of displacement and land alienation have shaped the Mro community's perceptions of development and informed their contemporary responses to new development projects. I conceptualize the cumulative effect of these repeated interventions as a "normalization of loss," in which dispossession becomes embedded in Indigenous communities' everyday expectations and experiences of state-led development. This normalization is continually reworked through memory, ecological grief, attachment to ancestral land, and accumulated political awareness. These processes give rise to what I call as "resistant continuity," through which past and anticipated losses are transformed into resources for sustaining collective resistance. Together, these concepts form the central contribution of this thesis.

After situating contemporary Mro resistance in a historical context, in chapter three: Mro Community Resistance and Tourism-Led Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, I examine how resistance strategies emerge in response to unequal power relations, political pressure, and tourism-led development initiatives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Here, I analyze how the Mro community organizes and mobilizes resistance against the proposed Marriott development on Chimbuk Hill, exploring how local and national political actors, corporate interests, and military involvement influence the progression of development projects. Finally, I offer insight into how these factors, events, and circumstances shape the conditions under which Indigenous communities negotiate, contest, or challenge these interventions.

Building on the historical, political, and ideological processes that have shaped the Chittagong Hill Tracts since the colonial period, in chapter four: Findings and Discussion, I finally present my key findings on how tourism-led development reshapes power, governance, and everyday life in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Throughout this thesis, I examine how the language of development, administrative regulation, and militarized tourism influences Indigenous access to land, cultural continuity, and local decision-making. With this analysis, I explore how development initiatives transform social relations, environmental practices, and community autonomy in the hills, while also highlighting how the Mro community interprets and challenges these processes through collective resistance and land, identity, and self-determination claims.

Ultimately, my thesis argues that Mro resistance extends beyond opposition to a single development project and constitutes what I understand as ‘resistant continuity,’ through which collective memory, land-based identity, and claims to self-determination are preserved, renewed, and mobilized across generations despite ongoing pressures of displacement and exclusion.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative secondary analysis, a methodological approach that draws on previously conducted studies, existing datasets, archival materials, government documents, and published literature to address new research questions rather than collecting primary field data.¹⁵

¹⁵ Lorraine Andrews et al., *Classic Grounded Theory to Analyse Secondary Data*: n.d.; Melissa P. Johnston, *Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come*, n.d.

Through qualitative secondary analysis, researchers examine, reinterpret, and synthesize existing sources to generate new insights and understand social phenomena from a different analytical perspective.¹⁶ I synthesize historical documents, legal and policy frameworks, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997, and relevant constitutional amendments, alongside media reports, human rights documentation, and scholarly literature to examine how historical and contemporary processes of land dispossession have shaped the Mro community's resistance to tourism-driven development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Rather than relying on a single data source, my analysis critically examines how development narratives frame tourism and land use by triangulating across multiple types of evidence to identify structural patterns, particularly the recurring links between militarization, land dispossession, tourism development, and the exclusion of Indigenous voices from decision-making processes. Policy and legal documents are analyzed to assess the gap between formal recognition of Indigenous rights and their lack of practical implementation. Media and advocacy materials are examined not merely as reports but as representations of contested narratives.

Rather than treating each source separately, I compared and interpreted information across academic literature, government documents, human rights reports, media coverage, and Indigenous advocacy materials. By examining where these sources converged and diverged, I identified recurring themes related to land dispossession, tourism, state development, and Indigenous resistance. This comparative analysis helped me understand how the proposed Marriott project fits within the broader historical and political processes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

1.1.3 A Note on Indigenous Terminology

In my thesis, I use the term 'Indigenous Peoples' (IPs) to refer to communities that maintain distinct cultural, social, historical, and territorial relationships that differ from dominant populations within the state and who identify according to their own customs, traditions, and collective identities. This understanding follows the principles outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to determine their own identity and membership.¹⁷ While the terminology used to refer to these communities is subject to considerable debate, it is crucial to acknowledge their

¹⁶ Andrews et al., *Classic Grounded Theory to Analyze Secondary Data: Johnston, Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come*.

¹⁷ "UNDRIP-United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples-page 24

self-identity. The Constitution of Bangladesh, through the 15th Amendment in 2011, officially rejected the term "Indigenous" and instead classified these communities as “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities,” while referring to all citizens of Bangladesh as “Bangalee.”¹⁸ This amendment disregarded the principle of self-identification and has been seen as a denial of Indigenous peoples’ distinct identity and rights.¹⁹ In various statutes and governmental policy documents, terms such as “Indigenous,” “Aboriginal,” “Adivasi,” “ethnic minority,” “hillmen/hill people,” and “Upajati” (sub-nation/tribe/tribal) are commonly used.²⁰ A vocal group from these Indigenous Peoples supports the use of “Indigenous” in English and “Adivasi” in Bengali, rejecting terms like “Upajati” and “tribe” due to their implications of backwardness and primitiveness.²¹ Other terms that are widely accepted among Indigenous populations include “Jumma,” which reflects their common heritage of swidden cultivation, and “Pahari,” which translates to hill people, specifically referring to the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).²² Notably, prior to the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in 2022, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of Bangladesh issued an official notice directing all electronic media to avoid using the term “Indigenous.”²³ This action shows disrespect and goes against Indigenous Peoples’ right to freely identify who they are. This thesis respects the preferred terminology of the Indigenous peoples to honor their identity and rights.

1.2 Literature Review

Key Concepts, Theories, and Studies

The literature relevant to this research spans several interdisciplinary fields, including anthropology, political ecology, development studies, legal studies, and Indigenous studies. Scholars examining land governance, tourism expansion, and Indigenous rights recognize that

¹⁸ Human Rights Council, “Joint Submission on the Human Rights Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh,” n.d.

¹⁹ River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network “Bangladesh Adivasi Forum: Promoting Indigenous Peoples Rights in Bangladesh,” River Above Asia and Oceania Ecclesial Network, October 25, 2021.

²⁰ Raja Devasish Roy, People’s Republic of Bangladesh, n.d.

²¹ Roy, People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

²² Roy, People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

²³ David Nathaniel Berger et al., 2 IWGIA – The Indigenous World – 2023, n.d., 160.

development projects are rarely neutral economic initiatives.²⁴ Instead, they assert that they often function within broader political and institutional systems that reshape control over land, resources, and cultural identity.²⁵ This section situates my research within four key literatures: the historical foundations of land governance and colonial rule, global debates on development and dispossession, the relationship between tourism and militarization, and recent studies on Indigenous resistance and counter-narratives to dominant state-led development discourses.

1.2.1 Development, Dispossession, and Political Economy

While global studies on tourism show how development projects can contribute to displacement and dispossession, critical development scholars such as Arturo Escobar, James Ferguson, and David Harvey argue that these processes are not accidental outcomes of modernization but are often connected to broader systems of governance, territorial control, and economic restructuring.²⁶ Scholars in development studies and political ecology, including Andreas Neef and James Scott, therefore, caution against viewing development as a neutral strategy for economic growth.²⁷ Scott, in particular, argues that development initiatives often rely on centralized systems of planning and administration that simplify complex local realities into forms easier for the state to manage, frequently overlooking Indigenous and local understandings of land, the environment, and social life.²⁸ These debates are particularly relevant in Indigenous territories such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where tourism and infrastructure projects are frequently promoted as symbols of progress while also generating concerns over land dispossession and political exclusion.

One of the most influential critiques of development discourse is offered by Arturo Escobar, a Colombian anthropologist whose book *“Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World”* examines how development became a dominant framework for governing postcolonial societies. Drawing on development interventions in Latin America, particularly rural development projects in Colombia and other parts of the Third World, Escobar argues that

²⁴ James Ferguson, *Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1994), Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Andreas Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement: The Darker Side of the Feel-Good Industry*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021).

²⁵ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, n.d.; Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*; Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*; Tripura et al., “Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism.”

²⁶ Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*; Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.

²⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State : How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, with Internet Archive (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998), Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

²⁸ Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

development discourse constructs certain societies as “underdeveloped” and therefore in need of outside intervention.²⁹ According to Escobar, development institutions such as governments, international organizations, and development agencies play a central role in producing knowledge about poverty, modernization, and progress. This knowledge, in turn, legitimizes large-scale interventions aimed at transforming societies and landscapes in the name of improvement. His argument is useful in understanding how the hills of the CHT are often portrayed as economically “untapped” spaces waiting to be modernized through tourism and investment, while Indigenous relationships with land and territory receive far less attention. Similar critiques of development discourse have also been developed by post-development scholars such as Wolfgang Sachs and Gustavo Esteva. Sachs examines how development became a universal framework for organizing political and economic life in the Global South, while Esteva argues that development often marginalizes local knowledge systems and alternative ways of living through externally imposed models of modernization.³⁰

A related critique is developed by James Ferguson, an anthropologist known for his influential book *“The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho.”* Ferguson develops this argument through his study of internationally funded rural development projects in Lesotho, where initiatives framed as poverty reduction programs ultimately expanded bureaucratic state power while failing to address structural inequality.³¹ Ferguson states that development initiatives frequently function as an “anti-politics machine,” meaning they transform complex political and historical problems into technical-administrative issues. He argues that development projects often transform deeply political questions surrounding land, inequality, and authority into technical or administrative problems.³² This insight is particularly relevant in the CHT, where tourism projects are commonly discussed through the language of investment, connectivity, and regional development, while tensions surrounding Indigenous land rights and militarization remain largely sidelined. Related discussions appear in the work of Akhil Gupta, whose research on development bureaucracy in India examines how state

²⁹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

³⁰ Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, with Internet Archive (London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J. Zed Books, 1992).

³¹ Ferguson, *Anti-Politics Machine*.

³² Ferguson, *Anti-Politics Machine*.

institutions and administrative practices shape experiences of poverty, governance, and political marginalization in postcolonial contexts.³³

Another important contribution to this debate comes from David Harvey, a political economist, whose book *“The New Imperialism”* introduces the concept of “accumulation by dispossession.” Harvey connects this idea to broader global processes such as privatization, enclosure, and neoliberal restructuring, arguing that capitalist expansion frequently depends on converting collectively used land and resources into commercial assets.³⁴ His framework helps explain why tourism expansion in Indigenous territories often generates disputes over land ownership and territorial control.³⁵ Similar arguments have also influenced scholarship on land grabbing and territorial restructuring in Indigenous and rural regions across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Scholars such as Michael Levien and Saturnino Borrás Jr. examine how large-scale development and investment projects frequently transform collectively used land into commercially valuable assets, often generating displacement and conflicts over land rights.³⁶ In the CHT, places such as Sajek Valley, Nilgiri, and Chimbuk Hill increasingly reflect these dynamics as land associated with jhum cultivation, forest livelihoods, and community life becomes commercially valuable for tourism and infrastructure development. In this thesis, I use the concept of land grabbing to examine how tourism development can facilitate the transfer of control over Indigenous customary land to state, military, and commercial actors, particularly where affected communities lack meaningful participation or consent.

Political ecologists have further expanded these insights by examining how environmental narratives and sustainability discourses can also facilitate processes of land control. As discussed earlier, Andreas Neef’s book *“Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement: The Darker Side of the Feel-Good Industry”* demonstrates how tourism development often combines economic and environmental rhetoric to legitimize land acquisition. In many cases, projects marketed as eco-tourism or conservation initiatives are framed as environmentally responsible alternatives to

³³ Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, with Internet Archive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

³⁴ Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.

³⁵ Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.

³⁶ Saturnino M. Borrás et al., “Land Grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* “Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India,” *Social Forces* 98, no. 2 (2019): 1–3.

extractive industries.³⁷ However, Neef's research shows that such projects can simultaneously displace Indigenous communities and commercialize landscapes previously used for subsistence livelihoods. Related concerns are reflected in tourism and political ecology scholarship examining eco-tourism, conservation, and Indigenous displacement in other parts of the world. Scholars such as Rosaleen Duffy and Jim Igoe examine how conservation and tourism initiatives in Africa and other regions can reshape local access to land and resources while expanding external control over Indigenous territories.³⁸

Together, these scholars show that development should not be understood only as economic policy or infrastructure expansion. Development also operates as a form of governance that reshapes relationships between land, power, and political authority. These perspectives provide an important foundation for my thesis, which builds on these theoretical insights by examining how the proposed Marriott tourism development in Chimbuk Hill reflects broader processes through which development initiatives reshape Indigenous territories and generate new forms of contestation and resistance.

1.2.2 Colonial Governance, Land Alienation, and Settler Colonialism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Understanding contemporary land conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) requires examining the longer historical structures that shaped governance and land relations in the region. Scholars frequently identify the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 as a major turning point in this process.³⁹ Introduced during British colonial rule, the Regulation formally recognized the authority of traditional chiefs and Indigenous institutions while ultimately placing administrative power in the hands of the colonial state.⁴⁰ Although the system appeared to protect Indigenous governance, it also created a hierarchical structure in which customary authorities remained

³⁷ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

³⁸ Rosaleen Duffy, *Nature Crime: How We're Getting Conservation Wrong*, with Internet Archive (New Haven [Conn.] : Yale University Press, 2010), Jim Igoe, *Conservation and Globalization : A Study of the National Parks and Indigenous Communities from East Africa to South Dakota*, with Internet Archive (Belmont, CA, USA : Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004).

³⁹ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*; Adnan, "Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation."

⁴⁰ *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

subordinate to centralized state control.⁴¹ The legacy of this arrangement continues to influence land administration and political authority in the CHT today.⁴²

One of the most influential scholars examining this legal structure is Raja Devasish Roy, a Chakma Circle Chief and legal scholar and former member of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council. In his article “*Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*,” Roy examines the relationship between Indigenous customary legal systems and Bangladesh’s national legal framework.⁴³ Drawing on the legal and administrative history of the CHT, Roy argues that although the state formally recognizes customary laws, Indigenous institutions continue to operate within a structure where ultimate authority remains with state institutions.⁴⁴ His analysis shows that juridical pluralism in the CHT does not represent an equal coexistence of legal systems; rather, customary governance is recognized only within limits determined by the state.⁴⁵ This argument is particularly important for understanding why land disputes continue to emerge despite the formal recognition of Indigenous institutions and traditional leadership structures.

Questions of land alienation and demographic change are explored further by Shapan Adnan, a prominent scholar of political economy and rural development. In “*Migration, Land Alienation and Ethnic Conflict: Causes of Poverty in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*,” Adnan traces how state-sponsored Bengali migration programs gradually transformed the demographic and political landscape of the CHT.⁴⁶ His research demonstrates that land dispossession in the hills did not occur through isolated incidents alone but through long-term state policies involving settlement programs, administrative interventions, and development initiatives. The large-scale migration of Bengali settlers into the CHT during the late twentieth century significantly altered patterns of land ownership and political authority, particularly in areas historically inhabited by Indigenous communities.⁴⁷ A similarly detailed examination is provided by Shapan Adnan and Ranajit

⁴¹ “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

⁴² “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

⁴³ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.

⁴⁴ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.

⁴⁵ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

⁴⁶ Adnan, “Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation.”

⁴⁷ Adnan, “Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation.”

Dastidar in their influential study “*Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.” Drawing on extensive historical records and field-based research, they show how settlement schemes, leasing arrangements, and bureaucratic procedures enabled the transfer of Indigenous land while maintaining the appearance of legality.⁴⁸ This shift from overt coercion to administrative control reveals how dispossession can occur gradually through state institutions rather than solely through direct force.

To further understand the longer historical structures shaping land conflicts in the CHT, I would like to draw on insights from settler-colonial theory. This literature provides a useful framework for understanding how states reshape Indigenous territories through land policies, settlement programs, and development initiatives. Rather than viewing displacement as isolated events, settler colonial theory emphasizes the long-term structural processes through which Indigenous lands become incorporated into state-controlled systems. One of the most influential scholars in this field is Patrick Wolfe, whose seminal article “*Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*” provides a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of settler colonial expansion. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism should be understood not as a historical event but as an enduring structure that continually seeks to secure land for settlers by eliminating Indigenous sovereignty and control over territory.⁴⁹ According to Wolfe, the primary objective of settler colonial systems is not simply the exploitation of Indigenous labor but the acquisition of land itself. This process often unfolds through a variety of mechanisms, including settlement policies, administrative restructuring, and development projects that gradually transform Indigenous landscapes into spaces governed by state institutions and market economies.⁵⁰

Although settler colonial theory has most frequently been applied to contexts such as Australia, North America, and Palestine, scholars examining the political history of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have identified comparable dynamics of state-sponsored settlement and territorial restructuring in the region. For instance, Shapan Adnan demonstrates how government-supported migration programs facilitated the large-scale movement of Bengali settlers into Indigenous territories, gradually transforming patterns of land ownership and political authority in the hills.⁵¹

⁴⁸ ““Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,” n.d.

⁴⁹ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

⁵⁰ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.”

⁵¹ Adnan, “Migration, Discrimination and Land Alienation.”

Infrastructure projects, tourism expansion, and agricultural development have increasingly incorporated Indigenous territories into state-led development frameworks, particularly in places such as Sajek Valley, Nilgiri, and Chimbuk Hill. In this context, development projects cannot be understood solely as economic initiatives. They are also tied to longer processes of demographic transformation and state consolidation in Indigenous territories.

In this sense, contemporary land conflicts in the CHT cannot be separated from longer histories of colonial governance, settlement policies, and administrative control over Indigenous territories. My thesis builds on these discussions by examining how tourism development in Chimbuk Hill intersects with these historical processes and how the Mro community's resistance emerges within this broader trajectory of territorial transformation.

