Field research in the conflict zone: An empirical study of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse how a field study in a conflict zone is challenging and what sorts of challenges a researcher may face collecting data collection. Here, the conflict zone refers to violent and latent conflict situation where people frequently face the violence and human rights violation. In a conflict situation, the security forces try to control and dominate every sphere of life of the local citizen. As a result, conducting field study in conflict situation requires methodological flexibility, strong ethical consideration, and safety and security of the researcher and the respondents as well. This paper is an empirically driven personal experience of how a graduate research student conducted the field study under difficult situation in a conflict area in Bangladesh. Based on the personal experience and empirical observation, this paper suggests that the predetermined methodology selection may not work out in the practical situation; rather the flexibility in methodology could help the researcher for conducting the field as per the situation demand. The paper also suggests that researcher, particularly the outside researcher (researchers who do not belong to the country where the conflict zone exists) should think about the underlying causes of the silence of the respondents, security situation, conflict parties and the potential of conflict for the research.

1. Introduction

Research based on field study in the conflict zone is the hardest task for collecting data. Field study provides the raw data to prove or disprove the research hypothesis, objectives and questions. Thus, researchers should pay full attention and highest consideration while collecting the data in the conflict zone. This process starts with mapping the study sites, getting prepared to enter the study area, managing the logistics to conduct the study, seeking permission from the appropriate authority, and arranging security issues for the personal safety. This process also includes hiring the research assistants if the people of the proposed study sites speaks in a different language, managing accommodation and health issues and above all finishing the study with packing bag and badges. Field study is indeed a lengthy and most tedious process of the research work. Despite, the entire process of field study is also a full of excitement, anxiety, and a new story about the field. The current article describes such a story of the field study conducted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh.

Ethical and methodological consideration strongly guides field study-based social research in all aspects; even though the research is not conducting in the conflict zone. The ethical issues ranging from the personal welfare to the potential vulnerabilities of the respondents and researcher (Ausbrooks, Barrett, & Martinez-Cosio, 2009; Clark, 2012; Pottier, Hammond, & Cramer, 2011). Ethics in the research guides a researcher how to conduct a field study; what types of question a researcher can ask the respondents; and in what circumstances a researcher can ask questions to the respondents. Unlike the developed countries, such as USA, Canada, UK and Australia, there is no established ethics process in Bangladesh. The present study has been conducted in a conflict zone in Bangladesh where a long-standing ethnopolitical conflict[1] has been continuing for several reasons, but the settlement and migration of the Bengali people from the low-land and rural areas of Bangladesh to the CHT has complicated the situations (Hafiz & Islam, 1993; Lee, 2001). Before initiating the study in the CHT in Bangladesh, I fulfilled the requirements of ethics application e.g. case selection, research design, selection of respondents, and the formation of questions in the Social and Behavioural Science at Flinders University, Australia. For this purpose, I searched the literature on guidelines of ethical consideration in collecting data in the CHT in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, not a single document based on ethical guideline in the case of Bangladesh provided the knowhow of drawing questions, setting respondents pole and the way of asking the respondents. However, some articles and book chapters on conflict zone research across the world helped to develop questionnaires, methodology and research design (Ausbrooks et al., 2009; Brinkmann, 2014; Clark, 2012; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Goodhand, 2000; Haer & Becher, 2012; Höglund, 2011). Some books and articles on the refugee, displaced people and minority research also provided valuable insights to accomplish the task (Burton, Nandi, & Platt, 2010; Garland, Spalek, & Chakraborti, 2005; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). Taking into consideration of the theoretical and practical aspects, I designed the study and advanced to the field of the study. This paper, thus, is an outcome of the field study experience and observation in the CHT in Bangladesh. Firstly, this paper has described the research design and description of the research project. Secondly, this paper has highlighted the challenges that I faced while

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[1] The conflict in the CHT during the 1972-1997 has been termed as the ethno-political conflict between the Bangladesh army and *Shanti* Bahini (peace forces) formed by the tribal people in the CHT (Mohsin, 1997). The conflict has been resolved by a peace treaty signed in 1997 between the PCJSS and Bangladesh government. Although the conflict between the Army and *Shanti Bahini* has been ended, the social conflict is undergoing in the CHT between and among groups for capturing resources, social position. The tribal people are also frustrated as the peace treaty is yet to be implemented.

conducting the field study in the CHT. Finally, this article has recommended few suggestions to overcome the challenges of collecting data in the CHT areas.