1.2.3 Tourism, Militarization, and Indigenous Land Rights

The relationship between tourism expansion and Indigenous land rights has become an important area of discussion within development studies, anthropology, political ecology, and human rights scholarship. Although tourism is frequently promoted as a sustainable pathway to economic growth, many scholars argue that tourism-led development can also contribute to land dispossession, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of Indigenous communities.⁵² Across the Global South, tourism projects have transformed Indigenous territories into commercial and recreational spaces while prioritizing state interests, private investment, and conservation agendas over local land rights and decision-making processes.⁵³

One important contribution to this discussion is Sabrina Tremblay-Huet's article, *"Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Peoples in the Light of the IACHR Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de la Cruz y sus miembros v. Honduras Case,"* which analyzes the experiences of the Garífuna people in Honduras. Tremblay-Huet examines how the Honduran government authorized tourism development projects on Garífuna ancestral lands

⁵² Sabrina Tremblay-Huet, "Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Communities in the Light of the Iachr Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de La Cruz y Sus Miembros v. Honduras Case," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 26, no. 2 (2019): 216–41; Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*; Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*; Renée V. Hagen and Tessa Minter, "Displacement in the Name of Development. How Indigenous Rights Legislation Fails to Protect Philippine Hunter-Gatherers," *Society & Natural Resources* 33, no. 1 (2020): 65–82.

⁵³ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*; Tremblay-Huet, "Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Communities in the Light of the Iachr Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de La Cruz y Sus Miembros v. Honduras Case."

without obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. The dispute eventually reached the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which ruled that the Honduran state had violated the collective land rights of the Garífuna community.⁵⁴ Tremblay-Huet argues that tourism development projects frequently treat Indigenous territories primarily as economic assets rather than as cultural and social spaces that sustain Indigenous identity and livelihoods. Her analysis highlights how tourism development can operate in ways similar to extractive industries by prioritizing foreign investment and national economic growth while disregarding Indigenous rights to land, culture, and self-determination.⁵⁵

Similar dynamics are explored by Renée V. Hagen & Tessa Minter in their article “*Displacement in the Name of Development: How Indigenous Rights Legislation Fails to Protect Philippine Hunter-Gatherers.*” Their study focuses on the Agta people, an Indigenous hunter-gatherer community in the Philippines whose traditional lands have been targeted for tourism and infrastructure development projects. Although the Philippines formally recognizes Indigenous land rights through legislative frameworks such as the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act, Hagen and Minter demonstrate that legal protections often remain ineffective in practice. They show that bureaucratic conflicts between state agencies, procedural loopholes in land governance systems, and competing development priorities frequently weaken the enforcement of Indigenous land rights. As a result, tourism and infrastructure projects continue to facilitate the commodification of Indigenous land, often leading to displacement and disruption of traditional livelihoods.⁵⁶ Their analysis illustrates how development-induced displacement can occur even in contexts where legal protections formally exist.

A broader global perspective on tourism-related land conflicts is provided by Andreas Neef in his book “*Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement: The Darker Side of the Feel-Good Industry.*” Neef critically examines how tourism, often portrayed as an environmentally friendly and socially responsible industry, can contribute to large-scale land grabbing and displacement across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Through comparative case studies from more than thirty countries,

⁵⁴ Tremblay-Huet, “Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Communities in the Light of the Iachr Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de La Cruz y Sus Miembros v. Honduras Case.”

⁵⁵ Tremblay-Huet, “Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Communities in the Light of the Iachr Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de La Cruz y Sus Miembros v. Honduras Case.”

⁵⁶ Hagen and Minter, “Displacement in the Name of Development. How Indigenous Rights Legislation Fails to Protect Philippine Hunter-Gatherers.”

Neef demonstrates that tourism development frequently involves the transfer of land from local communities to state agencies, private investors, or international corporations. Neef argues that tourism's reputation as a "feel-good industry" can obscure its extractive dimensions, allowing development projects to proceed under narratives of sustainability and economic development while masking their social and environmental consequences.⁵⁷ His work provides an important analytical framework for understanding tourism not merely as a cultural or recreational activity but as a political and economic process that reshapes control over land and natural resources.

The relationship between tourism, conservation, and land dispossession is also critically examined in John Mbaria and Mordecai Ogada's influential book *"The Big Conservation Lie: The Untold Story of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya."* Mbaria and Ogada challenge the dominant narrative that conservation tourism inherently benefits local communities and protects ecosystems. Drawing on extensive case studies from Kenya, they demonstrate how conservation initiatives often serve as mechanisms for the appropriation of Indigenous lands under the guise of wildlife protection and environmental preservation.⁵⁸ According to the authors, conservation tourism often privileges international NGOs, government agencies, and private tourism investors while excluding Indigenous communities from territories they have historically managed. The result is a model of "conservation tourism" that commodifies both landscapes and cultures while marginalizing Indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional land stewardship practices and governance.⁵⁹

Research on tourism-related land grabs demonstrates that tourism expansion can contribute to enclosure, restricted mobility, and the consolidation of state authority over Indigenous territories.⁶⁰ Environmental governance scholars similarly emphasize that tourism infrastructure frequently disrupts ecosystems through deforestation, road construction, pollution, and resource extraction, while also marginalizing Indigenous ecological knowledge and land management practices.⁶¹ Burgos-Ayala and colleagues examine in their article *"Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Environmental Management for Human-Nature Connectedness: A Leverage Points Perspective"*

⁵⁷ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

⁵⁸ John Mbaria and Mordecai Ogada, *The Big Conservation Lie: The Untold Story of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya* (Lens & Pens Publishing, 2017).

⁵⁹ Mbaria and Ogada, *The Big Conservation Lie*.

⁶⁰ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

⁶¹ Aracely Burgos-Ayala et al., "Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Environmental Management for Human-Nature Connectedness: A Leverage Points Perspective," *Ecosystems and People* 16, no. 1 (2020): 290–303.

how Indigenous and local knowledge contribute to biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability. The authors argue that Indigenous knowledge systems often incorporate detailed ecological understanding developed through long-term interaction with local environments. These knowledge systems can play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and promoting sustainable land management practices. However, Burgos-Ayala et al. note that development projects frequently marginalize Indigenous knowledge by prioritizing technocratic planning approaches that emphasize economic efficiency and short-term profitability over ecological sustainability.⁶²

These broader debates are particularly relevant in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where tourism expansion intersects with longer histories of militarization, land dispossession, and state control. Hana Shams Ahmed argues that tourism infrastructure in the CHT often develops alongside systems of militarized governance and territorial administration rather than functioning only as economic development initiatives.⁶³ The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), an organization that monitors Indigenous rights globally, has repeatedly documented concerns surrounding land rights, militarization, and development policies affecting Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh and beyond. These reports emphasize that, despite commitments made under the 1997 Peace Accord, many aspects of governance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts remain heavily influenced by the military and administrative institutions. According to IWGIA, development initiatives, including tourism expansion, often occur in contexts where Indigenous communities have limited influence over land-use and resource-management decision-making (IWGIA, various years).⁶⁴ Similar concerns appear in Sabiha Yeasmin Rosy's work on tourism expansion in Bandarban, which highlights environmental degradation and the growing pressure on Indigenous livelihoods and ecological practices.⁶⁵

These studies are important for my research because they show that tourism development is rarely only about recreation or economic growth. Tourism projects can also reshape land relations, governance systems, environmental practices, and Indigenous access to territory. In the context of

⁶² Burgos-Ayala et al., "Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Environmental Management for Human-Nature Connectedness."

⁶³ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

⁶⁴ Berger et al., *2 IWGIA – The Indigenous World – 2023*.

⁶⁵ Sabiha Yeasmin Rosy, "Development and Culture in the Context of Chittagong Hill Tracts (Cht), Bangladesh," *Social Science Review* 37, no. 2 (2021): 87–103.

Chimbuk Hill, these debates help explain why the proposed Marriott tourism project has generated concerns surrounding land dispossession, militarization, environmental change, and Indigenous political autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

1.2.4 Indigenous Resistance and Counter-Narratives

While much of the literature on development and land dispossession focuses on the structural forces that marginalize Indigenous communities, a growing body of research emphasizes Indigenous agency and the different ways communities resist external forces.⁶⁶ Scholars increasingly argue that Indigenous communities are not simply passive victims of development projects but active political actors who negotiate, challenge, and reinterpret initiatives that threaten their lands and livelihoods.⁶⁷ Similar forms of Indigenous resistance have been documented in places such as Honduras, the Philippines, and Kenya, where communities have challenged tourism development, conservation projects, and land grabbing on ancestral lands.⁶⁸

One of the most influential Indigenous scholars writing on resistance and resurgence is Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, whose work shifts discussions of Indigenous politics beyond state-centered frameworks of recognition and rights. In *“As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance,”* Simpson argues that Indigenous resistance should not be understood solely through moments of protest or direct confrontation with the state. Instead, she conceptualizes resistance as a broader process of Indigenous resurgence grounded in relationships to land, language, collective responsibility, cultural continuity, and everyday practices of community life.⁶⁹ Drawing from Nishnaabeg intellectual traditions and land-based knowledge systems, Simpson explains that colonialism operates by attempting to sever Indigenous peoples from their territories, governance systems, and ways of knowing. In response, Indigenous resurgence involves rebuilding and sustaining these relationships through practices such as

⁶⁶ Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, with Internet Archive (Cambridge, MA: South End Press; Minneapolis, MN: Honor the Earth, 1999); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States,” *WICaZO Sa REVIEW*, 2017; Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, *Indigenous Americas* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Tripura et al., “Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism.”

⁶⁷ LaDuke, *All Our Relations*; Tripura et al., “Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism.”

⁶⁸ Hagen and Minter, “Displacement in the Name of Development. How Indigenous Rights Legislation Fails to Protect Philippine Hunter-Gatherers”; Mbaria and Ogada, *The Big Conservation Lie*; Tremblay-Huet, “Tourism and the Protection of the Cultural Rights and Identity of Indigenous Communities in the Light of the Iachr Judgment in the Comunidad Garífuna Triunfo de La Cruz y Sus Miembros v. Honduras Case.”

⁶⁹ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

storytelling, ceremony, language preservation, intergenerational teaching, and community-based governance.⁷⁰ Rather than relying entirely on state recognition, Simpson emphasizes Indigenous self-determination by renewing Indigenous social and political systems within Indigenous communities.

Building on these broader discussions of Indigenous resurgence, several scholars examining Indigenous resistance movements globally argue that Indigenous communities actively challenge colonial domination, land dispossession, and state-led development projects through a wide range of political and cultural strategies. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, in *“An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States,”* examines how Indigenous nations across North America resisted settler expansion, forced removal, and military violence through both armed resistance and the preservation of Indigenous governance systems.⁷¹ Similarly, Winona LaDuke, in *“All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life,”* highlights Indigenous environmental resistance movements against resource extraction and ecological destruction, particularly struggles surrounding mining, land protection, and environmental justice in Indigenous communities.⁷² Another important contribution comes from Andrea Smith, whose work *“Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide”* examines how Indigenous women have played central roles in resistance movements while simultaneously confronting gendered forms of colonial violence.⁷³

In the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an important contribution to this discussion is provided by Khokaneswar Tripura, Gareth Butler, Gerti Szili, and Kevin Hannam in their article *“Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism: Tourism Stories from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.”* The authors examine how Indigenous communities in the CHT respond to tourism expansion by developing alternative narratives that challenge dominant representations of the region as a leisure landscape. Their research highlights how tourism development in the CHT is often framed through state and commercial narratives that portray the hills as scenic destinations for domestic and international tourists. These narratives tend to marginalize Indigenous histories and experiences while presenting the region as an open frontier for investment and recreation. Tripura and his

⁷⁰ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

⁷¹ Dunbar-Ortiz, *“An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States.”*

⁷² LaDuke, *All Our Relations*.

⁷³ Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, with Internet Archive ([Durham, NC] : Duke University Press, 2015).

colleagues argue that Indigenous communities actively contest these representations by constructing counter-narratives that emphasize historical dispossession, cultural identity, and Indigenous relationships with the land.⁷⁴ Through storytelling, community-led tourism initiatives, and political advocacy, Indigenous actors attempt to reclaim control over how their territories and cultures are represented.

Scholars studying Indigenous resistance note that resistance often takes many forms, including organized political action, legal advocacy, grassroots activism, and cultural expression. Through these strategies, Indigenous communities challenge dominant development narratives and assert their rights to land, identity, and self-determination despite unequal power relations. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Mro community's resistance to the proposed Marriott tourism project at Chimbuk Hill reflects similar dynamics. The Mro have raised awareness about the impacts of tourism development, built alliances with activists and civil society organizations, and framed their struggle within broader discussions of Indigenous rights and environmental protection. By examining these resistance strategies, this thesis contributes to the literature on Indigenous resistance in the CHT and highlights how local communities actively challenge development projects that threaten their land and cultural continuity.

⁷⁴ Tripura et al., "Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism."

Chapter Two: Historical and Contemporary Context of the Mro Community and Land Displacement

2.1: Background and Context

According to the Population and Housing Census 2022, Bangladesh is home to 50 distinct ethnic/Indigenous communities alongside the majority Bengali population.⁷⁵ The 2022 Census estimates the Indigenous population of Bangladesh at approximately 1.65 million,⁷⁶ though Indigenous groups assert the actual number is closer to 4 million.⁷⁷ The majority reside in the plains districts, but the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), comprising Bandarban, Rangamati, and Khagrachari are home to 11 Indigenous groups, each with their own cultural and ecological

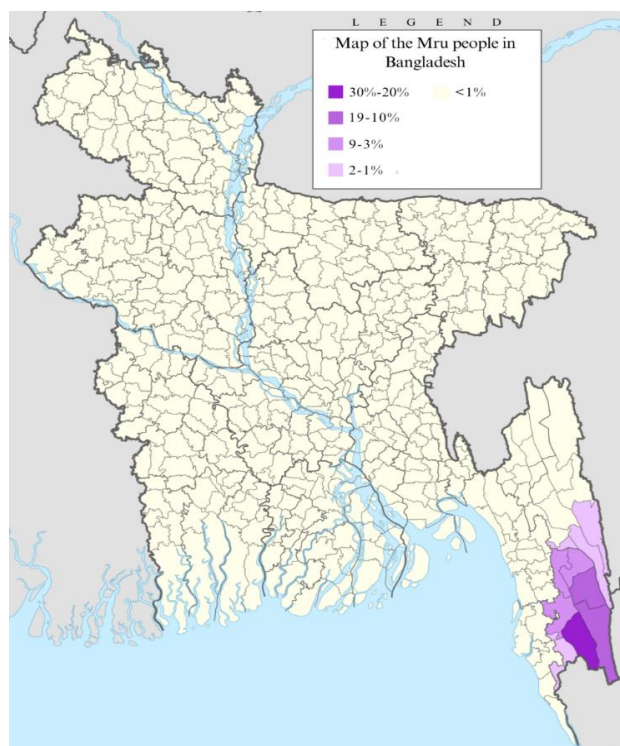


Figure 1: Mro community residing in Bangladesh⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Population & Housing Census 2022.

⁷⁶ Population & Housing Census 2022.

⁷⁷ “The Indigenous World 2024: Bangladesh - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,”

⁷⁸ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Mru_people_in_Bangladesh.png

identities.⁷⁹ Among them, the Mro community, also known as Murong, Mru, or Mrung, is one of the most geographically isolated and historically marginalized groups, primarily residing in the Bandarban and Rangamati hill districts along the Sangu and Matamuhuri rivers.⁸⁰ The Mro's historical trajectory is marked by migration from present-day Rakhine State in Myanmar to southeastern Bengal, driven by interethnic conflict and displacement between the 14th and 18th centuries. Today, approximately 70,000 Mro people reside near the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar tri-border zone. Their livelihoods remain deeply intertwined with ancestral territories through swidden (jhum) cultivation, forest stewardship, and spiritual ties to land expressed through ritual offerings to spirits before and after swidden cultivation, ancestral burial and cremation practices, and ceremonies that connect community identity to particular landscapes.⁸¹

In this chapter, I examine the historical and structural factors shaping the Mro community's experiences of land dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, drawing on secondary sources to trace how colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary state interventions have shaped Indigenous land relations. I begin by outlining the Mro's background and deep-rooted connection to their ancestral land. I then examine how colonial forest laws, the Kaptai Dam, Bengali settler programs, and militarized governance contributed to a long pattern of displacement. I also explore how tourism, especially in Nilgiri and Sajek, has become a new form of land control, paving the way for projects such as the Marriott resort on Chimbuk Hill. Finally, I show how legal and constitutional frameworks have failed to protect Indigenous land rights. This chapter explores and asserts that the current resistance is not just about one development project, but is indeed part of a longer struggle for land, recognition, and justice.

In recent decades, the CHT has been increasingly framed by the state and private sector as a site of opportunity for tourism-driven development. The government's efforts to promote the region as a destination for domestic and international tourists have led to significant land allocations, often involving the military for hotel resorts and eco-tourism projects. These developments have

⁷⁹ "The Indigenous World 2021: Bangladesh - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,"

⁸⁰ M. Mostafizur Rahman, *Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh: An Ethnographic Analysis* IARJSET 10, no. 6 (2023).

⁸¹ Rahman, "Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh."

frequently occurred without any consent from Indigenous communities, including the Mro, and have resulted in forced evictions, militarized control, and cultural alienation.⁸²

My research focuses on a single case: the proposed five-star Marriott hotel and resort on Chimbuk Hill, Bandarban. The project, initiated by R&R Holdings Ltd. (a subsidiary of Sikder Group) in collaboration with the Bangladesh Army Welfare Trust, has drawn national and international criticism for proceeding without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from affected Indigenous communities. FPIC is an important principle of Indigenous rights recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), particularly regarding decisions and development activities that affect Indigenous lands and territories.⁸³ Mro leaders and rights groups allege that the development violates multiple legal instruments, including the CHT Regulation of 1900, the Bandarban Hill District Council Act of 1989, and the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act of 2001.⁸⁴

My study examines the historical context, environmental and cultural implications, and grassroots activism surrounding the proposed hotel and resort on Chimbuk Hill. The analysis situates this resistance within a broader continuum of dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), ranging from colonial land classifications and post-independence development interventions to settler encroachments and the militarized commodification of nature through tourism. I examine here how partnerships between the state and corporate actors contribute to controlling Indigenous spaces and silencing their voices in national development planning. This research traces the roots of today's conflict to long-standing systems of land regulation, unclear legal protections, and military control in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While the Marriott resort is framed by officials as a symbol of economic progress and regional upliftment in the present, for the Mro it represents yet another chapter in the long history of structural violence and cultural erasure. By foregrounding Indigenous voices and resistance, my study challenges the dominant narratives of development used by the Government and industry, and asserts the need for land justice grounded in recognition, restitution, and autonomy.

⁸² Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

⁸³ Roy, *People's Republic of Bangladesh*.

⁸⁴ Staff Correspondent, "Marriott Hotel Construction in Bandarban against Laws," *The Daily Star*, November 17, 2020.

2.2: Colonial and Early Post-Colonial Foundations of Land Dispossession

The Mro's presence in what is now the Chittagong Hill Tracts dates back to the 14th century, following waves of migration from present-day Rakhine State in Myanmar.⁸⁵ Over the centuries, they established village clusters, swidden cultivation practices, and governance systems rooted in customary law. While the region was not entirely free from interethnic tensions or small-scale conflicts, the Mro and other Indigenous communities largely maintained control over their lands and lived with relative autonomy. There was no centralized authority disrupting their land tenure systems until the onset of British colonial rule.⁸⁶

The roots of land alienation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts trace back to British colonial rule (1860-1947), which imposed a formal legal and administrative regime over a region that had long been governed through Indigenous customary systems. As Raja Devasish Roy (2004) argues, the CHT was designated a “Backward Tract” under the 1900 Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, a special legal framework that aimed to isolate and govern the Indigenous population through indirect rule, whereby the colonial administration governed through existing Indigenous institutions such as Circle Chiefs and Headmen rather than replacing them with British officials. Although these leaders continued to administer local affairs, they were placed under the authority of the colonial administration, allowing the British to exercise control over the region while preserving only limited Indigenous autonomy.⁸⁷ While this Regulation apparently restricted the transfer of land from Indigenous to non-Indigenous people, it also embedded a racialized and paternalistic logic that framed Indigenous practices as primitive and in need of regulation.⁸⁸

British authorities imposed new land classifications, including “reserve forests,” under the 1865 and 1927 Forest Acts.⁸⁹ These laws criminalized jhum cultivation, a traditional hill farming system

⁸⁵ Rahman, “Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh.”

⁸⁶ Raja Devasish Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh 21, no. 1 (2004).

⁸⁷ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

⁸⁸ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

⁸⁹ “The Indian Forest Act - The Act Was First Passed in 1865 and Hence Amended Twice in 1878 and 1927” .

where forested land is cleared, farmed for one or two seasons, and then left fallow to regenerate⁹⁰, which was central to the agroecological practices of the Mro, Chakma, Tripura, and other Indigenous peoples and redefined vast tracts of Indigenous-managed commons as state-owned forest.⁹¹ While the colonial administration often justified these classifications as environmental or economic necessities, they were in practice mechanisms of enclosure, which dispossessed Indigenous communities and subordinated their ecological knowledge systems to extractive state control.⁹²

The colonial construction of territorial boundaries also laid the groundwork for future political disenfranchisement. When the Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, the majority-non-Muslim CHT was controversially included in East Pakistan, despite strong objections from Indigenous leaders.⁹³ This decision marked the beginning of a post-colonial state-building process that saw the CHT as a frontier region to be tamed, integrated, and modernized, often at the expense of its Indigenous inhabitants.⁹⁴

In the early decades of Pakistan's rule, legal protections such as the requirement for headman consultation before land transfers, restrictions on non-Indigenous settlement, and formal land registration systems like *kabuliat* (a written agreement for land use) and *khatian* (a land record or ownership ledger) under the 1900 Regulation were increasingly eroded.⁹⁵ The influx of Bengali administrators, the appointment of non-Indigenous officials to key roles, and the centralization of land decision-making undermined Indigenous autonomy. At the same time, development planning began to prioritize the extraction of natural resources and the transformation of "unused" land into sites of infrastructure, agriculture, and eventually, energy production.⁹⁶ This shift laid the

⁹⁰ Tapan Kumar Nath et al., "Shifting Cultivation (Jhum) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: Examining Its Sustainability, Rural Livelihood and Policy Implications," *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability* 3, no. 2 (2005): 130–42.

⁹¹ "The Indian Forest Act - The Act Was First Passed in 1865 and Hence Amended Twice in 1878 and 1927."

⁹² Rajkumari Chandra Kalindi Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Bangladesh, IWGIA Document 99 (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2000), 119.

⁹³ Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Bangladesh.

⁹⁴ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

⁹⁵ IWGIA-CHTC Book "Life is not ours: land and human rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Bangladesh," 11, 50.

⁹⁶ The term "unused" reflects a colonial perception rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery, a 15th-century legal and religious framework used by European powers to justify land appropriation from Indigenous peoples by declaring their territories as *terra nullius*, or unoccupied land. This logic disregarded Indigenous systems of land stewardship and communal use.

foundation for one of the most disruptive events in CHT history: the construction of the Kaptai Dam.⁹⁷

2.3 Development as Displacement: The Kaptai Dam and Mass Dispossession

One of the most profound episodes of forced displacement in the CHT occurred under Pakistani rule in the early 1960s with the construction of the Kaptai hydroelectric dam on the Karnaphuli River. Funded by the United States and built with the assistance of foreign engineers, the project was celebrated as a symbol of national modernization and energy independence by the government of Pakistan.⁹⁸ Arun Kumar Nayak (2019), a scholar of development studies, argues that the Kaptai Dam marked the beginning of a new era of loss, trauma, and exclusion for the Indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Although the Chakma community experienced the greatest displacement, the dam also profoundly affected the Mro, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, and other Indigenous communities.⁹⁹ The project submerged approximately 54,000 acres of cultivable land and displaced over 100,000 Indigenous people, nearly one-third of the total Indigenous population of the CHT at the time.¹⁰⁰ This included hundreds of Indigenous families whose upland jhum plots, village sites, and forest commons were inundated.¹⁰¹ Nayak (2019) argues that this mass displacement occurred without meaningful consultation, compensation, or resettlement planning. Most affected people were neither informed nor prepared for the scale of dislocation that followed.¹⁰²

Arun Kumar Nayak (2019) further explains that many displaced families were forced to migrate into remote hill areas, where their already limited access to basic services such as clean drinking water, healthcare, education, transportation, and suitable land for farming became even more restricted. Thousands fled across the border into India, where they faced statelessness and decades of uncertainty.¹⁰³ Others became internally displaced people, surviving on marginal lands or in

⁹⁷ “IWGIA-CHTC Book “Life is not ours: land and human rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Bangladesh,” 53.

⁹⁸ energytransitionbd, “Karnaphuli 230 MW (BPDB) Hydropower Plant,” EnergyTransitionBD, January 3, 2024,

⁹⁹ Arun Kumar Nayak, a scholar of development studies with a focus on development, public policy, and governance, examines the impacts of development-induced displacement through his study of the Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh. “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security: A Study of the Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh,” *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2019): 199–231.

¹⁰⁰ IWGIA-CHTC Life Is Not Ours.

¹⁰¹ Nayak, “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security.”

¹⁰² Nayak, “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security.”

¹⁰³ Nayak, “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security,” 208.

labor arrangements that further undermined their autonomy.¹⁰⁴ The Kaptai Dam thus introduced a precedent of state-led “development” that prioritized national economic goals over Indigenous survival, cultural continuity, and ecological stewardship.

The narrative framing of the dam as a great achievement is instructive. It positioned Indigenous land as a resource to be harnessed for the greater good, erasing the epistemologies and rights of those who inhabited it.¹⁰⁵ Legal protections were circumvented, and resistance was muted under the regime of developmentalism, a belief that projects like dams were beyond question because they represented modernity itself.¹⁰⁶

For the Indigenous people of CHT, particularly the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Mro, and others, the dam was not only a physical loss but a political and symbolic one.¹⁰⁷ It revealed that the state viewed their presence as an obstacle rather than a stakeholder in development. This dynamic, where development is imposed and displacement justified through utilitarian logic, would repeat in various forms in subsequent decades, including in the contemporary Marriott project.

2.4: Bengali Settler Influx and Military-Civilian Restructuring

In 1971, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation after a brutal nine-month war of secession from Pakistan.¹⁰⁸ The conflict began with a military crackdown on 25 March 1971, during which West Pakistani forces unleashed widespread violence across East Pakistan, targeting civilians, institutions, and entire villages.¹⁰⁹ The campaign resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, mass displacement, and immense social and economic devastation. The war ended on 16 December 1971 with the defeat of the Pakistani military and the birth of an independent Bangladesh, achieved through collective resistance and immense sacrifice, including civilians, freedom fighters, and victims of widespread violence.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Nayak, “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security.”

¹⁰⁵ Nayak, “Involuntary Displacement and Human Security.”

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹⁰⁷ “The Kaptai Dam: A Story of Disenfranchisement, Displacement, and Destruction,” *International Rivers*, November 2, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁹ Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*.

¹¹⁰ Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*.

Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, state policy in the CHT shifted toward a more aggressive form of internal colonization. Amid growing demands for autonomy from Indigenous political organizations, most notably the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the central Bangladeshi government responded by launching a massive Bengali settlement program in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹¹¹ The PCJSS, founded in 1972 by Manabendra Narayan Larma, is the first and longest-standing political organization representing the multilingual Indigenous Jumma peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.¹¹² It emerged in the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's independence, articulating demands for regional autonomy, constitutional recognition, and the protection of Indigenous land rights.¹¹³ Grounded in the principles of nationalism, democracy, secularism, equality, and social justice, the organization played a central role in mobilizing political resistance in the region.¹¹⁴ The government based this program on a clear difference between the flat plains and the hilly areas: the crowded, fertile lowlands where most Bengali people lived, and the forested, less populated hill districts in the southeast, historically inhabited by Indigenous communities.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," n.d.

¹¹² "About PCJSS," Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, n.d. <https://www.pcjss.org/about-pcjss/>.

¹¹³ "About PCJSS."

¹¹⁴ "About PCJSS."

¹¹⁵ "Geography of Bangladesh - The Land, Climate and River Systems,".

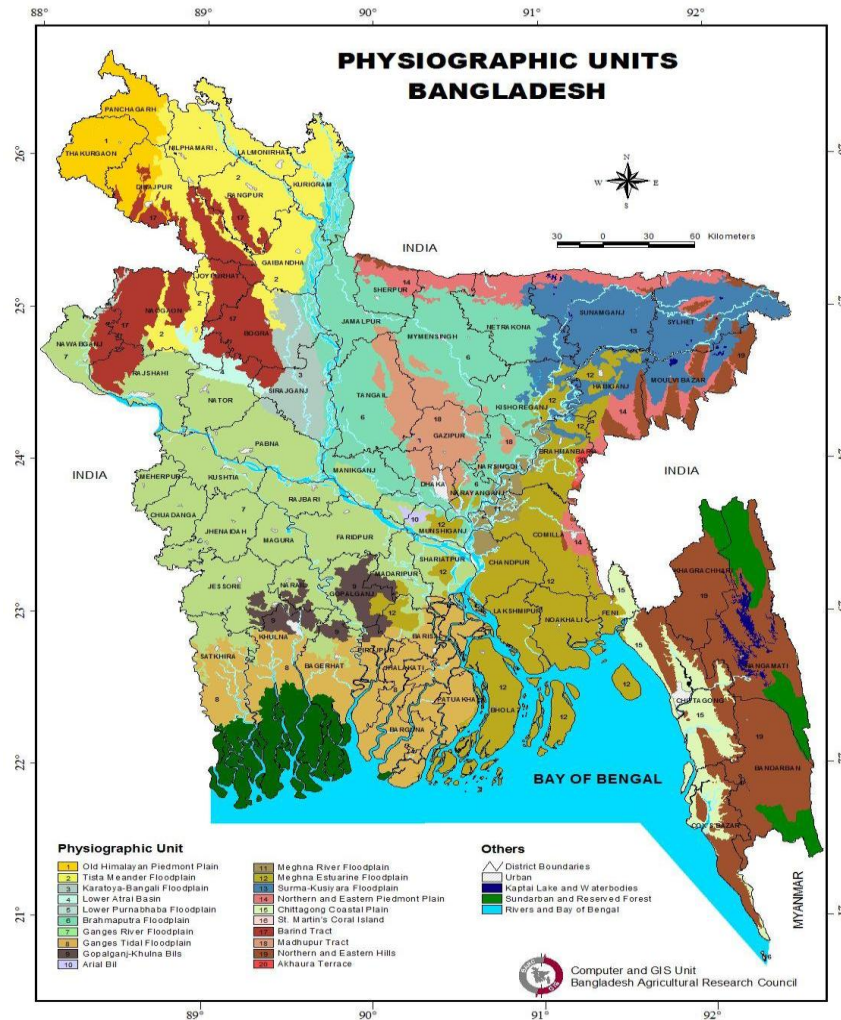


Figure 2: Physiography Map¹¹⁶

This program resettled over 400,000 Bengali families from the plains into the hill districts, with logistical and material support from the military.¹¹⁷ The influx dramatically altered the demographic balance of the CHT. In many areas, Indigenous peoples, including the Mro, became minorities on their own land. Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar (2011), land rights scholars, show that while state rhetoric framed the program as a solution to landlessness and overpopulation in the plains, its deeper function was geopolitical: to assimilate the region, dilute Indigenous political demands, and secure territorial control through demographic engineering.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ "LRI-Map Products-Bangladesh," n.d.

¹¹⁷ Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh" page: xxi

¹¹⁸ Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh" page: 61

To facilitate this transformation, the military established permanent bases across the CHT, often on lands confiscated from Indigenous communities. Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar (2011) further note that these installations were justified as necessary for national security and counterinsurgency against the Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of the PCJSS. The Shanti Bahini emerged in the mid-1970s following repeated state repression, with the aim of resisting militarization and defending Indigenous land rights. It carried out guerrilla operations against state forces throughout the 1980s and 1990s until the signing of the 1997 Peace Accord.¹¹⁹ However, its presence also gave the state a rationale to intensify surveillance and military control in Indigenous areas, resulting in near-constant surveillance and intimidation. Road checkpoints, military patrols, and curfews became routine aspects of everyday life.¹²⁰

The settler influx was also accompanied by the formalization of land titles for Bengali migrants, while Indigenous land remained largely unregistered under national law. The state recognizes land ownership only through individual registered titles such as khatian documents (a land record or ownership ledger), written deeds, and cadastral survey records under the national law system.¹²¹ In contrast, customary tenure systems practiced by Indigenous communities, which recognize communal ownership, oral inheritance, and flexible access to land, are not acknowledged under the Constitution or mainstream land legislation.¹²² As a result, Indigenous communities were unable to contest land grabs in the courts or register claims to ancestral territories, leaving them legally vulnerable to dispossession.¹²³

2.5: Tourism and the Post-Accord Economy of Displacement

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed after more than two decades of armed conflict between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), whose armed wing, the Shanti Bahini, had been engaged in a protracted insurgency since the mid-1970s.¹²⁴ The conflict was rooted in demands for constitutional recognition, land rights, and regional autonomy, and had resulted in widespread militarization, displacement, and political

¹¹⁹ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

¹²⁰ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. page:68-72

¹²¹ Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

¹²² Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

¹²³ Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

¹²⁴ Dr. Abdullah Al Faruque, “Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Challenges and Human Rights Issues,” 2014.

unrest in the hill districts.¹²⁵ In response to sustained resistance and pressure from Indigenous groups, the government signed the Accord in 1997 with the stated aim of establishing peace, promoting reconciliation, and recognizing Indigenous identity and rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.¹²⁶ Following the Accord, the Shanti Bahini was formally disbanded, although many of the underlying issues remained unresolved, shaping subsequent political mobilizations and contemporary Indigenous resistance in the region.¹²⁷

Hana S. Ahmed, an anthropologist and former coordinator of the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, argues in her work *“Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (2017)”* that, despite formally ending decades of armed conflict, the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord failed to deliver on its promises of reconciliation, demilitarization, and Indigenous empowerment in southeastern Bangladesh.¹²⁸ While it promised the return of dispossessed lands, the withdrawal of temporary military camps, and the strengthening of Indigenous self-governance through institutions like the Hill District Councils (HDC), implementation has been partial and uneven.¹²⁹ She highlights that, in practice, the post-Accord period has witnessed not a retreat of state power, but its reconfiguration through new modalities, particularly tourism-led development backed by military and corporate interests.¹³⁰

Tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has emerged as a strategy for national integration and economic growth. Framed as “peaceful,” these initiatives market the CHT as a scenic frontier for recreation, drawing on picturesque representations of misty mountains, forested trails, and “exotic” Indigenous cultures. However, behind this aesthetic lies a deeper political logic: the transformation of Indigenous territory into a consumable space, controlled by non-Indigenous developers, often backed by state and military entities.¹³¹

Two flagship tourism zones, **Nilgiri** in Bandarban and **Sajek Valley** in Rangamati, epitomize this trend. Both are situated in areas historically inhabited by Indigenous communities, including the Mro, Tripura, and Lushai. Nilgiri, perched at 2,300 feet above sea level, was developed in the early

¹²⁵ Al Faruque, “Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Challenges and Human Rights Issues.”

¹²⁶ Al Faruque, “Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Challenges and Human Rights Issues.”