2. Description of the Study

The aim of the proposed PhD studies is to explore the impacts of climate change events in migration decision of the Bengali people who have settled in the CHT and the implication of the migration and settlement in the conflict and peacebuilding. Naturally, the field of the study is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which is characterised as conflict area in Bangladesh. The CHT is a conflict area because a long standing ethno-political conflict was existed during 1972-1997 period between the Bangladesh army and *Shanti Bahini* (the military wing of the tribal people). The root causes of the conflict are the denial of the constitutional recognition of the identity and right to self-determination of the tribal people in the CHT (Levene, 1999; Mohsin, 1997, 2003). Although a peace accord has been signed between the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and Bangladesh government in 1997, the region is still conflicting between the Bengali settlers and tribal people for the ownership of land, resources and social position (Mohsin, 2003; Panday & Jamil, 2009). Different sources confirm that 400,000-600,000 Bengali people have been settled in the CHT during 1977-1989 which contributed to the escalation of the CHT conflict (Reuveny, 2007; Suhrke, 1997; Ullah, Shamsuddoha, & Shahjahan, 2014). With this connection of the Bengali migration and social network, more Bengali people might have been settled in the CHT. From the geographical point of view, Bangladesh is one of the most climate hit countries in the World. People are adversely affected by the climate change events, e.g. floods, drought, sea-level rise and riverbank erosion. Bangladesh is also termed as a fragile state regarding demographic pressure, population displacement and the rule of law.[2] During the CHT conflict, the successive government in different period settled the poor and destitute people from the *plain land* to the hill area of the CHT. Existing research has mentioned that a significant number of environemnt and climate change displaced people have been resettled in the CHT by the government which consequently contributed to the escalation of the CHT conflict (Hafiz & Islam, 1993; Homer-Dixon, 1994; Lee, 1997; Reuveny, 2007; Swain, 1996). However, there no empirical study to support that Bengali settlers in the CHT are climate change driven, and they are contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The proposed research aims to investigated the complex relationship between climate change induced migration and conflict in the CHT using environmental security and conflict theories.

3. Data collection Design

To answer the above questions, the study followed the mixed method research design comprising survey and qualitative interview. The questionnaire survey has been carried out among CHT residents living in mixed Bengali – Tribal, local wards (*upozilas*). Based on the simple random sampling method, the study determined the number of the sample size from diverse fields i.e. farmer, teacher, small vendors, social workers, community leaders and homemakers. The study ensured the gender representative and age groups. Both young and elder people have been recruited for the survey. Two separate questionnaires have been developed for Bengali migrants and CHT Tribal people. It was a face-to-face interview and conducted at the respondent's place. For this purpose, I had to visit door to door of the respondents. The interview was a semi-structured open-ended interview with individuals who have the relevant expert knowledge or professional experience. A purposive sampling method

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[2] Fragile state index, 2016, available at http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/.

has been used to select the respondents for the open-ended interview. The open-ended interview is divided into two parts: interview of climate victims and interview of experts. Two sets of semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions have been developed for this purpose. For the interviews, the study has recruited the self-claimed climate affected people who have been selected through the survey processes.

4. Literature review

Conflict is a "situation in which two or more parties are engaged to achieve a specific goal, and the nature of the goal is incompatible" (Mitchell, 1989, p. 7; Sisk, 2001). Uppsala University Conflict Data has defined conflict as the battle-related death where at least 25 battle-related death occurs. Norman (2009) has defined the conflict zone while describing the research in the conflict zone as

> "(a) hot conflicts characterized by open, direct violence; (b) intractable conflicts with varying degrees of active and latent violence; (c) situations of state oppression of citizens; (d) post-conflict situations; and (e) humanitarian situations resulting from conflict, such as flows of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs)"(Norman, 2009, p. 74).

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh, the hot conflict has been resolved after the signing of the peace treaty in 1997. However, the other characteristics of the conflict zone are remaining and a small scale social conflict situation is continuing. As a result, field study in such a conflict zone demanded sounds methodological tools and highest ethical standard for ensuring the rights of the respondents. Kovats-Barnet (2002) has outlined that in a critical field, methodology should be "an elastic, incorporative, integrative, and malleable" (Kovats-Bernat, 2002). As a result, I applied two tools for the data collection. In fact, sampling is considered as a key tool in conducting a field study in the conflict zone. The 'snowball' sampling process play as an appropriate method in the conflict zone to get information about the victim (Haer & Becher, 2012). Focus group discussion is also widely used for collecting data from a single sitting. But conducting the focus group discussion is a challenging task for number of reasons, such as difficulty to gather people from all sections, groups and parties in a common place for the discussion and possibility of concealing actual information in front of a large audience. The security concern, the presence of security personnel and other vested interest groups, may interfere in focus group discussion (Norman, 2009). Considering this complexity the study overlooked the focus group discussion but relied on the survey method. The World Bank study in 'Conflict Survey Sourcebook' has applied the socio-economic survey for measuring conflicts and major impacts of conflict on people. However, this is also challenging for the individual researcher particularly for the research student to conduct this survey in the ground of time and financial matter. The pattern of questions, unit of analysis, nature of the study design, partialities of the researcher and respondents, and sensitivity of questioning to the respondents constitute key issues in the socio-economic survey research (Justino, Brück, & Verwimp, 2013).