¹²⁷ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

¹²⁸ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹²⁹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹³⁰ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹³¹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

2000s by the Bangladesh Army and now includes luxury cottages, controlled access, and military surveillance.¹³² In 2006, the military forcibly evicted 275 Mro families from Sualok mauza (administrative units)¹³³, along with the Marma families, to make way for the Nilgiri Resort.¹³⁴ Without any prior notice, soldiers entered the villages and evicted residents at gunpoint, giving them no time to gather their belongings.¹³⁵ The displaced families were forced to live under the open sky for months, and during this time, seven children and two elders reportedly died due to exposure and lack of shelter.¹³⁶ Indigenous access to the site has since been tightly controlled, with military presence and surveillance, not only through official policies but also by the violent memory of forced removal, intimidation, and the destruction of homes, orchards, and a school.¹³⁷ Although promoted as a site of "natural beauty," Nilgiri is emblematic of militarized eco-tourism, where the army patrols tourist zones, and entry is contingent upon army approval.¹³⁸

Sajek Valley, developed in the 2010s as one of Bangladesh's premier tourist destinations, is located in Rangamati District and accessed via Khagrachari through a military-constructed road.¹³⁹ Formerly inhabited by the Tripura and Lushai Indigenous communities, the area was declared a reserve forest, stripping residents of legal land protections. In 2008 and 2010, violent arson attacks linked to state-backed settlement and tourism expansion resulted in the burning of over 70 and then 400 Indigenous homes, respectively, causing mass displacement of Jumma villagers.¹⁴⁰ These acts of violence coincided with the expansion of tourism infrastructure and were followed by increased military surveillance and governance, including the establishment of a Strategic Management Forum by the Armed Forces Division.¹⁴¹ This militarized oversight rebranded the region as a peaceful mountain escape while imposing structural exclusion on Indigenous populations. Resorts, restaurants, and tourism enterprises have since flourished, predominantly

¹³² "Nilgiri (Bandarban) History," <https://travelsetu.com/guide/nilgiri-tourism/nilgiri-tourism-history>.

¹³³ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012), 30.

¹³⁴ Mukti Chakma, *Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Impact on Indigenous Peoples (IPs)*, n.d.

¹³⁵ Chakma, *Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Impact on Indigenous Peoples (IPs)*.

¹³⁶ Chakma, *Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Impact on Indigenous Peoples (IPs)*.

¹³⁷ Chakma, *Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Impact on Indigenous Peoples (IPs)*.

¹³⁸ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹³⁹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, 5–6.

¹⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, page 6.

¹⁴¹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Page 89

owned by Bengali settlers and military-linked investors, while Indigenous residents face surveillance, cultural misrepresentation, and restricted access to their ancestral lands, all under a development narrative that silences resistance and conceals dispossession.¹⁴²

In both Nilgiri and Sajek, tourism has been used as a way to showcase development after years of conflict. It gives the impression of progress, but in reality, it allows the military to remain in the area and continue taking over Indigenous land. When local people speak out against these projects, they are often seen as being against development. At the same time, Indigenous cultures are used in tourism advertisements, while the people themselves lose access to their own land and have little say in what happens to it. For the Mro community in Bandarban, the experiences of Nilgiri and Sajek serve as cautionary precedents to the case study of this thesis. The Marriott project at Chimbuk Hill replicates many of the same dynamics seen in these two areas: state-sanctioned land alienation, lack of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), military-backed development, and the framing of Indigenous land as a tourism commodity. Thus, while tourism is officially portrayed as a vehicle for economic inclusion and modernization, for Indigenous peoples in the CHT it has constituted a continuation of dispossession, now cloaked in the language of leisure and nation-building. The “post-Accord economy” is not one of peace and restitution, but of displacement and erasure repackaged as development.

2.6: Militarization and Surveillance

Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has deep historical roots, closely tied to the region’s colonial and postcolonial governance. While the 1997 Peace Accord promised the withdrawal of temporary military camps and the restoration of civil administration, the CHT remains one of the most militarized regions in Bangladesh.¹⁴³ This enduring military presence must be understood as a legacy of state strategies that have long equated Indigenous land claims with political threat and sought to consolidate territorial control through security frameworks.¹⁴⁴

As discussed earlier, during the British colonial period (1860-1947), the CHT was administered as a “Backward Tract” under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900, designed to isolate

¹⁴² Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Page 77-100

¹⁴³ Kroc Institute for International, “Withdrawal of Troops: Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT),” *Peace Accords Matrix*, April 11, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Page 30-52

Indigenous populations while controlling movement and land access.¹⁴⁵ The post-partition Pakistani state (1947-1971), and later independent Bangladesh (1971-present), inherited and intensified these logics, continuing colonial-era practices such as converting customarily held Indigenous land into state-controlled “reserved forests.”¹⁴⁶ Hana Shams Ahmed’s (2017) work explores that with the rise of the Bahini insurgency in the 1970s, militarization became the central tool of the state’s counterinsurgency and assimilation strategy.¹⁴⁷ Ahmed(2017) asserts that the deployment of thousands of troops, the establishment of permanent army camps, and the surveillance of civilian life became normalized in CHT.¹⁴⁸ She explores, by the 1980s, militarization was no longer limited to conflict suppression. It became embedded in everyday governance, with the military acting as a de facto administrative authority across many hill districts.¹⁴⁹ She further demonstrates that military officials often influenced land allocation decisions, infrastructure planning, and even cultural events such as the Biju Festival (Chakma New Year celebration).¹⁵⁰ The construction of roads, schools, and markets were often carried out under military oversight, consolidating control over both space and narrative.¹⁵¹

Ahmed (2017) argues that Indigenous communities, including the Mro, found their lives circumscribed by this apparatus of surveillance. Movement between villages required clearance, particularly along roads controlled by military checkpoints and cantonments, such as those leading to tourist destinations like Sajek or Nilgiri.¹⁵² Public gatherings were closely monitored, and dissenting voices such as those protesting evictions or tourism projects frequently faced intimidation, fabricated legal cases, or custodial violence.¹⁵³ For example, in December 2006, Ranglai Mro, a traditional Mro headman and elected representative, protested the military’s eviction of 275 Mro families in Bandarban.¹⁵⁴ In retaliation, he was arrested, tortured, and later

¹⁴⁵ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.

¹⁴⁶ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, 151.

¹⁴⁷ Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Page 74

¹⁴⁸ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

¹⁴⁹ Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

¹⁵⁰ Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, 79–82.

¹⁵¹ Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, 20–28.

¹⁵² Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

¹⁵³ IWGIA, Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh (IWGIA, 2012), 30–31.

¹⁵⁴ IWGIA, Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh (IWGIA, 2012), 30–32.

sentenced to 17 years in prison on politically motivated charges.¹⁵⁵ His case illustrates how Indigenous resistance is not only silenced but also criminalized through state and military force. The expansion of tourism projects in recent decades, particularly those backed by the army, has further entrenched this militarized order, reframing coercive control as development facilitation. As Ahmed concludes, militarization in the CHT is not an aberration; it is a continuation of a colonial model of governance that uses security to discipline distinctiveness of Indigenous communities, such as their language, land-based lifestyles, political autonomy, or resistance to outside development.¹⁵⁶ The result is a space where Indigenous people are hyper-visible as spectacle but invisible as rights-bearing citizens. Understanding this history is crucial to contextualizing contemporary struggles over land, development, and justice.

2.7: Juridical and Constitutional Contestations

The legal history of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) reveals a persistent tension between Indigenous customary law and the state's centralized legal apparatus.¹⁵⁷ From the colonial era through post-independence Bangladesh, juridical frameworks have consistently failed to recognize or protect Indigenous land tenure systems.¹⁵⁸ These systems are typically governed by customary laws and practices, passed down through generations, which regulate communal ownership and access to land, forests, and water for farming, hunting, and gathering.¹⁵⁹ They are largely unwritten and based on tradition, yet play a central role in sustaining Indigenous livelihoods and cultural identity.¹⁶⁰ Instead, legal reforms have often enabled dispossession by reclassifying Indigenous land as state property or public domain, and by sidelining traditional governance structures.¹⁶¹

Raja Devasish Roy, a Chakma lawyer, traditional Chief, and leading scholar of Indigenous rights in the CHT, has conducted extensive research on the region's legal frameworks.¹⁶² According to

¹⁵⁵ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁵⁶ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

¹⁵⁷ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*

¹⁵⁸ Adnan and Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh."

¹⁵⁹ Mong Shano Chowdhury, ed., *Survival under Threat: Human Rights Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh* (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact ; Kapaeeng Foundation, 2014), 23.

¹⁶⁰ Chowdhury, *Survival under Threat*, 23.

¹⁶¹ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* 113–82.

¹⁶² Dev Kumar Sunuwar, "Chakma Chief Advocates for Indigenous Rights and Customary Law in Bangladesh," accessed August 2, 2025.

him, Under British rule, the CHT Regulation of 1900 established a semi-autonomous legal regime that recognized some customary land practices, such as communal jhum (swidden) cultivation, where land use was based on occupation and local control rather than formal titles, and regulation by traditional institutions like the Headman, while also reinforcing state control through a paternalistic rule, such as subordinating Indigenous leaders to bureaucratic state officials and keeping major decisions, including those related to military and resource use, in the hands of distant central authorities like Calcutta in India or Islamabad in Pakistan.¹⁶³ The regulation prohibited the transfer of land from Indigenous to non-Indigenous people but placed ultimate authority regarding land tenure in the hands of colonial administrators. Roy emphasizes that while intended to safeguard Indigenous autonomy, it also institutionalized a racialized logic that viewed Indigenous governance as inferior and in need of oversight.¹⁶⁴

Following the Partition in 1947, the Pakistani state retained the 1900 Regulation but introduced administrative centralization and began undermining traditional leadership. Land management increasingly fell under bureaucrats who did not consult Indigenous authorities. According to Roy, the legal pluralism of the region where customary law (based on oral tradition and community regulation) coexisted with statutory law (state-made laws codified in acts and regulations) was gradually eroded as courts began favoring state laws over oral or customary tenure.¹⁶⁵ After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Roy notes that constitutional and legislative developments further marginalized Indigenous legal identities.

With the establishment of the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission was established to address land conflicts. Although it is one of the most important post-Accord institutions, it has remained largely ineffective due to structural weaknesses, including a lack of binding authority, political interference, and insufficient funding. Efforts to strengthen its powers through legal amendments have also repeatedly stalled in

¹⁶³ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, 119.

¹⁶⁴ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, 124–27.

¹⁶⁵ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* 125–27.

Parliament.¹⁶⁶ As a result, land disputes continue to be adjudicated in national courts unfamiliar with or dismissive of customary tenure systems.

The legal frameworks used to legitimize land development in the CHT, including for tourism projects like the one at Chimbuk Hill, exploit this ambiguity. Lands traditionally inhabited by the Mro and other Indigenous groups under customary tenure are often not officially titled or recorded in national registries. This lack of documentation enables the state to lease or appropriate land for “public interest” projects without compensating or consulting the communities that have inhabited it for generations.¹⁶⁷ The law, in this context, becomes less a mechanism of justice than a tool of bureaucratic violence. Rather than protecting Indigenous communities, it facilitates their displacement by failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of their historical and cultural claims. The legal erasure of Indigeneity in the Constitution and the paralysis of institutions like the Land Commission illustrate how the structure of the state itself perpetuates dispossession not through overt violence, but through procedural neglect and semantic denial. This is not unique to Bangladesh; across much of the Global South and even in countries that formally recognize customary tenure, such as Uganda, states frequently exploit legal ambiguities to dispossess Indigenous and rural communities.¹⁶⁸ At a broader scale, these patterns reflect how capitalist state structures mobilize legal frameworks to enable commodification and enclosure, prioritizing accumulation over relational land ethics.

2.8: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the long and complicated history of land dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. By tracing events from colonial times to the present, I have drawn on substantial texts and research that shows how the Mro community, like many other Indigenous groups in the region, has been stripped of its rights through state actions, including laws, development projects, settlement programs, and military control. These histories and the evolution of land dispossession in CHT were not random or disconnected events; rather, they followed a pattern where Indigenous land, knowledge, and rights were consistently devalued, with the state

¹⁶⁶ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

¹⁶⁷ Ahmed, Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

¹⁶⁸ Hamisi Baabu Awuye, “Customary Law in the Ugandan Legal System,” n.d, 2024.

gradually asserting control over territories that had been stewarded by Indigenous communities for centuries.

I have explored how British colonial policies first disrupted Indigenous systems by introducing forest laws and indirect rule. That control continued and intensified under Pakistan, and later, independent Bangladesh. The construction of the Kaptai Dam was a turning point, as it not only displaced tens of thousands of people but also showed how national development projects could go ahead without consulting those most affected. This idea that land can be taken for the “greater good” was used again during the settler influx and still continues today in the name of tourism, a logic echoed globally wherever states displace marginalized communities in the name of development, conservation, or national interest.

I have also looked at how tourism has become a new tool for controlling land in the CHT. Places like Nilgiri and Sajek were turned into tourist zones with little regard for the Indigenous communities living there. These areas are now promoted as peaceful and beautiful escapes, but the cost of this “beauty” has been high. People have been evicted, their voices ignored, and their cultures used for display without their consent. The same pattern can be seen in the Marriott project at Chimbuk Hill, where development has once again meant displacement for the Mro.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that the Mro struggle today cannot be separated from their struggles of the past. Their resistance to the Marriott resort is not just about this one hotel, it is part of a much longer fight to protect their land, identity, and way of life. It is a demand to be recognized not as obstacles to development, but as rightful caretakers of the land.

As I move into the next chapter, which will focus on the Mro community’s ongoing resistance, this historical context will be key. Understanding how we got here helps explain why this struggle matters not just for the Mro, but for the broader conversation about Indigenous rights, justice, and the future of development in Bangladesh.

Chapter Three: Mro Community Resistance Strategies

3.1 Introduction

The Mro people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) today face a new phase of land contestation shaped by high-profile tourism and infrastructure projects, among which the proposed Marriott Hotels & Resorts complex in Chimbuk Hill has become emblematic. While Chapter 2 outlined the historical processes of colonial land regulation, post-independence development schemes, and militarized settlement that have shaped the present context, this chapter examines the contemporary struggle to defend Mro territories against recent development pressures. The analysis is based on secondary research using government documents, legal frameworks, human rights reports, and media sources to examine how ongoing state and corporate interventions are reshaping Indigenous land relations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

This chapter focuses on three interconnected themes. First, I detail the scope and implications of the Marriott project as a case study in corporate-military tourism ventures. Second, I present an overview of the strategies the Mro have mobilized to resist displacement and assert their right. Third, I examine the broader political, environmental, and cultural stakes of such projects for Indigenous sovereignty in the CHT. This chapter thus analyses how grassroots activism intersects with existing and historical power structures, and how Indigenous knowledge offers alternative, and deeply refusing, models of sustainable development.

By situating the Marriott case within these wider dynamics, the chapter demonstrates yet again that the struggle is not an isolated dispute but part of an ongoing contest over the meaning of development, governance, and justice in the CHT.

3.2 Overview of the Proposed Marriott Hotel Project in Chimbuk Hill

On September 17th, 2020, R&R Holdings Limited, a subsidiary of the Sikder Group, in partnership with the Bangladesh Army's Sena Kalyan Trust (Army Welfare Trust), announced plans to develop a five-star Marriott Hotels & Resorts complex and amusement park in Lulaine mouza (administrative land unit)¹⁶⁹ in Chimbuk Hill, Bandarban district.¹⁷⁰ The project is planned

¹⁶⁹ Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Slow Demise of the Region's Indigenous Peoples (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁷⁰ Bir Bahadur Ushwe Sing Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction n.d.

for approximately 800 to 1,000 acres along the Chimbuk-Thanchi road, encompassing Kapru Para, Dola Para, and Shong Nam Hung, as well as parts of common forests, jhum cultivation hills, orchards, cremation sites, water sources, and multiple Mro villages, including Markinpara, Longbaitangpara, Mensingpara, Riyamanaipara, and Menringpara.¹⁷¹

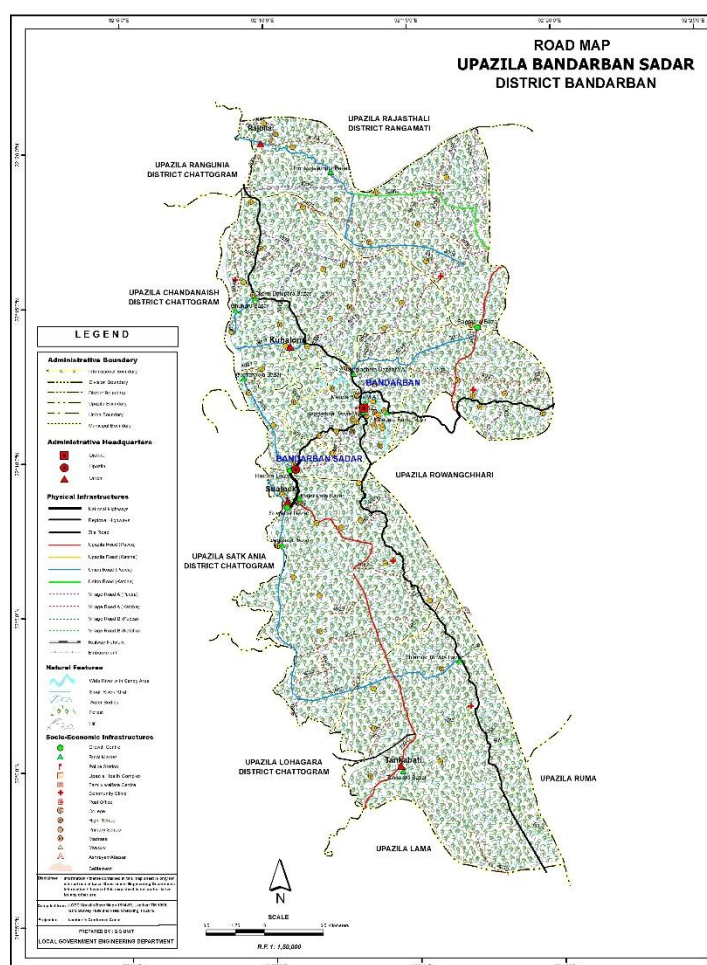


Figure 3 Bandarban Sadar¹⁷²

The Human Rights Forum Bangladesh, a coalition of civil society organizations advocating for human rights and accountability, reported in November 2020 that site preparation for the Marriott project had already begun with hill cutting, raising the threat of imminent displacement for an

¹⁷¹ Hill Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” Hill Voice, November 19, 2020.

¹⁷² “Oldweb.Lged.Gov.Bd/ViewMap.Aspx,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://oldweb.lged.gov.bd/ViewMap.aspx>.

estimated 10,000 Indigenous residents.¹⁷³ The Forum warned that the project violated the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, which guarantees the land rights of Indigenous peoples in the region, as well as Bangladesh's obligations under ILO Convention No. 107, ratified during the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.¹⁷⁴ The Human Rights Forum Bangladesh demanded three immediate actions: 1) halting construction and canceling the project; 2) protecting the life, livelihood, culture, and heritage of the Mro and other Indigenous communities; and 3) fully implementing the CHT Accord alongside the activation of the Land Dispute Settlement Commission to return grabbed lands.¹⁷⁵ These demands reflect a rights-based framework that situates the Marriott project within the broader struggle over land governance and Indigenous self-determination in the CHT.

Tourism marketing frequently describes Chimbuk Hill as the “Darjeeling of Bangladesh,” a branding used by the Bangladesh Tourism Board and private tour operators to promote the region as a premium destination for domestic and foreign visitors.¹⁷⁶ This promotional framing presents the hill only as a place of leisure and beauty, ignoring that it is both the ancestral land of the Mro and an ecologically sensitive landscape.¹⁷⁷

3.3 Contemporary Pressures on the Mro Community

3.3.1 Expansion of Tourism-Linked Land Insecurity

Following the 1997 Peace Accord, the expansion of road networks, increased military involvement in infrastructure development, and state policies promoting the CHT as a tourism destination facilitated a rapid growth of the tourism industry. The proposed Marriott development is part of a broader wave of tourism expansion in Bandarban and other parts of the CHT, often promoted as

¹⁷³ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁶ dailypost.net, “Bandarban’s Chimbuk Hill: Travel Guide for the ‘Darjeeling of Bangladesh,’” [Dailypost.Net](http://dailypost.net).

¹⁷⁷ Townsend Middleton, *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling, South Asia in Motion* (Stanford University Press, 2016). “The comparison to Darjeeling is itself politically charged; the popular image of Darjeeling as a peaceful tourist hill station hides the struggles of Indigenous communities there, such as the Gorkha community, who have long faced displacement and political marginalization. Using “Darjeeling of Bangladesh” therefore repeats a colonial idea that overlooks the Indigenous realities in both regions.

economic progress but accompanied by aggressive land acquisition. In the past decade, luxury resorts, eco-parks, and roadside tourism facilities have proliferated under both private and military management, facilitated by Hill District Council approvals and district administration land leases that frequently bypass meaningful community consultation.¹⁷⁸

Research and media reporting show that this pattern extends beyond Chimbuk Hill. For example, in Nilgiri, a military-operated resort displaced Indigenous households and destroyed their farmland and community spaces.¹⁷⁹ In Sajek Valley, road construction for tourism has been linked to settler land grabs and restrictions on Indigenous cultivation.¹⁸⁰ These precedents have heightened Mro concerns that the Marriott project represents not a stand-alone development, but that it is also part of an increasingly entrenched process of tourism-driven dispossession.

3.3.2 Militarized Oversight of Indigenous Territories

As outlined in Chapter 2, militarization in the CHT has deep historical roots, but its contemporary expression is closely tied to tourism expansion. Around Chimbuk Hill and adjacent Mro villages, this legacy has translated into a dense military presence near tourist zones. New camps and checkpoints, officially justified as measures for visitor safety, have in practice extended armed surveillance over Indigenous life.¹⁸¹

As explored in the last chapter, militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) remains pervasive despite commitments in the 1997 Peace Accord to withdraw temporary camps. Thousands of troops and security personnel are still deployed across the region under Operation Uttoron (“Operation Upliftment”), maintaining extensive checkpoints and bases.¹⁸² This heavy military presence extends into everyday governance, where army officials frequently oversee civil administration and influence local affairs.¹⁸³ For instance, a report by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA 2013) notes that in all three hill districts, Khagrachari, Rangamati, and Bandarban, Deputy Commissioners must seek prior approval from local Brigade Commanders

¹⁷⁸ Md Mehedi, *The Recent Trend of Tourism: An Increasing Threat to the Lands Rights of Ethnic Minorities of Chittagong Hill Tract.*, 2021.

¹⁷⁹ Chakma, *Tourism Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Impact on Indigenous Peoples (IPs)*.

¹⁸⁰ Sohara Mehroze Shachi, “Sajek Needs More than Just Tourism,” *The Daily Star*, July 7, 2017.

¹⁸¹ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁸² “Militarisation in CHT,” *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti*, n.d.

¹⁸³ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

before taking administrative decisions, and NGOs are required to obtain military clearance to conduct development activities. Such practices demonstrate how the military effectively directs local governance under the pretext of “security maintenance.”¹⁸⁴ The report further criticizes this situation as a system of surveillance and control that restricts Indigenous peoples’ freedom of movement and undermines their political autonomy.¹⁸⁵

In this way, military infrastructure does not merely coexist with tourism but actively underpins it, creating a system where development projects are advanced under the shadow of surveillance. This dynamic illustrates how the militarized governance structures discussed earlier now serve to discipline resistance in the name of facilitating “safe” tourism.

3.4 Resistance Strategies: Mro Activism and Advocacy

3.4.1 From Local Mobilization to Public Protest

Local mobilization began in Mro villages after news spread that land in Lulaine mouza (administrative land unit)¹⁸⁶ had been allocated for the Marriott project without the required consent of the mouza headman (administrative leader)¹⁸⁷ or approval from the Hill District and Regional Councils.¹⁸⁸ Under the CHT Accord, all development projects are supposed to proceed only with the informed consent of village karbaris (village leaders who assist the headman),¹⁸⁹ mouza headmen, and the approval of the Hill District Council and Regional Council, but no such process was followed in this case.¹⁹⁰ After the news broke, on November 18th, 2020, hundreds of Mro people and their allies formed a human chain in Bandarban town, carrying placards calling for the project’s cancellation.¹⁹¹ Solidarity rallies followed in Dhaka, where Indigenous leaders sought to nationalize the issue by linking it to the government’s breach of the CHT Accord and violation of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) standards.¹⁹² In early 2021, resistance reached its peak in terms of public visibility. Cultural showdowns were staged in villages, blending

¹⁸⁴ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁸⁵ IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁸⁶ *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

¹⁸⁷ Roy, *Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*.

¹⁸⁸ *Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land* - Sriti O Chetona, April 17, 2021.

¹⁸⁹ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

¹⁹⁰ Sushmita S. Preetha, “The Bloody View from the Resort in the Hills,” *The Daily Star*, November 13, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

¹⁹² Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction

protest with song and dance to underscore the sacred connection between the Mro and Chimbuk Hill.¹⁹³ On 7 February 2021, thousands joined a 30-kilometer “long march” from the Chimbuk hills to Bandarban town, chanting slogans and carrying banners against the resort.¹⁹⁴ Indigenous students and activists amplified these protests, nationalizing the struggle and situating the Marriott dispute within broader Indigenous rights movements in Bangladesh. They warned that six villages would be directly affected and as many as 70-116 more indirectly affected, placing around 1,000 acres of jhum land at risk of grabbing.¹⁹⁵ This dramatic mobilisation not only demonstrated unity but also drew national media coverage and international attention.



Figure 4: Mro indigenous community protests against the construction of the Marriott Hotel¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Sushmita S. Preetha, “The Bloody View from the Resort in the Hills,” *The Daily Star*, November 13, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ “‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing’: A Voice from the Indigenous Mro Facing Eviction from Their Land,” *Human Wrongs Watch* May 4, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Staff Correspondent, “‘Want Right to Ancestral Land, Not Luxury Hotel,’” *The Daily Star*, March 3, 2021.

¹⁹⁶ “Eminent Citizens Demand Cancellation of Marriott Hotel Project in Bandarban,” *The Business Standard*, December 12, 2020.



Figure 5: Long March¹⁹⁷



Figure 6: Cultural showdown by Mro community¹⁹⁸ (Translation of the banner: “By destroying the ancestral land, life, and livelihood of the Mro people of Chimbuk Hill, the Sikder Group’s Marriott Hotel project is being built.”)

¹⁹⁷ Star Digital Report, “Construction of Hotel in Chimbuk Hill: Hundreds of Mros Take Part in Long March,” The Daily Star, February 7, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Preetha, “The Bloody View from the Resort in the Hills,” November 13, 2020.



Figure 7: Long March¹⁹⁹



Figure 8: Taken by IWGIA: Young Mro girl joining the protest²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ ““If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.””

²⁰⁰ ““If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.””

3.4.2 Petitions, Legal Appeals, and Advocacy

Alongside street protests, the Mro community pursued formal channels of opposition through petitions and legal appeals. The Human Rights Forum Bangladesh submitted a protest statement to the Prime Minister's Office, citing violations of the CHT Accord, the Hill District Council Act, and the CHT Land Dispute Settlement Commission Act, as well as international obligations under ILO Convention No 107.²⁰¹ Petition campaigns coordinated by the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF) and the Kapaeeng Foundation gathered endorsements from a wide spectrum of national civil society organisations, including Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Bangladesh Somajtantrik Dal, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), and the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA).²⁰²

Support also extended beyond Bangladesh's borders. International organizations such as the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Amnesty International signed and circulated petitions under the banner "Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction."²⁰³ These petitions linked the Marriott resort to broader violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), situating the case within global human rights standards.

Even though the government did not take real action, the petitions and legal protests were still very important. The challenges made it clear that the state and company were acting illegally, both under Bangladeshi law and under international rules. Also, by filing petitions, the Mro created written proof of their opposition, which strengthens their claim that their consent was never asked for, nor given.²⁰⁴ This prevents the authorities from later saying that the community quietly accepted the project or that the resistance was small or unimportant.

3.4.3 Cultural and Symbolic Resistance

Cultural assertion has been central to the Mro's advocacy. During protests, men and women displayed traditional weaving and clothing in front of government offices, framing them as living expressions of Mro sovereignty threatened by corporate-military development.²⁰⁵ As discussed in Chapter One, scholars such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Winona LaDuke, and Sabrina

²⁰¹ HRFB's Concern on the Eviction of Mro Groups from Their Land to Build Five Storey Hotel – Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB).

²⁰² Correspondent, "Want Right to Ancestral Land, Not Luxury Hotel."

²⁰³ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

²⁰⁴ Sobhan Talha, *Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona*.

²⁰⁵ Sobhan Talha, *Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona*.

Tremblay-Huet demonstrate that Indigenous communities frequently use cultural expression, storytelling, political advocacy, and alliance-building to challenge dominant development narratives and assert their rights to land and self-determination. The Mro community's use of cultural expression as political action reflects these broader patterns and parallels what Tripura et al. (2023) describe as “counter-narratives,” which reclaim public narratives about Indigenous culture by presenting them on Indigenous terms rather than through the commercialized lens of the tourism industry.²⁰⁶ One striking example took place in Dhaka: on March 2, 2021, a group of Mro community members, along with about 30 other Indigenous people, dressed in traditional clothes and played the *plung*, a bamboo flute, in Shahbagh, Dhaka as a sign of the protest against the Marriott luxury hotel planned on their ancestral lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.²⁰⁷ By centering this performance in the capital of Bangladesh, the protesters transported symbols of Mro heritage into a national political space, making visible the cultural dimensions of their land struggle.



Figure 9: Mro man playing the plung flute²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Tripura et al., “Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism.”

²⁰⁷ Sobhan Talha, *Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona*.

²⁰⁸ “‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’”



Figure 10: Mro community members protesting in the form of an organized cultural event²⁰⁹

This was not the only form of counter-narrative that appeared in my research. Across the Mro resistance, counter-narratives also emerged through public demonstrations, protest messages, community statements, and the use of collective memories of earlier displacement. These forms of resistance challenged dominant representations of Chimbuk as a landscape available for tourism and development by presenting it instead as ancestral Mro territory connected to livelihood, cultural identity, and community continuity. They also challenged the assumption that tourism-led development necessarily represents progress for the Mro, as community members emphasized land security, cultural survival, and the ability to determine their own future. In this way, counter-narratives operated not only through cultural performances such as the “plung” protest, but also through competing interpretations of land, development, and the history of dispossession.

3.5 Role of Grassroots Movements

According to Robert Longley, Grassroots movements are community-driven initiatives that emerge from the communities themselves (“bottom up”), led by those directly affected rather than external actors or formal institutions.²¹⁰ In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, such movements are anchored in Indigenous governance systems, kinship networks, and collective practices of resistance. The Mro community’s opposition to the Marriott project illustrates how grassroots

²⁰⁹ ‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’ 27 April 2021

²¹⁰ Robert Longley “What Is a Grassroots Movement? Definition and Examples,” 2022

mobilization rooted in traditional authority, strengthened by inter-ethnic alliances, and adapted to resource constraints, forms the core of resistance against corporate-military development.

Local people and activists from the Mro community have raised their voices against the construction of the five-star hotel in the Chimbuk Hill area.²¹¹ The first phase of mobilization emerged as a spontaneous community response rather than a formally convened process. As Reng Young Mro, one of the organizers, explained, the movement drew strength from the collective memory of past displacements.²¹² These bitter experiences of eviction and landlessness created a shared recognition that the Marriott project signaled another cycle of dispossession, prompting villagers across affected mouzas to organize collectively.²¹³ Participation was broad, with men, women, and youth joining human chains and marches; media reports noted that many travelled directly from threatened villages to urban protests.²¹⁴ This spontaneous yet coordinated mobilization underscored that resistance was community-driven and rooted in lived history, rather than externally imposed or orchestrated by NGOs. In doing so, it affirmed the legitimacy of Mro claims to land and their right to determine the future of their ancestral territories.

Importantly, while Mro governance is historically male dominated, the threat posed by the Marriott development prompted broader participation, with women leading cultural demonstrations and younger activists managing digital outreach campaigns.²¹⁵ UN experts echoed these concerns internationally, stressing that the project was proceeding without the consent of Indigenous leaders and that the dispute reflected systemic violations of Indigenous governance rights and authority.²¹⁶

Recognizing the limits of isolated action, the Mro also forged alliances with other Indigenous groups in the CHT, including Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities.²¹⁷ These collaborations

²¹¹ Nasir Uz Zaman, “‘Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,’” August 18, 2025.

²¹² “Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,”

²¹³ “Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,”

²¹⁴ “Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,”

²¹⁵ The Mro have a patriarchal social system and village councils led by male elders or headmen, limiting women’s direct participation in governance. See Rahman, “Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh”

²¹⁶ “UN Experts Call for Halt to Contentious Tourism Resort in Bangladesh,” OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/un-experts-call-halt-contentious-tourism-resort-bangladesh>.

²¹⁷ Talha Riyan Sobhan, “Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land,” *Eco-Business*, April 19, 2021.

culminated in joint demonstrations, such as the multi-ethnic rally in Dhaka on March 2nd 2021, that brought together hundreds of participants from across Bangladesh.²¹⁸



Figure 11: Protest in the Capital, Dhaka²¹⁹

Civil society organizations and progressive political parties also played a key role in amplifying the movement's reach. Groups such as the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), the Bangladesh Communist Party (CPB), and the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF) expressed solidarity with the protests and issued statements of support.²²⁰ Their involvement created a bridge between grassroots mobilization in Bandarban and policy debates in Dhaka, drawing wider national attention to the issue. Solidarity also extended to international networks. Organizations such as the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA),²²¹ Amnesty International,²²² and Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact (AIPP)²²³ publicized the Marriott project dispute as part of broader campaigns on Indigenous rights in Asia. While these groups had earlier supported petitions, their continued engagement in

²¹⁸ Riyan Sobhan, "Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land."

²¹⁹ Riyan Sobhan, "Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land."

²²⁰ Correspondent, "Want Right to Ancestral Land, Not Luxury Hotel."

²²¹ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction n.d.

²²² "Amnesty Letter for Mro," n.d.

²²³ Bir Bahadur Ushwe Sing Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

awareness campaigns and global advocacy reframed the conflict as part of a wider struggle for Indigenous self-determination.

Through these alliances, the Mro resistance moved beyond a localized dispute to become part of a collective Indigenous and civil society movement, making it more difficult for state and corporate actors to dismiss their opposition as narrow or small-scaled. Taken together, these strategies demonstrate how grassroots mobilization operates as the backbone of Indigenous resistance in the CHT. Rooted in Indigenous governance but responsive to new political realities, the Mro's organizing shows that community-driven movements adapt, expand, and endure even in the face of structural constraints and state hostility, as they have always done.

3.6 Environmental Degradation from Tourism and Infrastructure

3.6.1 Land and Forest Loss

The Marriott project at Chimbuk Hill involves large-scale forestland clearance and hill cutting in one of the CHT's steepest terrains, accelerating erosion and slope instability.²²⁴ Reports and testimonies describe foreign “red flags” and boundary markers scattered across Mro villages, signaling planned expropriation for the resort.²²⁵ For the Mro, these hills are not only homelands but also the foundation of their subsistence economy: sites of jhum fields, orchards, forests, and cremation grounds.²²⁶ Land clearance for luxury villas and cable car infrastructure threatens to destroy these areas, undermining both ecological resilience and community survival.²²⁷

²²⁴ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²²⁵ “What Is Happening to the Land of the Mro People? - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,”.

²²⁶ Hill Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” Hill Voice, November 19, 2020.

²²⁷ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”



Figure 12: Red flag boundary marker²²⁸

3.6.2 Impact on Community Water Sources:

In an article by Sriti O Chetona organization in March 2021, Riyan Sobhan Talha, a Dhaka-based journalist and photographer who reports extensively on environmental issues, climate change, and Indigenous rights, highlights that concerns over water access have been central to opposition against the Marriott project. Community leaders emphasized that construction threatened springs and canals, which supply Mro villages with their only sources of drinking and irrigation water.²²⁹ Mro representatives told a visiting parliamentary committee that the Sikder Group had already begun building dams on the Lulaine canal and Dolapara stream, both vital to surrounding settlements.²³⁰ Talha further states that given that nearly 70 percent of residents near the site rely directly on these streams and small rivers, the project risks diverting or seizing water resources on which households and farming depend.²³¹

Reng Young Mro, an organizer of the ongoing protest, repeatedly described the hotel as a threat to basic survival: “*What could be more inhumane than...ignoring their demands who are already deprived of education, health care, drinking water, electricity, and other facilities?*”²³² The Daily

²²⁸ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²²⁹ Sobhan Talha, Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona.