In a conflict zone, people keep silent as they are faced by continuous pressure, torture, deprivation and domination from the military or political elites. As a result, respondents rarely share their information to the outside researcher. This non-response tendency is called 'culture of silence' in the conflict zone (Goodhand, 2000). Under this situation, the researcher needs to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity for protecting the respondent's individuality and personal dignity. The researcher should provide the guarantee to the respondents to ensure the confidentiality of their information. The researcher needs to know the 'information economy'

and retain the sensitivity of the respondent's needs and security (Goodhand, 2000). In this regard, trust building helps to break the silence of the respondents with the unknown researchers (Coy, 2001). Therefore, the researchers need to show restraint, and must know where to stop from the interviewing. Building trust also helps to build confidence among the respondents to share information, memories and history (Azmi, Brun, & Lund, 2017; Mazurana, Jacobsen, & Gale, 2013).

The questioning is extremely important. The researcher should avoid the sensitive questions and handle the respondents with care for the existing psychological trauma. Due to the trauma, the non-response rate may be increased as well as the respondents may not remember the memory happened in his/her life (Haer & Becher, 2012). As a result, Haer and Becher (2012) has advised the researchers to be efficient in collecting data and introduce some open-ended questions for reducing the non-response rate in the case of sensitive questions. Kristine Hoglund (2011) has pointed out the power relation, changing the structure, repression of the people influenced the research process. The sensitivity of the research focus and research design are also a critical issue that influences the research process (Höglund, 2011). Hoglund has also identified some challenges to access to the information, informants and respondents. In this regard, the key issues are trust, cultural silence, sensitive subject and stigma. Powerful people, security and media people may most likely dominate the data collection environment, on the other hand, minority and powerless group get less scope to share their information, or they do not like to exchange information so as to getting fear from the powerful or security forces. Therefore, the researcher can influence the respondents for collecting data or participate in the research (Haer & Becher, 2012).

After the methodological issue, conducting research in the conflict zone demands strong ethical principles. Respondents of the conflict situation do not like to participate in any survey or interview due to internal conditions such as political polarisation, the high prevalence of security forces, insecurities, poverty and past trauma (Haer & Becher, 2012). Thus, individual researcher adopts the principle of 'informed consent'. According to this principle of informed consent, the respondents must be informed about the pros and cons of the research, its potential benefit as well as the aftermath of the study. The respondents need to have full freedom of withdrawing from the interview at any time (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). Moreover, every researcher must follow the principle of 'doing no harm' to the respondents living in the conflict zone. The American Anthropological Association AAA 1998, Section-III first enacted the code of conduct not to harm or avoid harm to the respondents while conducting research (Pottier et al., 2011).

Confidentiality is also a critical issue in the case of conflict research as researchers rely heavily on outsiders (research assistance and gatekeepers) for collecting data. If the researcher is also an outsiders, he/she may face more challenges for conducting the field study. In a conflict zone and ethnic minority dominated areas, researchers mostly depend on the gatekeepers, community leaders, and local research assistant for getting access to the respondents and avoid insecurities and complexities. However, getting help from the gatekeepers and community leaders may hamper the integrity, authenticity, and confidentiality of the research as gatekeepers and respondents are a different subject and may have different interest and power relations. Fluehr-Lobban (2008) has also suggested preventing potential harms (e.g. loss of life, disability, psychological harm); avoid violating ethical/moral norms (e.g. the informed consent and 'do no harms' principles); and should avoid the transgressive values, customs and desires (Fluehr-Lobban, 2008). Safety and security of the researcher and respondents constitute a major issue in the conflict situation. From the researcher point of view,

it is tough to reach to every corner of the conflict area for collecting data which has a severe security risk. Armed groups and the communities living under the conflict situation may not believe the outsiders and also may perceive that the action of the researcher may significantly harm them (Coy, 2001). At the same time, the researcher faces some potential challenges, such as "emotional drainage, loneliness and harsh physical stress and language barrier" (Höglund, 2011).

In summary, it can be argued that some methodological and ethical issues need to be considered before commencing the field study in the conflict zone. Flexible method, prior understanding about the field and having full information about the parties and leaders constitute significant concerns for the researcher. During and after the field study, the researchers should maintain confidentiality, anonymity and impartiality to the respondents and their information. Respondents must give a full understanding of the research and the possible outcome of their participating in the research. Moreover, the security of the interviewees and the researchers are a prime concern in the conflict zone research.