²³⁰ Sobhan Talha, Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona.

²³¹ Sobhan Talha, Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona.

²³² ‘Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,’.

Star reported that land clearance by R&R Holdings Ltd was already obstructing access routes to burial places, sacred stones, trees, and water sources.²³³ Civil society outlets likewise noted that up to 10,000 residents could see their livelihoods undermined if streams and canals are damaged or privatized by the resort.²³⁴ The risk is compounded by an already fragile hydrological system. WaterAid Bangladesh study found that by 2017, seven out of ten monitored springs in Bandarban had significantly reduced flow compared to 2008, a decline worsened by hillside cutting and deforestation.²³⁵

3.6.3 Biodiversity and Habitat Fragmentation

The forests of Chimbuk are not only cultural commons but also biodiversity refuges.²³⁶ Protestors warned (in the long march) that hill cutting, road expansion, and increased tourism traffic will fragment wildlife habitats and threaten biodiversity.²³⁷ In the IWGIA report titled *“If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing”* (2021), Abani, a youth from the Indigenous Mro community, describes the hills as “large libraries” of ecological knowledge, containing medicinal plants such as *“huttom”* (used to treat broken bones) that elders pass on to younger generations.²³⁸ With deforestation, this knowledge, already precarious due to land alienation, faces extinction. Thus, biodiversity loss coincides with cultural and epistemic erosion.

The cumulative effect of hill cutting, road building, and intensified visitation is cascading ecological degradation that is inseparable from Indigenous dispossession. The very infrastructure that enables tourism also displaces forest stewardship practices, replacing them with militarized checkpoints and commercial leases. As discussed in Chapter One, scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Burgos-Ayala et al. argue that development can simultaneously transform ecosystems, marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems, and disrupt the land-based relationships through which Indigenous identity and community are sustained. From

²³³ Staff Correspondent, “Marriott Hotel Construction in Bandarban against Laws,” The Daily Star, November 17, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/marriott-hotel-construction-illegal-bandarban-1996145>.

²³⁴ Sobhan Talha, Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona.

²³⁵ Sobhan Talha, Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land - Sriti O Chetona.

²³⁶ The term cultural commons refers to collectively managed territories where natural resources, cultural traditions, and social relationships are interlinked through Indigenous governance rather than private ownership. See Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Canto Classics (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²³⁷ Star Digital Report, “Construction of Hotel in Chimbuk Hill: Hundreds of Mros Take Part in Long March,” The Daily Star, February 7, 2021.

²³⁸ ““If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”” April 27th, 2021

this perspective, the transformation of Chimbuk Hill constitutes ecological, epistemological, and existential violence, as living hills, water, and forests, together with the knowledge systems and lifeworlds they sustain, are replaced by villas, swimming pools, and amusement parks. As Mro activist Abani put it in the IWGIA report, “If I lose my land, I am no one. I have nothing...everything I learnt from my ancestors is related to land”.²³⁹

3.7 Impacts on Cultural Heritage and Traditional Practices

Tourism-led development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), therefore, threatens not just material but also epistemological, ontological, and existential harm, endangering cultural memory and identity, as well as sustainable subsistence practices and livelihoods, for future generations. The proposed Marriott project in Chimbuk Hill thus exemplifies how displacement from ancestral territories is inseparable from the erosion of spiritual identity, traditional knowledge, Indigenous governance and authority, and cultural continuity.

3.7.1 Loss of Sacred and Communal Sites

For the Mro, as it is for many Indigenous Nations and communities globally, land is imbued with ancestral and spiritual meaning. Testimonies gathered by IWIGA emphasize that cemeteries, religious spaces, and sacred hills, sites where deities and Ancestors are believed to dwell, would be destroyed or rendered inaccessible by the resort.²⁴⁰ In the IWGIA report, Abani from the Indigenous Mro community recalled the trauma of 2006, when 11,445 acres were acquired for military use and communities were forced to abandon burial grounds, an experience still described in terms of grief and cultural dislocation.²⁴¹ Abani described it in IWIGA reports like this “*The elders were crying ‘No, I don’t want to leave my own land, my family members, my father and mother are buried here in this land. How can I leave this land? I don’t want to.’ But they had to leave...forced off their land, for months they had to stay with no shelter during the winter season. It was tough for them to survive that time.*”²⁴² The Marriott project risks repeating this cycle, replacing spiritually significant land and forests under community governance and control with luxury villas and cable cars under state-militarized and foreign control.²⁴³

²³⁹ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.” April 27th, 2021

²⁴⁰ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction n.d.

²⁴¹ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²⁴² “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²⁴³ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

3.7.2 Disruption of Farming and Cultural Practices

Jhum cultivation, central to Mro cultural and ecological life, is not only an economic activity but also tied to rituals, festivals, and seasonal rhythms. Community voices highlight how tourism infrastructure fragments this landscape: in a 2020 interview with the New Age Youth organization, Reng Young Mro described how cable cars planned to connect the resort's twelve villas would pass directly over villages, stripping privacy and intruding on spaces of farming, worship, and everyday life. The Marriott project thus risks reducing Mro cultural practices to tourist spectacles.

Women in particular expressed fear that reducing privacy and tourist access and surveillance would undermine their sense of security.²⁴⁴ In an interview with IWGIA, Mro Youth Abani shares that Mro women, who traditionally wear handmade clothing that offers less coverage and often leaves the upper body bare, face harassment and ridicule from outsiders.²⁴⁵ At least 54 cases of sexual violence against Indigenous women were reported in Bangladesh in recent years, 19 of them in the CHT, underscoring how tourism development heightens risks for women while pressuring them to abandon their cultural identity.²⁴⁶

IWIGA also noted that instruments like the *plung* (bamboo flute), which carry ceremonial and spiritual significance, may disappear if bamboo forests are cleared for development.²⁴⁷ This reflects what Reng Young Mro terms “cultural aggression,” where place names, languages, and rituals are overwritten by state or commercial labels.²⁴⁸ For example, the renaming of sacred hills like *Shung Nam Kua Rum* (“hill of the ancestor gods”) into Bengali titles such as *Chandra Pahar* (Moon hill) exemplifies how dispossession extends into symbolic erasure.²⁴⁹ In this way, both cultivation and culture risk being commodified, eroded, and detached from the land that sustains them.

3.8 Power Dynamics and Political Influences

The Marriott project in Chimbuk Hill is not simply an isolated tourism venture; it sits at the intersection of corporate, military, and political power in the CHT. As mentioned earlier, military encroachment has long shaped the politics of land in Bandarban, and the current resort

²⁴⁴ ‘Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,’.

²⁴⁵ ‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’

²⁴⁶ ‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’

²⁴⁷ ‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’

²⁴⁸ ‘Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,’

²⁴⁹ ‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’

development reflects that continuity. What makes the Chimbuk project distinct is the intensity of corporate-military collaboration, where private business interests such as R&R Holdings Ltd operate with explicit backing from state security institutions. Reports describe army personnel marking land with red flags and restricting local access even before formal approvals were secured, signaling that force rather than consent underpinned the development process.²⁵⁰

Local resistance has therefore unfolded under heavy surveillance. Community members and activists recount how security checkpoints were used to obstruct access to protest sites, and those who publicly opposed the resort were threatened with harassment.²⁵¹ Such intimidation is not incidental but reflects a deliberate tactic of silencing Indigenous voices, framing opposition as a threat to development or “security.” This dynamic reinforces what scholars have described as the militarization of development in the CHT: the use of security structures to facilitate projects that benefit outside elites at the expense of Indigenous communities.²⁵²

The political side of the Marriott project also raises serious concerns. Under the 1997 CHT Accord, Hill District Councils are supposed to review and approve land use and development projects.²⁵³ However, reports show that these legal bodies were ignored during the approval process, leaving local governance structures sidelined.²⁵⁴ National leaders promoted the resort as part of Bangladesh’s broader tourism and investment vision, using narratives of progress that framed local opposition as irrational or anti-development. Hana S. Ahmed argues that tourism in the CHT is used to cover state violence and legitimize land expropriation. In reality, Indigenous people stressed that they are not against development but against losing their land, consent, governance authority, and cultural survival.

3.8.1 Tourism as a Tool of Surveillance and Displacement

Tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is consistently framed by the state and corporate actors as a benign force of modernization, stability, and progress, yet in practice, it functions as a device for legitimizing land grabs and normalizing militarization. Once Indigenous territories are branded as

²⁵⁰ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²⁵¹ Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

²⁵² Mp, Subject: Protect the Indigenous Mro People from Forced Eviction, n.d.

²⁵³ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

²⁵⁴ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

leisure landscapes, the heightened security presence and exceptional administrative practices required to secure them are presented as the necessary price of “development.” Tripura et al. describe this process as a form of settler-colonial logic that naturalizes land alienation and cultural marginalization.²⁵⁵ The Marriott resort at Chimbuk Hill was promoted in precisely these terms as a showcase for regional development, even though civil society and media outlets warned that it would displace Mro villagers, undermine the CHT Accord, and render Indigenous people refugees on their own land.²⁵⁶

This model of tourism has also been accompanied by the consolidation of military infrastructures. Security camps, checkpoints, and patrols are clustered around resorts and access roads, officially justified as measures for visitor safety but in reality, serving to monitor Indigenous mobility and silence protest.²⁵⁷ IWGIA’s *The Slow Demise* records how these security camps become permanent features of tourism zones,²⁵⁸ while Hana Shams (2020) calls this pattern “securitization of the Hills,”²⁵⁹ in which military presence and tourism projects reinforce each other. In the Chimbuk hill area, even the Mro long march unfolded under close surveillance, and many villagers described how a heavy sense of silence remained, as checkpoints and constant monitoring made people afraid to speak out again.²⁶⁰

3.8.2 Divide and Rule Tactics

One of the most troubling aspects of the Marriott project was the way authorities tried to undercut genuine resistance by staging a counter-protest. Hill Voice, a popular online news for CHT issues, Indigenous rights, minority and women issues and human rights, published that, on November 17th, 2020, (just days after the Mro community and their allies launched strong protests) the army, working with Bengali settler groups, forced Mro villagers from another area to take part in a “human chain” in favour of the hotel in Bandarban town.²⁶¹ Testimonies later revealed that many

²⁵⁵ Tripura et al., “Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism.”

²⁵⁶ Voice, “Concerns and Protests of the Human Rights Forum on Building a Five-Star Hotel and Tourist Facility by Evicting the Indigenous Mros in Chimbuk,” November 19, 2020.

²⁵⁷ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁵⁸ *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: The Slow Demise of the Region’s Indigenous Peoples* (IWGIA, 2012).

²⁵⁹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁶⁰ Hana Shams Ahmed, “One Year after the Mros’ Long March in Bandarban, Has Anything Changed?,” *The Daily Star*, April 1, 2022.

²⁶¹ Hill Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel,” *GroundswellNews*, November 20, 2020,

participants were rounded up in Alikadam, put on buses, and given placards and banners that had been prepared in advance by the army and military intelligence.²⁶² It was further written in the Hill Voice news portal that they were told what to say, handed slogans such as “tourism in the mountains is development of Mro people,” and even paid small amounts of money (about 1,000-1,500 taka=8-12 USD) for their attendance.²⁶³

For those who took part, the experience was not voluntary. Villagers described feeling anxious and helpless, standing silently in a protest that did not reflect their real views. Observers noted that many of the faces in the line-up looked uneasy, while intelligence officers and settler leaders closely supervised the event.²⁶⁴ Rights groups and student organizations quickly denounced the “human chain” as a staged performance designed to muddy the waters and present the illusion of divided opinion within the Mro community.²⁶⁵ Chyaung Young Mro, General Secretary of Bangladesh Mro Students Association, said that “this was absolutely a projected lie and arranged event” that misrepresented their struggle.²⁶⁶ Hana Shams Ahmed notes that, a year after the Mro long march, the absence of further public protest or reporting did not mean that the conflict over the proposed resort had been resolved.²⁶⁷ Ahmed argues that the silence surrounding the project needs to be understood within the political conditions of the CHT, where surveillance of Jumma activists remained high and reportedly intensified following the Mro protests and expressions of concern from national and international human rights organizations. She points out that, after the February 2021 long march, some Mro people were photographed holding signs welcoming tourism, while very little information subsequently emerged about what was happening on the ground.²⁶⁸ For Ahmed, this silence was therefore not evidence of acceptance; rather, the earlier cultural showdown and long march expressed decades of accumulated discontent over land dispossession and eviction and a refusal of development that could produce further displacement.²⁶⁹

²⁶² Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel.”

²⁶³ Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel.”

²⁶⁴ Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel.”

²⁶⁵ “‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.’”

²⁶⁶ Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel.”

²⁶⁷ Ahmed, “One Year after the Mros’ Long March in Bandarban, Has Anything Changed?”

²⁶⁸ Ahmed, “One Year after the Mros’ Long March in Bandarban, Has Anything Changed?”

²⁶⁹ Ahmed, “One Year after the Mros’ Long March in Bandarban, Has Anything Changed?”

This kind of divide and rule strategy has long been used in the CHT to weaken Indigenous solidarity, but its reappearance in the Marriott case cut especially deep. For many Mro, it was not only a reminder of the state's power but also an emotional betrayal seeing a few local leaders pressured or co-opted into standing against the broader community's interests. Beyond the immediate propaganda value, the event signaled how far authorities were willing to go: turning community members against each other in order to legitimize a project that most saw as a direct threat to their land and survival.



Figure 13: Staged counter-protest. Translation from the large banner is “The Army and the Mro community, another name for them is the bridge of cooperation.”²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Voice, “Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel.”



Figure 14: Anxious villagers in the protest²⁷¹

3.9 Development Promises and Exclusions

Although the Marriott project and similar ventures are promoted as opportunities to improve local livelihoods, Mro leaders argue that tourism development rarely benefits Indigenous communities in practice. As Reng Young Mro explained to the New Age youth organization, the quality of life is tied to education, healthcare, and control over land, not to resorts that seize ancestral territories in the name of business.²⁷² Promises of self-employment and economic uplift are used to justify land grabbing, yet the reality is that people lose both their farmland and their chance to use it for future security.²⁷³ In Sajek, for example, more than 200 Pangkhua and Lushai families were evicted, and in Nilgiri, locals were told they would be given opportunities to run shops but were later left with only token access, such as selling fruit in parking areas, hardly the empowerment they were promised.²⁷⁴ At the same time, the state neglects to provide even the most basic services to Indigenous children. In a cluster of 35 Mro villages, there is not a single primary school, and the lack of nearby hospitals means that preventable outbreaks of diseases like measles have claimed children's lives.²⁷⁵ Abani expressed deep frustration that roads and luxury resorts are

²⁷¹ Voice, "Mro Villagers Forced by Army and Communal Groups to Attend Human Chain for Five-Star Hotel."

²⁷² 'Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,'.

²⁷³ 'Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,'.

²⁷⁴ 'Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,'.

²⁷⁵ "If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing."

prioritized over schools and clinics, leaving children “always in the dark.”²⁷⁶ Without access to education, healthcare, or secure land, families grow poorer, and children are forced to remain at home working in fields rather than pursuing a future. For many Mro, the loss of land means more than economic decline; it threatens the very conditions through which knowledge, care, and identity are passed to the next generation. Their fears for their children’s future reflect not only material insecurity but also the epistemological and existential violence of being severed from the landscapes that once supported their lives, and provided practical, spiritual, legal and political teachings of how to live.²⁷⁷

3.10 Conclusion

What has been marketed as a symbol of national progress has, in reality, greatly deepened insecurity for local communities, threatening their forests, water, and livelihoods, while sidelining their consent and governance structures guaranteed under the CHT Accord. Resistance has been strong and multi-layered: from human chains and cultural protests to the long march, and from legal petitions to international advocacy. Yet these efforts have unfolded under heavy surveillance, intimidation, and even divide-and-rule tactics that sought to fracture solidarity.

For the Mro, the Marriott project is not just about a hotel; it represents the continuation of a long history of dispossession, where promises of “development” mask the loss of ancestral land, the weakening of Indigenous authority, the loss of Indigenous knowledge, and the erasure of cultural identity. The state’s narratives of modernization and global connectivity stand in stark contrast to and muddle the lived reality of villagers who lack schools, hospitals, and increasingly land and secure livelihoods.

What is clear is that the Marriott project case is that it is not an isolated dispute but part of a broader pattern in the CHT, where land, power, identity and sovereignty are continually fought for and contested. As the following chapter turns to Indigenous knowledge, governance, and community-led alternatives, it asks whether and how ‘development’ can be reimagined on different terms: ones that prioritize Indigenous rights, sustainability, and justice, rather than dispossession and exclusion.

²⁷⁶ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²⁷⁷ “‘If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing’: A Desperate Plea of the Indigenous Mro Facing Eviction from Their Land. - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,”.

Chapter Four: Findings and Contribution

4.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter described the Mro community's struggle against land dispossession and documented the forces driving tourism-led development, this chapter moves beyond those descriptions to interpret what the findings and supporting literature reveal about power, belonging, and control. My analysis focuses on how the idea of "development" operates as a language of power, often expressed through authority, coercion, and control and how the Mro community experiences, negotiates, and challenges these manifestations in their daily lives. What stands out is that land politics in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have never been a series of isolated events. Instead, they form a continuous pattern of domination that changes form but not intention. Each stage of colonial forest laws, the Kaptai Dam, Bengali settlement programs, and now military-backed tourism, adds another layer to this long history of intervention (chapter two). Together, they reveal a consistent effort to manage Indigenous people by redefining their land, their labor, and their legitimacy.