5. Field Experiences in the proposed field: Challenges and adopted measures
5.1. Permission from the authority

As per the ethical guideline of the Doctoral studies, I sought permission from the CHT ministry to conduct the interview in the proposed field. In the conflict zone, permission from the authority means the legal as well as a mental issue for carrying out a field study in a conflict and post-conflict society. In this study, I applied for the permission from the CHT affairs ministry for carrying out a study on 'climate change, migration and conflict in the CHT. However, the authority[3] denied providing the permission letter on the ground that the CHT conflict is not a climate or environmental induced, rather, it is merely a political problem. They argued that I have an evil intention to divert the attention of the CHT people. I tried to make understand that this is a PhD studies and merely designed to investigate the implication of climate and environmental issues in migration decision and conflict formation in the CHT. The authority also mentioned that there are hundreds of studies have been conducted in the CHT. However, none of the studies ever sought permission from the CHT ministry to carry out the study. Instead, the concerned person advised to carry out the study in my way, and preferably silently and with care so that the study might not hamper the community relations in the CHT.

I also faced the issue of the breaching confidently of the research question as the concerned government officials (one official of the CHT ministry and one of the foreign ministry) advised me to apply formally with the questionnaires and proposal of what objectives I am going to achieve from the study. The questionnaire sharing seems a risky issue as this process may hamper the research if the latter and questionnaires are transferred to the law enforcing agencies. Therefore, I avoided this process and proceeded on the CHT to conduct questionnaire survey among the respondents. I relied on the specific permission and the consent of the community leaders of each of the study site. In each study site, I sought permission from the respondents of the survey procedure. I verbally read out the major points of the consent form and assured them that their participation in this study is voluntary and they can withdraw them at any time from the study. My observation is that formal permission from the higher authority for conducting research in the conflict zone is tough for an individual researcher. In some instance, a concerned person does not like to share the information as if they might fall

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[3] Here, authority refer to a person whom I talked and sought the permission. I sought permission from a joint secretary working in the CHT ministry and looking after CHT affairs.

in trouble or may face difficulties in their professional life. The individual permission system from the respondent and verbal consultation with the community leaders helped to overcome this challenge and conduct the field study in the proposed study area.

5.2. Getting access to the conflict zone

In conflict area like the CHT in Bangladesh, study site is characterised as risky and conflicting between the adversaries. There is also a fear of abduction and extortion. As a result, researchers face difficulties in reaching to the study sites for collecting data from the appropriate respondents. I also faced challenges in reaching into the different corners of the CHT to conduct a survey and qualitative interview. The CHT is consist of three hill districts but located in separate places. The Chakma people dominate the *Rangamati* district, and the *Khagrachari* and *Bandarban* districts are dominated by the Tripura and Marama people respectively. Due to the long existing conflicts, Bengali and tribal people are living in the CHT but as a separate location in different districts. In some location, Bengali and tribal people are also living side by side. From the location and demographic distribution, I noticed that the Bengali people own most of the business centres in the three hill districts and, thus, they are living in the core of the cities. On the other hand, tribal people are either job holders or mostly doing farming. As a result, they live either in the city centres or the remote hill areas. This distinct character and present demographic location inhibit the researcher to collect the data. Most importantly, it was almost difficult to reach the people who are living in the deep jungle and hill areas. However, I appointed two research assistants from the tribal community who helped to reach into some of the remote areas for conducting the survey. In some cases, the research assistants also felt insecure to visit some places as there is a conflict going in among the tribal people in the line of political affiliation and supporting the peace agreement. Demanding extortion is also a problem to reach some places. Some organised groups kidnap people and demand extortion. My research assistants and I were very scared in some locations to go into and conduct the survey. Fortunately, no problem appeared at whiling conducting the survey in the CHT. In this regard, I took the help from the gatekeepers[4] who assisted to enter the study sites and approach the respondents. I noticed that the gatekeeper has a good relationship with the locally influential people, such as chairman of the union parishad and school teachers. For example, in *Naniarchar* and *Longudu* the local chairman helped us to go to study sites for the data collection.

On the other hand, Bengali people (particularly the settlers) have built the dwelling close to the army camps or adjacent to the security forces location and close to the urban centre. This arrangement is called the United village[5] (*Ghusso Gram*) which is heavily supervised and surveillance by the security forces and intelligence agencies for the security concern. As a result, I faced difficulties to reach into the Bengali respondents. One day, I have been bound to stop the survey process and faced the security forces about 'what I am doing in the CHT and why this research has targeted the Bengali people'. Moreover, I always tried to avoid the location of the Army camp so that they could not notice me and my research assistants. In the army camp area, the stranger need to satisfy the reason for visiting the CHT. In fact, Army as the security forces of Bangladesh claims that they are the sole people to look after every matter

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[4] Gatekeeper refers to the person who help the researcher to know the place, approach the respondents and collect data. Gatekeepers also help the researcher to avoid the fear and psychological stress in the conflict one (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

[5] The concept of the Ghusso Gram was formulated after 1980s by the than government to protect the Bengali people in the CHT and avoid the communal violence between the Bengali and Tribal people. Now there are around 86 Ghusso Gram in the CHT where the Bengali people are solely living.

in the CHT. Therefore, the Army discourages to conduct sensitive research in the CHT in the ground that this information sharing may increase the hostile relationship between the Bengali and tribal people. However, many graduate students in Bangladesh are conducting research in the CHT by their capacity or managing the ethical and methodological difficulties.

Considering all these aspects, I went to each study site and conducted the survey with great care. In this regard, I took help of the Bangladesh ANSAR[6] to know about the region, the possible challenges and the ways to overcome the challenges. As I have a previous connection with few of the top officials of Bangladesh ANSAR in the CHT region, I sought help from them to know about the situation in the region. I proposed that the study is being conducted for the educational purpose. Accordingly, the ANSAR officials supported on different grounds, e.g. finding the appropriate location of the study site, getting access to the remote area, and the way of avoiding any unwanted circumstances. Even, the ANSAR staff accompany with me in some places what they perceived as a risky area where I might have fallen into a problem. This process helped to get access to the expected respondents for conducting the survey. They (ANSAR-VDP) officials arranged every possible arrangement, e.g. hiring a motorbike to reach the remote area, identifying the settlement para, locating hostile zone in the CHT, finding hotel and food court. This information helped to conduct the study smoothly. In fact, some places (for example, *Vuachori*, *Panchari*, *Diginala*, *Myney*, *Baghaisari*, *Manikchari*) are situated in the remote areas in the CHT. Without motorbike and private car, it is quite impossible to visit and collect survey data. Moreover, my prior knowledge in working in the CHT region helped to identify possible challenges. In 2014, I worked as a researcher in a project funded by the UNDP and have been able to build up the relationship with few people working as peace activists in the CHT. I also sought help from them while conducting the study in the proposed study sites.

5.3. Approaching to the respondents

In the research design, I have applied door knocking system of every household for conducting the survey. I decided to interview any person of each household who will be willing to give interview above 18 years of age. In the practical field, I faced challenges to identify household and appropriate respondents. The dwelling system in the CHT is different from other parts of Bangladesh, particularly from the *plain land*. In the urban area of the CHT, most of the housing are situated proximity, but in the remote area, the position of the housing is located having long distance. I managed to conduct a field study in the urban areas smoothly as it was comparatively easy to reach the household. However, in the remote area, I faced difficulties to reach at the household and find out appropriate respondents. Most of the cases, the male person remains absent from the house. In that case, I dare to enter the house. I requested to give time, and they also assured to come in the next day morning or afternoon. When I arrived at the fixed date and knocked the door, the female household or an under-aged girl/boy responded that their *Ma* and *Baba* (mom and dad) are absent in the house. This situation has happened in the case of conducting the survey among the tribal people. As a result, I visited those places in several times for getting access to the respondents. It consumed time and labour to complete the survey processes. Transportation for accessing to some places was also a major concern. There were some locations where at least a day is required to reach at, and there is no suitable accommodation facility for the outsiders. In such a situation, I managed to live in few families

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[6] Bangladesh ANSAR is one of the largest security forces in Bangladesh whose aim is to ensure peace, security and development along with Bangladesh Army. Bangladesh ANSAR has set up their camp in different places in the three hill districts.

in several places. Though it was not sustainable on several grounds, i.e. safety, security, health and accommodation, I took the challenges to accomplish the survey. The security of the respondents was also a significant concern in the case of the remote area. People in the remote area, particularly, the tribal people do not share their information because they get fear from the factional political wings, such as United People Democratic Front (UPDF), Janosanhoti Samity (JSS) and JSS reformist parties.

5.4. Trust building issue

Every field study depends on the trust building between the researcher and the respondents. Researchers first need to introduce him/her to the respondents and his project. After getting information, the respondents decide whether he/she should participate in the research or not. I also applied the same process for collecting data. However, I faced problem in developing the trust with the respondents in some study sites. In some cases, respondents straightforwardly denied participating in the research. They denied due to the existing bad experiences about the research works and activities of some local academicians and NGO activists. For example, some researchers, academics and NGOs activists blindly support either tribal people or settlement of Bengali people in the CHT. This practice has already created phobia and panic among the general people about the research and survey. Some people also showed their anger and anguish by uttering the name of some renowned academics and NGO worker of Bangladesh. Alimuddin, a 50 years Bengali settlers in the CHT informed that

> Some Bengali people named 'X, Y. Z'[7] are the dalal (interest seeker) of the tribal people. They work against us. They want us to be repatriated from the CHT. However, we will not leave this place; this is our land now.

As a result, they (Bengali respondents) told me that they would not talk to me as they do not know me. I became puzzled in such a situation and took the time to reapproach them. I wholeheartedly tried to manage them not to treat myself with other academics, and NGO workers. In some instances, I become successful in managing them, but in some cases, they refused to participate. The identity card of the foreign university helped to overcome this problem. I also faced the similar kind of problem while approaching the tribal people. In some cases, tribal people are so scared, and they felt that they are living in insecurity and anxiety. When I approached them and introduced myself as a researcher, they refused to participate in the research. The respondent told that,

> We do not believe the outsider. All are self-fish. People come for their interest. They are the paid-agent of other organisations. People come and collect data, take off photos and earn money. However, they do not do anything for us, and for our community. We are living in a miserable condition for a long time. Many people like you have come and talked to us, promised us to do something for our community. However, we have never seen them after their research.