For the Mro, forced displacement is not a single historical moment but a condition that continues to shape daily life. It influences how people move, live, remember, and relate to each other. Every new project, whether described as "development," "eco-tourism," or "modernization," arrives with promises of progress but produces similar results: the weakening of Indigenous autonomy and the reorganization of land under state and corporate power. My study suggests that the state's authority over Indigenous land has not disappeared, despite the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, but has merely changed form. Instead of direct coercion, control is now exercised through administrative language and moral claims that make the exclusion of the Mro from their ancestral lands and decision-making processes appear necessary for progress. The analysis in this chapter draws from multiple perspectives: historical, political, and environmental - to explore how continual land loss connects with identity, governance, and belonging in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The evidence shows that "development" in the CHT has functioned less as an economic goal and more as a political instrument for territorial control. Under the language of modernization, the expansion of roads, cantonments, and luxury resorts has extended state surveillance into Indigenous spaces while excluding those same communities from decision-making, reflecting

broader dynamics of settler colonialism in which land is reorganized to consolidate external control. This reflects what Hana Shams Ahmed describes as the “*everyday normalization of violence*,” where tourism replaces overt militarization but preserves the same hierarchy of power.²⁷⁸

In my interpretation, the Mro’s opposition to the Marriott hotel project on Chimbuk Hill is not limited to a single development dispute. It exposes a much deeper contradiction in Bangladesh’s national development narrative, where inclusion is repeatedly promised yet exclusion persists. The findings also reveal that environmental and sustainability rhetoric has become a new tool for legitimizing land appropriation. Phrases such as “eco-tourism,” “heritage protection,” and “green development” often disguise extractive practices that benefit investors rather than communities. As Andreas Neef, a scholar whose work focuses on land grabbing, tourism, and displacement in the Global South observes, such initiatives merge conservation ideals with corporate profit motives, treating Indigenous territories as underused spaces available for transformation.²⁷⁹ In the CHT, this dynamic is visible in projects where the army leases forested land for tourism projects, claiming development benefits while limiting Indigenous access to ancestral areas.²⁸⁰ From my research, this pattern shows that the new frontier of displacement in the CHT is not marked by open violence but by moral justification, where sustainability becomes a cover for exclusion.

At the same time, the findings highlight the persistence and clarity of Indigenous political consciousness. Despite surveillance, restricted mobility, and institutional neglect, the Mro community continues to assert its right to self-determination. Their collective resistance shows an active understanding of rights and belonging; it is not a reaction but a deliberate strategy to protect meaning, territory, and dignity. Their opposition challenges the logic that defines Indigenous land as disposable and Indigenous knowledge as irrelevant. It also reveals a deeper understanding of justice, one rooted not in compensation or relocation but in recognition and participation.²⁸¹ In my view, this struggle redefines what resistance means; it is not only about survival but about reclaiming the authority and sovereignty to decide the future of the hills.

²⁷⁸ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. 2017

²⁷⁹ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

²⁸⁰ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*, 59.

²⁸¹ “Amnesty Intl- Pushed to the Edge” n.d.

This analytical lens moves beyond documenting injustice to uncovering the system that produces it: the convergence of state authority, military enterprise, and global tourism capital. By situating the Mro movement within this wider network, the analysis connects local resistance to broader patterns of Indigenous struggles against settler colonialism, capitalist dispossession, environmental dispossession, and the politics of erasure.

4.2 Language of Development

Drawing on secondary sources, my study shows that in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), land loss for Indigenous communities does not occur as a single historical event but as a recurring process that adapts to new political and economic contexts. What changes over time is not the outcome but the vocabulary used to justify it. Each era, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary, uses a new set of words to explain why Indigenous people must give up their lands for “the greater good.” The continuity lies in the logic that development always requires someone’s displacement. In this sense, the present wave of tourism-led development in the CHT is not a break from the past but its latest version.

The evidence demonstrates that state narratives have evolved from the language of “civilizing the backward tracts” during British rule, to “integrating the frontier” under Pakistan, and now to “modernizing through tourism” under Bangladesh. Although the language has softened, the effect remains the same: Indigenous lands are continuously reframed as state assets waiting to be improved. As Shapan Adnan and Ranajit Dastidar observed, this shift marks a move from coercive land seizure to what they call “accumulation by dispossession,” where bureaucratic procedures and commercial leases achieve what military operations once did.²⁸² My findings builds on this idea to argue that dispossession in the hills no longer relies on visible force. Instead, it operates through a carefully manufactured sense of consent, produced by the language of development that portrays exclusion as progress and occupation as modernization.

Reports and tourism campaigns describe the hills as “untapped potential,” “unexplored,” and “eco-friendly.”²⁸³ These words carry a hidden assumption: that the land has no proper use until the state or the market defines it. This discourse positions Indigenous people as obstacles to progress unless

²⁸² Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,” 107.

²⁸³ Sarder Ali Haider, *Unlocking the Untapped Potential of Chittagong Hill Tracts: Overcoming Barriers to Attract International Tourists and Boost Bangladesh’s Tourism Economy*, 9, no. 2 (2023): 924.

they agree to participate on terms set by outsiders. The state's language of inclusion, phrases such as "participation," "community benefit," and "peaceful integration," function as a moral cover for projects that transfer control of resources to military or corporate interests. This aligns with Hana Shams Ahmed's analysis of tourism as a soft form of militarization that gives a "civilian mask" to military occupation, using the language of development to normalize surveillance and economic dependency.²⁸⁴

In the case of the Marriott project on Chimbuk Hill, this pattern is particularly visible. Officials present the Marriott resort as a symbol of development and economic progress, yet the Mro community was never asked for consent.²⁸⁵ Their absence in planning meetings and public statements is treated as a non-issue, as if their silence equals approval.²⁸⁶ However, evidence points to this silence not as consent, but as exhaustion, and the result of decades of being excluded from the decisions over their own territories that shape their future.

At a deeper level, the repeated rebranding of dispossession, from security to modernization to eco-tourism, shows how power endures by rewriting its own justification. This is not simply a policy change; it is a cultural strategy. By renaming extraction as sustainability, the state transforms exploitation into virtue. Andreas Neef explains this as "green grabbing," a process where environmental goals are used to legitimize new enclosures.²⁸⁷ My interpretation of this case supports this idea: what appears as eco-development is in practice a new phase of land control, one that combines global environmental discourse with local militarized authority.

The findings also suggest that such linguistic shifts have emotional and psychological consequences. Older generations of Mro remember past displacements caused by the Kaptai Dam or forest reserves, while younger people now face exclusion under the name of tourism. This repeated experience produces a form of fatigue, which I think of as "the normalization of loss," a process through which repeated dispossession becomes embedded in everyday life and begins to appear routine, expected, and difficult to contest. In this sense, normalization of loss reflects a form of structural violence, where harm is not always immediate or visible but accumulates over

²⁸⁴ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁸⁵ Eco-Business, "Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land," Eco-Business, April 19, 2021.

²⁸⁶ Riyan Sobhan, "Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land."

²⁸⁷ Neef, *Tourism, Land Grabs and Displacement*.

time through policies, restrictions, and gradual exclusion.²⁸⁸ Over time, this repeated pattern fosters a sense that land dispossession will recur, often under shifting justifications.

4.3 Development as Everyday Control

Building on the normalization of loss concept, I explore here how development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is experienced not only as a set of projects or policies but as a daily structure of control. It reaches into the everyday aspects of life, of how people move, trade, cultivate, and even imagine their future. The presence of the state and the army is no longer expressed mainly through checkpoints or armed camps; it now appears through signs that read “Tourist Zone” or “Restricted Entry.”²⁸⁹ These boundaries, presented as part of development, quietly dictate who can enter, who must register, and who is considered legitimate within the hills.²⁹⁰ This shift from overt military occupation to administrative regulation reflects a broader transformation of power: control has become normalized, routinized, bureaucratized, and embedded in everyday life.

The literature available indicates that this normalization works through infrastructure, particularly the expansion of roads, military installations, and tourism facilities that reorganize Indigenous space and access to land, in ways comparable to how railroads functioned as instruments of territorial control during the colonial era. In several areas of Bandarban, including the routes toward Chimbuk and Thanchi, new roads built under tourism and military initiatives have improved access for visitors and security patrols but also tightened administrative control over local movement and resource use. This pattern, described in both IWGIA and Hana Shams Ahmed, reflects how infrastructure development expands state surveillance while narrowing Indigenous autonomy. Ahmed observes that road construction and tourism projects in Bandarban have enhanced the army’s mobility and visibility in the name of development, while IWGIA documents that similar expansion of roads in the southern hill tracts has restricted Indigenous access to forests and livelihoods under the justification of “connectivity.”²⁹¹

My observation is that development’s power lies in its subtlety. Unlike earlier waves of dispossession, which relied on visible force, this form of control works through policy documents,

²⁸⁸ Paul Farmer, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below,” in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman et al. (University of California Press, 1998).

²⁸⁹ “If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.”

²⁹⁰ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁹¹ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*; IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012).

zoning rules, and bureaucratic administrative language. These tools create a sense of legality and order, making it difficult to question exclusion. As I discussed earlier, Indigenous people in the CHT are asked to show ID cards, seek permission for gatherings, and/or request access to certain areas, all in the name of regulation.²⁹² Over time, these requirements normalize bureaucratic control, embedding structural violence within everyday movements and routines, and shaping how access, mobility, and participation are experienced. The findings also reveal how development reorganizes labor and value in the hills. The Mro, once self-sufficient through jhum (swidden) cultivation and forest use, are now drawn into wage labor linked to tourism and construction. This shift is often portrayed by government agencies as “employment generation,” but the jobs available are temporary and low-paid.²⁹³ Workers build resorts, maintain roads, or clean facilities that occupy their former lands. The irony is that development displaces people and then reabsorbs them as cheap labor within the very projects that took their resources, reflecting a broader capitalist process.²⁹⁴ This process mirrors what development scholars Adnan and Dastidar identify as “market-based control,” in which land and labor become commodities managed through state-capital alliances rather than through violence.²⁹⁵

At the social level, these new economic relationships also reshape hierarchies. Families with connections to local administrations or the military gain access to contracts and benefits, while those who oppose the projects are labeled uncooperative.²⁹⁶ As a result, development divides the community internally, weakening collective resistance.²⁹⁷ The analysis shows that this fragmentation is not accidental; it is built into the logic of control. By rewarding compliance and punishing dissent, development becomes a form of governance that disciplines through opportunity. In everyday terms, development in the CHT functions is what James Scott might describe as a *state simplification*, a process that makes complex human lives legible to authority.²⁹⁸ However, I show that in the hills, this simplification is moral as much as administrative.

²⁹² IWGIA, *Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (IWGIA, 2012); Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁹³ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh,” 49.

²⁹⁴ “Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I - Chapter Twenty-Six.”

²⁹⁵ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

²⁹⁶ Ahmed, *Tourism and State Violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*.

²⁹⁷ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

²⁹⁸ *State Simplifications: Nature, Space, and People*, n.d.

Development teaches people how to be “good citizens” by rewarding obedience to the development plan. It defines progress through compliance with state-defined development agendas rather than meaningful participation in decisions that shape land use and livelihoods. Mro’s limited access to their own hills or lands is justified through narratives of security, environmental protection, or tourism growth, all of which frame exclusion and alienation from their lands as benevolent.

4.4 The Cultural Dimensions of Land Loss

Land for the Mro, as it is for many Indigenous peoples, is not simply a physical resource but the foundation of cultural meaning and collective identity.²⁹⁹ Every stream, ridge, and forest path carries memory and purpose. When these places are taken, fenced, or transformed for tourism, the loss is not only territorial, but also existential. The primary relationship between people and land is central to understanding displacement in the hills. It is not only about who governs or controls the land but about how that land sustains knowledge, belief, and belonging.

In the testimonies and reports I examined, the Mro describe the forest as a living space, their life and livelihood are “encircled and fastened with the forest,” which sustains both material survival and cultural meaning.³⁰⁰ Farming, gathering, and rituals are woven into this landscape in ways that define what it means to live well. The introduction of large-scale tourism breaks this balance. Forests are cleared for resorts, paths are paved for visitors, and once communal spaces become commercial, and private, property. This transformation redefines how nature is understood and related to: what was once sacred becomes a scenic commodity. My analysis builds on this by showing that environmental change also damages cultural continuity. When relationships between people and land are transformed through new forms of governance and management, the meanings attached to that land begin to erode. The environmental consequences of this shift are visible. Hills are excavated for roads, slopes are destabilized by heavy construction, and water sources are diverted for resort facilities.³⁰¹ These physical disruptions mirror social dislocation. Communities that once relied on forest products such as bamboo, herbs, and wild fruits for both livelihood and ritual now face shrinking access as deforestation, settlement, and tourism restrict their movement

²⁹⁹ “Amnesty Intl- Pushed to the Edge.”

³⁰⁰ “Satish Chakma & Dr. M. Meera Mro Community and Their Livelihoods in Bandarban District,” n.d.

³⁰¹ Mong Shanoo Chowdhury and Pallab Chakma, Human Rights Report 2015 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh, n.d.; Riyan Sobhan, “Indigenous People in Bangladesh Oppose Resort on Ancestral Land.”

and use of forest lands.³⁰² The Mro are now more dependent on markets and wage labor, weakening their self-sufficiency and sovereignty. Adnan and Dastidar note that such state-driven projects transform Indigenous livelihoods into forms of controlled dependency.³⁰³ From the study, I found that this is the case in the Bandarban context: development undermines Indigenous autonomy by turning ancestral relationships with land, once guided by custom and collective stewardship, into bureaucratic transactions that require state permission and regulation.

What stands out in the data is that the loss of land also means the loss of language, ways of knowing, ways of being, and memory. The Mro's oral traditions, songs, and stories are grounded in the geography of their environment, and the names of hills, rivers, and sacred sites are part of their storytelling.³⁰⁴ When those places are renamed or restricted, cultural transmission becomes fractured.³⁰⁵ UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020) defines collective memory as the process through which communities preserve and pass on shared experiences, values, and traditions through language, ritual, and symbols.³⁰⁶ What becomes clear here is that the forced disconnection from ancestral land interrupts this memory system. Many Mro children grow up knowing the boundaries of military zones and tourist areas more clearly than the old forest paths that once connected their villages.³⁰⁷ This gradual replacement of the cultural landscape with controlled space threatens the continuity of Indigenous knowledge itself.

The findings also reveal emotional consequences that are less visible in policy documents but central to lived experience. Many community members describe feelings of grief, uncertainty, and helplessness when they see their hills transformed into restricted tourist sites. I use ecological grief to describe the emotional and cultural responses that can emerge from experienced or anticipated damage to landscapes, ecosystems, and environmental relationships that are central to people's lives. Building on Cunsolo and Ellis, I interpret these responses through the concept of ecological

³⁰² "Satish Chakma & Dr. M. Meera Mro Community and Their Livelihoods in Bandarban District"; Rahman, "Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh."

³⁰³ Adnan and Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh," 49.

³⁰⁴ Rahman, "Life and Society of the Mro Ethnic Group of Bangladesh"; "Satish Chakma & Dr. M. Meera Mro Community and Their Livelihoods in Bandarban District."

³⁰⁵ "Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,".

³⁰⁶ "The Future of Collective Memory: Preserving the Past in a Digital Age,".

³⁰⁷ "Mro People Do Not Want the Hotel but Their Rights to the Land,".

grief, particularly in relation to the experienced or anticipated loss of valued environments.³⁰⁸ More recently, Markkula and colleagues' work with Sámi communities further helps me consider how such grief can extend beyond environmental change to questions of cultural continuity and relationships with land across generations.³⁰⁹ In this thesis, I draw on these insights to examine how threatened changes to Mro ancestral land can be experienced not simply as the potential loss of territory, but also as threats to livelihood, belonging, cultural continuity, and relationships with the surrounding environment. Amnesty International documents similar patterns across the CHT, where forced relocations cause not only economic hardship but also psychological distress and cultural fragmentation.³¹⁰ I argue that, in the Mro case, environmental loss becomes part of emotional memory, which, over time, contributes to what I described earlier as the "normalization of loss," in which repeated dispossession becomes embedded in everyday life and increasingly difficult to contest. In this way, ecological grief does not remain a moment of loss but becomes a longer-term condition, as repeated experiences of land dispossession and restricted access to ancestral territories render loss both ongoing and anticipated.

4.5 Resistance as Redefinition

From the discussion, I found that the Mro community's resistance is not only a reaction to state intrusion but a continuation of existing ways of understanding justice and development that challenge dominant state narratives. It extends beyond public demonstrations to an everyday moral and political practice that insists that life on the hills must be governed by consent rather than command.

One of the clearest expressions of Mro resistance came in February 2021, when hundreds of community members marched from remote villages to Bandarban town to oppose the construction of the five-star Marriott resort on Chimbuk Hill, carrying banners reading "*Our Land, Our Life*."³¹¹ Local media reported that demonstrators rejected compensation and demanded a permanent halt to construction. Through their slogans, the protest became more than rejection; it taught a different vision of progress built on land, memory, and dignity. I have explored Hana Shams Ahmed's work

³⁰⁸ Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss," *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 4 (2018): 275–81.

³⁰⁹ Inkeri Markkula et al., "Climate Change, Cultural Continuity and Ecological Grief: Insights from the Sámi Homeland," *Ambio* 53, no. 8 (2024): 1203–17.

³¹⁰ "Amnesty Intl- Pushed to the Edge" 2013

³¹¹ Report, "Construction of Hotel in Chimbuk Hill," February 7, 2021.

throughout my thesis which shows that tourism in the CHT often operates as a civilian facade for military influence, masking control behind the rhetoric of peace and prosperity. My findings build on this by showing that the Mro invert that narrative using the visibility of protest to expose what so-called development conceals.