It became a challenging task to continue the work under this condition. In fact, people have already had bad experiences and stereotype about the researcher. As a result, this is indeed

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[7] I have intentionally mentioned the name 'X, Y, Z'. They mentioned some name of the renowned academics and NGO workers of Bangladesh. But I cannot mention their actual name in the report of my own research experience.

tough to portrait the actual scenario of the CHT due to the complicated nature of the conflict and involvement of different stakeholders in the conflict situation. I seriously thought about the concern that the respondents shared about their feeling. I thought again and again what to do and how I should maintain the neutrality in the research. I softly explained about the project and informed that there is nothing to cheat with any community living in the CHT. I confirmed that I have no relation with the government. Finally, they agreed to participate in the survey. However, they requested to do something for them if this research work makes any impact on the policy of the government. I again confirmed that I have no power to change the government policy regarding the CHT. However, I believe that the research work may have some positive impacts on policy guideline in the case of climate change and migration issue in Bangladesh.

5.5. Silence of the respondents

In the conflicting research, the silence of the interviewees hampers the integrity and validity of the research. In the current research project, I faced the problem of silence and non-response of the interviewees from the Bengali and tribal people. Due to the experience of conflict and violence in the CHT, the respondents felt insecure and fear for sharing information with the outsiders. This terrain of fear have created a culture of silence and non-response. While interviewing the Bengali people, they showed negative attitude to participate in the survey process. A female respondent named Amina in the *Longudu* told that:

> why I will take part the survey; this survey will not carry any good result for them'. Many people come to us. However, our condition is remaining as same as it was.

In fact, a transition period is undergoing after the signing of the peace accord in 1997. Bengali people, particularly the settlers, are seriously scared of eviction, losing their land and houses. Rumour has already circulated in the CHT that settlers will be returned to the *plain land* and government will take away the land and redistribute to the tribal people. This rumour has tremendously hampered the survey process among the Bengali people. Bengali settlers hardly wanted to share their information. On the contrary, tribal people having their past conflicting trauma and psychological stress also showed negative response in participating survey process. Most of the tribal respondents argued that

> Silence is the best way to live peacefully. Otherwise, we might be a victim of extortion and persecution.

In many cases, they (Bengali respondents) perceived me like a government agent who is working to identify the number of settlers. However, I managed to understand that this work is solely for the educational purpose. There is no other alternative purpose for this study. I also showed the student identity card, and they willingly participated in the interview. The outsider hampered the interview process. The respondents- both Bengali and Tribal, were unwilling to share their information due to the vigilance and presence of the agents of different underground parties and law enforcing agencies. In the CHT, Tribal people feel pressured and insecure from the underground parties[8] and Bangladesh army. On the other hand, Bengali people also feel

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[8] Underground parties mean those group of people who are united in a platform and either support the peace treaty between the government and JSS or oppose peace treaty. Some underground parties want complete freedom of the CHT. On the other hand, there is a party formed by the Bengali people who are claiming he equal right with the tribal people in the CHT.

insecurity from the underground parties. Due to the presence of the military and underground parties, people remain silent and hardly show interest to share their information with the outside researchers. I remained calm and quiet, tried to break the silence through discussing the general issues and their life in the CHT. However, many respondents replied that they do not read and write. I translated the letter into the local language and requested the research assistants to manage the respondents [tribal participants] by their local language. Finally, I managed to motivate them to participate in the survey.

5.6. Unwilling, Twisted and false information

In the conflict zone, respondent provides false and twisted information. I asked the respondent about the causes and consequences of the CHT conflict situation. The respondents provided the answer in the line of their political identity. The CHT is now a multicultural society where more than thirty ethnic groups including Bengali people are living. Currently, the tribal and Bengali community are divided for the political, social and cultural causes. Particularly, the tribal and Bengali people are engaged in conflict to keep control over land, resources, social position and political power. As a result, both the parties blame each other for their condition in the CHT. The tribal people particularly perceive Bengali settlers as the main cause of the plight in the CHT. In the field study, I identified the presence of partisan and hatred between two groups. While interviewing both the communities, I noticed that both the communities are twisting information for making a tarp for other. When I interviewed the Bengali people, they replied that CHT is part and parcel of Bangladesh and tribal people are the primary cause of ongoing conflict in the CHT. Abdul Awal a young shopkeeper of Khagrachari district argued that

> In the age of globalisation, people are going everywhere and living as per their qualification and expectations. We as Bengali people have come here to live. We are happy to live here. It is the part of our country. We can come and settle here.

On the other hand, tribal people informed that they are the original people and have been living peacefully from historically in the CHT. However, the settlement of the Bengali people has shattered the happiness and prosperity of the tribal people. Under this situation, the researcher faces the difficulty in identifying the exact meaning of the research. Even, the professionals are partitioned according to the party affiliation and ideological point of view. They see the CHT affairs as per their party and ideological perspective. I also observed the same situation while interviewing the professionals. Few of them have a preconceived idea about the CHT conflict and, therefore, they do not welcome to see the CHT conflict in different angles. An expert asked whether I have any knowledge about the CHT and why I have selected this topic. He also opines that "there is no relationship between the climate change-induced migration and conflict in the CHT". I as a researcher did not make an argument but requested to give an interview. I asked them to give time to discuss the research. Unfortunately, few of the professionals eventually did not provide their interview.

5.7. The issue of confidentiality and anonymity

Maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity constitute prime concerns for conducting the field study in the conflict zone. In this research, I maintained the anonymity in all respects for collecting data. I never asked the name and identity of the respondents during the fieldwork. As the CHT is a conflict prone area, asking identity and name of the researcher would not help

the investigator; rather the respondents might show their negative attitude towards the researcher. I followed the guideline of the ethic application process and the principle of confidentiality. However, I faced difficulties while maintaining the confidentiality of the researcher and research subjects. The outsider came during the interview session and intervened with the respondent. In some cases, more than one people came and tried to poke into the interview. In several places, the outsider interfered during the interview. As the CHT is a conflict prone area, different people, i.e. law enforcing agency, intelligence agency, journalist may have interest what is going on over there. In several places, I had to give a description of the project, for example, the nature, purpose, for whom the study is carried out, and the involvement of the government and international agency. Under this situation, I was not able to continue the interview for the two reasons: one is an ethical issue of maintaining the confidentially and anonymity of the research, and the second is that respondents were not willing to share their information in front of the outsiders. As a result, I stopped the interview and continued taking with the outsiders and tried to manage them that this is a survey conducted for the educational purpose. I also managed to understand them that their presence will hamper the survey process. After their departure from the study location, I again started the interview session and completed it. In the CHT, there is a system of social hegemony[9] that has established the supremacy of few people over the others. These superior people want to control everything related their social life. I saw the hegemonic social relations while conducting a field study. Few people came into within the interview session and told that they are all in all in the area. Thus, whatever information needed, they will provide. I technically avoided this powerful person from the interview session showing the identity card, mentioning the name of the locally influential people as well as using my portfolio. This technique sometimes worked. Few unwanted individuals who intended to interfere with the interview session left the place after seeing the identity or having heard the name of the influential people (example, *headman karbari* or local political leaders).

Although unwanted people is avoidable during the field study for maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondent, in some cases unwanted people seemed to be the appropriate person for the research. I invited few unwanted people for taking their interview when it is understood that they are the resource person for the research. In that case, I stopped the interview of the previous respondent and continued talking with the unwanted people and filled the separate questionnaire. I accepted this interview of the unwanted people in the few cases when it seemed like a quality data.

5.8. Personal safety and security

During the field study, I cared the safety and security of myself and my research assistants. In a conflict situation, personal safety is the most important concern for the researcher. Before conducting the field study, I designed where should go first and accordingly made the map for the entering point and ending point. I also collected phone number and address of the police officials for the emergency. I did not even inform the law enforcing agency people about the study in the CHT. For the safety and security, I also communicated with some local development workers. All these measures have been taken in case of the emergency. However, I faced two unwanted situations while conducting the field study. One day (in Longudu) few tribal young people came and wanted to know what we are doing in the CHT. They asked from

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[9] Hegemony, in this regard, refers to the social hegemony of few people who by dint of political connection, military affiliation or for power and money have been able to control over a certain area. People of the said area abide by the advice of the persons. This is a de facto power exercise over the area for either personal gain or wider social benefit.

where I have come from and for what purpose. Immediately, I showed the identity card, but they did not accept me as a researcher. They introduced them as the member of the UPDF (United People Democratic Front). My research assistant and I got a little bit scared. They took us in a place and saw the questionnaires and other papers. After an hour or more, they set us free to work. In that day, we did not continue our work but returned to our hotel.

Another incident came from the Bengali people. We proceeded to interview some Bengali household. We introduced myself and sought permission from them to conduct the interview. Surprisingly, they misunderstood, shouted and termed us as the agent of the government. They thought that we are working with the people and making a list of the Bengali people. Some of them uttered that:

> We will die, but we will not leave the place. For the twenty years, we are
> living here in this land. There is no question to leave the land and our house.
> We will sacrifice our blood.