Cultural expression is another field of contestation. During demonstrations, Mro youth performed dances and sang ancestral songs declaring that the hills cannot be sold.³¹² Khokaneswar Tripura et al. document similar Indigenous performances in the CHT as counter-narratives that challenge settler-colonial stories through art and storytelling.³¹³ My interpretation is that the Mro's performances reclaim representation itself, transforming culture from display into declaration. Similar dynamics have been observed in other Indigenous contexts, including Māori cultural revitalization in Aotearoa and Indigenous performance practices in North America, where cultural expression operates as a form of political assertion and resistance to marginalization. The movement's reach also depends on collaboration. Mro leaders have collaborated with the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Human Rights Forum Bangladesh, and international partners such as IWGIA to demand enforcement of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Joint statements in 2021 stressed that construction without FPIC violates both domestic law and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.³¹⁴ This collaboration turned a local land dispute into a globally recognized rights claim, illustrating what Adnan and Dastidar call the strategic use of advocacy networks to amplify Indigenous voices.³¹⁵ Memory functions as resistance as well. Elders recall earlier displacements from the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s to the Nilgiri tourism expansions in the 2000s to warn younger generations about recurring and failed state promises. Youth activists circulate those memories through hashtags such as #Mro_Lives_Matter, turning oral testimony into digital activism.³¹⁶ This intergenerational continuity transforms grief into guidance, linking past injustice with present defiance. I see this process as a form of "resistant

³¹² "'If I Lose My Land, I Am No One. I Have Nothing.'"

³¹³ Tripura et al., "Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism."

³¹⁴ "What Is Happening to the Land of the Mro People? - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,"

³¹⁵ Adnan and Dastidar, "Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh."

³¹⁶ Sohel Chakma Pahar, n.d, 2020, 27 November.

continuity,” where ecological grief does not end in loss but, in response to the normalization of loss, becomes a source of sustained resistance across generations.



Figure 15: Protest against the tourism project on Chimbuk Hill³¹⁷

Resistance has also become creative and forward-looking. By aligning with human rights advocates, environmentalists, and student networks, the Mro situate their struggle within broader debates over sustainable futures. These alliances reflect Raja Devasish Roy's view of Indigenous governance as a living customary law capable of adapting without losing its ethical foundation.³¹⁸ In this light, resistance becomes not only defiance but also design, an attempt to build alternatives grounded in collective stewardship, environmental reciprocity, and free, prior, and informed consent, which challenges the normalization of loss by asserting that access to land and decision-making cannot be taken for granted but must be actively negotiated and collectively determined.

4.6 Unequal Power and Conditional Rights

My review of state policies, legal frameworks, and their implementation show that in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the state's acknowledgment of Indigenous rights exists mostly in theory, but not in practice. Laws, agreements, and peace promise create the image of inclusion

³¹⁷ Sohel Chakma Pahar.

³¹⁸ Roy, Challenges for Juridical Pluralism and Customary Laws of Indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

while firmly keeping authority and power within the central government and the military. The 1997 CHT Peace Accord, once seen as a path to self-rule, remains largely unfulfilled. Institutions like the Hill District Councils and the Land Commission were meant to return land and strengthen autonomy, yet they hold little real power. Amnesty International reports that the Land Commission has resolved very few land cases because of political interference and weak authority.³¹⁹ This gap between law and reality is not accidental; state law maintains control under the appearance of reform. Meanwhile, militarization continues under the cover of development.

The structure of law and governance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) keeps Indigenous rights dependent on state approval. The CHT Regulation of 1900, though framed as a form of protection, still enables land transfers to settlers and private investors through permissions, often issued without community consent.³²⁰ This legal flexibility turns authority into a tool for selective inclusion: rights are recognized only when they do not interfere with state or military priorities. The 15th Constitutional Amendment (2011) intensified this inequality by removing the word *Indigenous* and labeling communities as “*tribes, minor races and ethnic sects*,” a shift that Raja Devasish Roy argues undermines collective identity.³²¹ Indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are treated as recipients of government approval rather than holders of guaranteed rights. According to IWGIA (2012), most administrative powers, such as decisions on land, development, and resource use, remain under the control of central ministries despite the creation of local councils. The report notes that the Hill District Councils and the Regional Council operate “only with permission from Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh), and their authority over budgets, staff, and project planning depends entirely on the government.”³²² Building on this, these institutional arrangements and governance practices reflect not just bureaucratic limitation but a deliberate design: by keeping Indigenous governance subordinate to central authorization, the state maintains control while appearing to promote decentralization.

³¹⁹ “Amnesty Intl-Pushed to the Edge”2013

³²⁰ Adnan and Dastidar, “Alienation of the Lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.”

³²¹ Raja Devasish Roy, People's Republic of Bangladesh, n.d.

³²² IWGIA, Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh (IWGIA, 2012).

4.7 Shifts and Continuities After the Government Change

The political overturn in August 2024, when former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned amid mass protests and fled the country, opened a narrow window for reform but did not dismantle the deeper power structures that sustain inequality.³²³ While the interim administration led by Professor Muhammad Yunus (a Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist serving as Chief Adviser) promised accountability and institutional reform, change in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has remained largely rhetorical.

Some restrictions on speech and civic activity have eased. Journalists and rights defenders now face fewer digital security charges, and discussions on military reform have entered public debate. However, Indigenous communities continue to experience violence. In September 2024, coordinated attacks by Bengali settlers in Khagrachari and Rangamati districts destroyed Indigenous homes and shops, leaving multiple casualties.³²⁴ These incidents demonstrate that while national leadership has shifted, local hierarchies of violence, linking settlers, corporate actors, and elements of the security forces, remain intact.

This continuity was further exposed by the arrest of Ringrong Mro, a respected Indigenous land defender from Lama Upazila, Bandarban. On February 22, 2025, Ringrong was taken by plainclothes officers from his village in Langkam Para following what locals described as a fabricated case filed by Lama Rubber Industries Ltd., a company long accused of grabbing and burning Indigenous land.³²⁵ According to his son, Johan Mro, the arrest is part of a broader effort to silence activists resisting the illegal occupation of 400 acres of ancestral land. Human-rights groups, including the Kapaeeng Foundation (a Dhaka-based Indigenous rights organization), have condemned the arrest and documented earlier violence by the same company, including attacks and the destruction of homes in 2022 and 2023.³²⁶ After a complaint from Kapaeeng, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) formed a probe committee and ordered local authorities to ensure security for Mro and Tripura villagers.³²⁷ Yet, as of early 2025, the order remains

³²³ Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina Resigns amid Mass Protests | Human Rights Watch, August 6, 2024.

³²⁴ “Renewed Violence in Chittagong Hill Tracts: Bengali Settlers Target Indigenous Jumma Communities | Cultural Survival,” September 24, 2024; “Joint Statement: Call for Urgent Action on Repeated Violence in CHT - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs,”.

³²⁵ Kapaeeng Foundation, “Arrest of Indigenous Leader Ringrong Mro and Ongoing Land Grabbing in Bandarban,” Kapaeeng Foundation.

³²⁶ Foundation, “Arrest of Indigenous Leader Ringrong Mro and Ongoing Land Grabbing in Bandarban.”

³²⁷ Foundation, “Arrest of Indigenous Leader Ringrong Mro and Ongoing Land Grabbing in Bandarban.”

unenforced. In a joint communication issued in March 2025, several United Nations Special Rapporteurs, including Mary Lawlor (Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders), Matthew Gillett (Vice-Chair on Communications of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention), expressed deep concern over the continued criminalization and judicial harassment of Ringrong Mro.³²⁸ They noted that his arrest reflects a broader pattern of intimidation against Indigenous and environmental human rights defenders in Bangladesh, urging the government to guarantee his safety and drop the fabricated charges.³²⁹



Figure 16: Protest Rally and Assembly, demanding the release of Ringrong Mro³³⁰ (Some translation of the placards: “Stop land grabbing in the name of development”; “withdraw false cases against Indigenous peoples”; “Stop military harassment; free Indigenous peoples”)

Protest rallies across Bandarban, Thanchi, and Dhaka, organized by the Mro Students’ Association and other Indigenous youth networks, have demanded Ringrong’s release and the withdrawal of false cases.³³¹ These events reveal that despite political change, the underlying structure of control linking corporate interests, security forces, and weak legal accountability continues to operate. For many Mro, the difference between regimes is symbolic: the language of democracy has replaced the language of discipline, but the mechanisms of exclusion persist. At the same time, Mro youth

³²⁸ Jade Dussart, “Bangladesh: Continued Criminalisation of Indigenous Community Leader and Environmental HRD Ringrong Mro (Joint Communication),” UN SR Human Rights Defenders,” n.d.

³²⁹ Dussart, “Bangladesh.”

³³⁰ Foundation, “Arrest of Indigenous Leader Ringrong Mro and Ongoing Land Grabbing in Bandarban.”

³³¹ Foundation, “Arrest of Indigenous Leader Ringrong Mro and Ongoing Land Grabbing in Bandarban.”

have intensified their use of media and alliances with national and international organizations to document abuses and demand Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all development projects.

In sum, the 2024 government change created a brief opening but so far, not a transformation. The Mro's struggle now lies in leveraging this opening without being reabsorbed into cycles of control. Real reform, as this research shows, will require transferring actual decision-making power to existing institutions such as the Hill District Councils and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council. These bodies were established to support local governance but continue to operate with limited authority and dependence on central approval, while corporate and military actors remain largely unaccountable.³³²

4.8 Conclusion

I explore in this chapter that dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is not a historical accident but a political process that continually reshapes itself through new forms of state governance and power, progress and development discourses, and moral justifications. What emerges across the analysis is a pattern of adaptation where the logic of capitalist domination survives by changing its language, institutions, and alliances. Across shifting political eras, the rhetoric of improvement, whether framed as civilization, integration, or eco-tourism, has consistently served to centralize authority over Indigenous territories. This continuity underscores that development in the CHT is not simply an economic strategy; it functions as an instrument of power and control that denies Indigenous rights and sovereignty, and that reorganizes life, labor, and belonging. In this context, the repeated experience of dispossession produces a normalization of loss, where displacement becomes embedded in everyday life and increasingly difficult to contest. At the same time, these processes generate various forms of ecological grief, through which the loss of land is experienced as a loss of identity, belonging, and continuity. At the same time, the findings highlight the resilience of Mro political consciousness and their capacity to reinterpret resistance as both protection and proposition. The Mro's struggle against the Chimbuk Hill Marriott project, their ongoing mobilization for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and their collaboration with rights organizations represent more than isolated acts of defiance. They signify an Indigenous critique of Bangladesh's development model, a demand for justice

³³² "Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord," n.d.

grounded in consent, collective stewardship, and ecological balance. Even under repression, as seen in the arrest of land defender Ringrong Mro in 2025, the community continues to expose the alliances between the military, corporate power, and local administration. This persistence demonstrates that the Mro movement is not only contesting land loss but redefining the moral terms of progress itself. In this sense, resistance emerges as a resistant continuity, where memories of past dispossession inform and sustain ongoing struggles, transforming grief into guidance and linking historical injustice with present defiance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that real transformation in the CHT cannot be achieved through rhetorical reforms or symbolic inclusion. It requires structural change: genuine recognition of Indigenous governance, demilitarization of development spaces, and accountability for corporate actors operating under state protection. The Mro experience illustrates both the cost of exclusion and the possibility of resistance that reimagines justice from below. By bringing together ecological grief, the normalization of loss, and continuity, this study shows that dispossession operates not only as a material process but also as an emotional and temporal one, shaping how loss is experienced, remembered, and resisted. Their struggle reminds us that development without consent is not progress, it is another name for control.

Chapter Five: Concluding Discussion

My thesis examines how the Mro community has resisted the proposed Marriott hotel and resort project on Chimbuk Hill and what this struggle reveals about tourism, development, and Indigenous land rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Using the proposed tourism project as a case study, I explore how historical processes of colonial rule, postcolonial state-building, militarization, and tourism development have shaped the Mro community's contemporary experiences of land dispossession and resistance. A central thread of this thesis has been that the conflict surrounding the Marriott project is not an isolated dispute over a tourism investment but the continuation of a much longer history of territorial control, Indigenous marginalization, and competing understandings of development.

I have shown here that the proposed Marriott development project is one of the latest examples in the long history of Indigenous land dispossession in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The historical analysis demonstrated that colonial forest policies, the Kaptai Dam, state-sponsored Bengali settlement, militarization, and tourism development have collectively transformed Indigenous territories into spaces governed primarily by state interests rather than Indigenous governance structures. Although these interventions have been justified through different narratives, including modernization, national security, conservation, and economic development, they have repeatedly resulted in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples while undermining their rights to land, governance, and self-determination.

My findings also demonstrate that tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts cannot be understood simply as an economic development strategy. Rather, tourism is a political and territorial project through which Indigenous land is reimagined as a commercial resource while Indigenous communities themselves are increasingly excluded from decisions concerning their ancestral territories. The histories of Nilgiri, Sajek, and now Chimbuk reveal a recurring pattern in which tourism expansion has been accompanied by military involvement, unequal land acquisition, restricted Indigenous participation, and the commodification of Indigenous landscapes and cultures. In this context, tourism functions not merely as a development initiative but as another mechanism through which state authority is extended over Indigenous territories.

At the same time, this research has shown that the Mro community has not remained passive in the face of these pressures. One of my central findings is that Mro resistance extends beyond protest alone. Community members have mobilized demonstrations, petitions, legal advocacy, alliances with Indigenous organizations, collaboration with national and international human rights groups, and media engagement to defend their ancestral lands. These actions illustrate that Indigenous resistance is not simply opposition to development. Rather, it is an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and authority over land, culture, and identity, as well as a demand to participate meaningfully in decisions that directly affect their lives. The Mro challenge development not because they reject economic progress, but because the development imposed upon them proceeds without their consent and threatens the foundations of their social, cultural, and spiritual existence.

My study, therefore, contributes to a better understanding of how tourism, development, and state power affect Indigenous communities. Empirically, it provides a detailed case study of the Mro community's resistance to the proposed Marriott project, documenting a contemporary Indigenous struggle that has received limited academic attention.

Historically, it demonstrates that present-day tourism conflicts cannot be understood separately from the longer histories of colonial governance, land dispossession, militarization, and state-led territorial restructuring in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, or elsewhere more generally. This research shows that tourism, militarization, and development cannot be treated as separate processes. Instead, they operate together as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that reshape Indigenous territories while simultaneously producing new forms of Indigenous resistance. Building on this analysis, my thesis develops two related conceptual contributions. The first, “normalization of loss,” explains how repeated cycles of land dispossession become embedded in everyday expectations, causing future displacement to be anticipated as a recurring feature of state-led development rather than understood as a series of isolated events. The second, “resistant continuity,” explains how memories of dispossession, ecological grief, and collective attachment to ancestral land become enduring sources of intergenerational resistance rather than resignation. Resistant continuity emerges in response to the normalization of loss, as accumulated experiences of injustice are transformed into collective memory, political awareness, and sustained action. Together, these concepts demonstrate that dispossession is not only a material loss of territory but

also an emotional, political, and temporal process that shapes how Indigenous communities anticipate loss, preserve continuity, and sustain resistance across generations.

My research also has important implications beyond the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Although my thesis focuses on a specific case in southeastern Bangladesh, the issues it raises resonate with Indigenous communities worldwide who continue to experience dispossession through development projects carried out in the name of national progress. The Mro experience demonstrates that development cannot be understood solely in terms of infrastructure, investment, or economic growth. Development also raises fundamental questions about justice, participation, historical responsibility, and the unequal distribution of power. When Indigenous peoples are excluded from decisions affecting their ancestral territories, development risks reproducing historical inequalities rather than addressing them.

Like all research, this study has several limitations. Due to geographical distance, financial constraints, and the politically sensitive nature of the research, I relied primarily on secondary data sources, including academic literature, government documents, human rights reports, media articles, and publications by Indigenous organizations. These constraints limited my ability to conduct fieldwork and collect primary data directly from the affected communities. Another limitation concerns whose voices are represented in the available literature. While the sources used in this study provide substantial information about Indigenous experiences and resistance in the CHT, the perspectives of armed factions involved in the region's political conflicts are not represented to the same extent. Because this study relies on secondary sources, I was therefore unable to explore these perspectives in depth. Future research could address this gap to provide a broader understanding of the political dynamics of the CHT. In addition, because the proposed Marriott project remains unresolved, its long-term social, environmental, and cultural implications cannot yet be fully assessed. Rather than diminishing the significance of the findings, these limitations highlight the need for continued research, particularly studies that incorporate long-term ethnographic fieldwork and direct engagement with the Mro community to further explore the impacts of tourism development on Indigenous land, livelihoods, and self-determination. Future research could expand this work by undertaking comparative studies of tourism-related land conflicts across different Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts or other parts of South Asia. Further studies could explore the gendered dimensions of Indigenous resistance,

youth activism, environmental justice, and the implementation of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) within Bangladesh's legal and policy frameworks. Such research would deepen understanding of how Indigenous communities continue to negotiate changing political and economic landscapes while defending their rights to land and self-determination.

Ultimately, the struggle surrounding the proposed Marriott hotel shows that tourism development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is not simply about the construction of a resort. In this specific case, it reveals questions of who has the authority to define development, whose knowledge and rights are recognized, and whose futures are prioritized in land-related decisions. Building on this analysis, my thesis argues that repeated experiences of dispossession contribute to a normalization of loss, while the accumulation of these experiences contributes to resistant continuity, through which resistance persists across time in response to recurring pressures on ancestral land. The Marriott project did not create the conflict examined in this study; rather, it exposed a much deeper and longer history of contested relationships between the state and Indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. For the Mro community, land is not merely a physical resource or an economic asset. It is the foundation of history, identity, spirituality, livelihood, and collective existence. Their resistance, therefore, represents far more than opposition to a single development project. It is an ongoing struggle to defend Indigenous autonomy, cultural continuity, and the right to determine the future of their ancestral territories. In this sense, the Mro struggle connects past experiences of dispossession with present efforts to protect ancestral land and the possibility of determining their own future. As long as development continues to proceed without meaningful recognition of Indigenous land rights, participation, and self-determination, conflicts such as those unfolding in Chimbuk Hill will remain not exceptions, but enduring expressions, continuations, and extensions of unresolved historical injustice.

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