I became puzzled to hear this words from the Bengali people. I tried to manage to say that I am not a government agent, but a university teacher and doing the Doctoral Studies in Australia. Finally, they became cool down, listened and participated in the interview. I realised that there is frustration, anger and anguish among the Bengali people for their deprivation[10], fear of losing land and house. A 55 years woman loudly told that:

> We want chal (rice), we do not understand what government is in power. We
> came here for chal and land. Now the government has stopped giving us chal.
> We will die. We will not be able to alive.

I came to know that government has stopped the rationing system in that area which has been continuing since the Bengali settlement in the CHT. However, I managed them with discussion and completed the survey.

5.9. Language barrier and the integrity of the research assistants

Language is also a critical issue while conducting a field study in the CHT. More than thirteen major ethnic communities are living in the CHT who have their distinct languages. Thus, researchers from the outside of the CHT faces an enormous difficulty for conducting a survey among all the communities in the CHT. Considering this difficulty, I purposefully appointed two research assistants from the Tribal community so that they could help for conducting the survey. However, the research assistants were also not known to all languages of the CHT. Finally, I changed the design and hired each research assistant from every community whom I interviewed. This process helped to reach the people of different tribal communities and approach them to conduct the interview. Although this process is risky, I adopted this one for the sake of completing the survey within the time frame. As a graduate student, I had a time constraint to finish the questionnaire process within a period. Therefore, I emphasised on completing the survey with all feasible options. Research assistant in this context played a role of introducing with the respondents. In a conflict area like the CHT, a research assistant from the local people play a major role in guiding the researcher as well as ensure the security of the

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[10] Here the term deprivation has been used because the respondent feel that they are deprived from the government. As they are also living in the CHT, they should have been given quota system like the tribal people in the CHT.

investigator. Of course, there are some shortcomings of taking help from the research assistants. They may influence the research through misguiding, providing miss-information and concealing appropriate respondents. They may also manipulate the response as the researcher himself do not know the language of the local people. Considering all these issues, I appointed my direct classroom students who have recently completed their studies and working novice researcher.. Then, a training session has been arranged for them to understand the projects and the ways of conducting the study. I accompany them all time while conducting the field study. The previous research experience reminded that the research assistant or enumerators sometimes do not take a risk and go to the door to door. They based on the perceptions and ideas fill up the questionnaire. The insincere effort of the researcher may cause great setback of the research project. The researcher should be aware of this drawback while conducting the field study.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In sum, it can be said that conducting research in a conflict zone is a full of anxiety, challenge, thrill and a thirst for innovating something new in the domain of social research. Like another conflict zone, the situation of the CHT has been moulded by the political, social and conflict history of the region. Parties in the conflict situation have undergone a long-standing physical, mental and psychological suffering. State as primary power enforcing authority has been enforcing all efforts to control the situation. As a result, conducting independent research work is a big challenge for the researcher and collecting information discouraged openly by the authority and security forces. Although graduate students and NGOs already advance many works in the name of exploring the causes and reinforcing the policies for resolving the conflict, most of the studies have faced hurdles and shortcomings to received the information. The unwillingness or the non-cooperation of the authority is a common scenario in all conflict research. In fact, the researcher should not approach the government officials in the conflict zone research as the rules and regulations encircle the government staffs. The researcher may adopt the simple permission system from the local authorities to conduct the study. However, researchers need to have clear cut information about the local leaders and local situation. Otherwise, the local authority might not cooperate; even, the local leader may harm the researcher and stop the study.

As respondents are highly partitioned and predisposed about the history of the conflict, parties and outcome of the conflicts, the researcher should be careful of selecting the appropriate respondents. Some respondents provided misinformation as well as misguided so that I could not be able to research in few places to receive information. As the society is conflicting and resources are very scarce, people perceive threats and insecurity of losing the current position and resources. I saw the people trying to conceal the information so as to they might fall in trouble for their sharing information. Outside researchers in this regards face difficulty for getting access to the appropriate respondents and extract information. The teachings of the research methodology book helped to be consistent with the data collection. I tried to be stick on the principles of methodology and ethical issues which reminded not to harm any respondent and the social relations. The rules of the letter of introduction have also controlled my behaviour and enable the respondent to understand the research and the worthy of their participation. I spent enough time to be free with the respondents and conduct the interview session. In the entire field study, the security along with the research assistants was the highest priority. The security question might not help the researcher, particularly the outside researchers, to conduct research in the conflict zone.

Finally, the field study report summarises that the researcher should think several times before carrying out the study in the area of conflict. The increasing nature of conflicts and complex situations have been encouraging the graduate students to study the cause and effects of the conflict. At the same time, studying in the volatile condition is not an easy task. Any misunderstanding and misinformation may cause greatly to the researchers and the people of the conflict area as well. I recommend that the researcher should not publish anything beyond the respondent's knowledge that may cause harms them afterwards. The researcher should respect the culture and cultural attributes of the people. The study should primarily consider the benefit of the respondents, then the research aims and objectives.

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