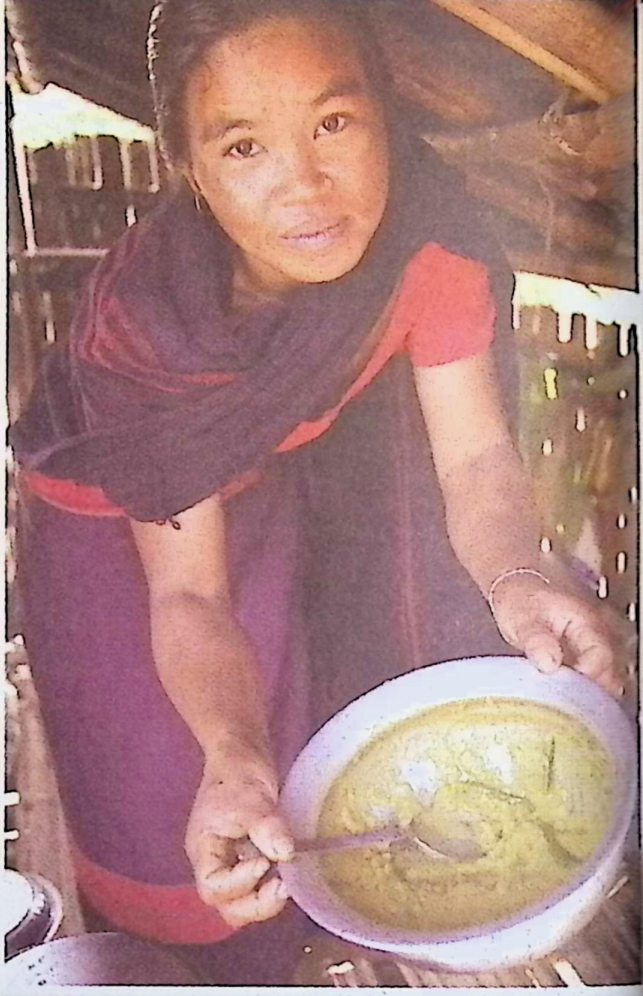
Hunger in the Hills

A journey through the Chittagong Hill Tracts



Shashimala Chakma is no longer able to afford to feed her family protein and more vegetables or send her daughter to school.

EMILY BRADY

Photographs: SHEHZAD NOORANI

The January sun shone softly on the palm trees and thatch huts of Sapcharibaro, a small village located off a windy road outside of Rangamati. Inside one of the village's hundred or so homes, Shashimala Chakma lifted the lid off an aluminium pot and shyly revealed its contents: a watery sauce jazzed up by a few green beans and the yellow tinge of turmeric.

Shashimala called the sauce "curry." Until a year or so ago, "curry" in Shashimala's house was a mixed vegetable dish, containing eggplant, cauliflower, onions, green beans, and whatever else was in season, sautéed with spices and cooking oil. But that was before the price of rice doubled in 2007 in Bangladesh and across the globe, forcing the hundreds of millions of poor families who depend on the grain as their main food source to make do with less. For Shashimala, the higher cost of rice forced her to cut back on other important food sources, like meat and vegetables.

"I add rice water to it now," she said, explaining the curry's starchy, liquid-like consistency and how she and her family are essentially eating rice with rice. She set the lid back on the pot and looked away, embarrassed.

The high food prices have forced Shashimala to cut back in other areas too. A few metres from her bamboo screen kitchen, Shashimala's 13-year-old daughter, Rima, sat on a mat in the dusty yard with a small loom balanced in her lap. The growing piece of cloth in front of the girl bore the telltale design of Chakma tribe, the most populous of the eleven indigenous groups who inhabit the region and are known collectively as the Jumma.

Rima's sturdy, young hands moved purposefully across the cloth, creating an intricate pattern by interlacing strands of rayon thread. Due to the high food prices, Sashimala could no longer afford to send her daughter to school, so Rima was trying to weave her way back. Rima hoped to sell each piece of cloth she wove --about three days work -- for 200 taka. It cost 850 taka to cover the cost of uniforms, books and other supplies required to attend school for the year. Like her young peers the world over, Rima viewed education as the key to her future and a way out of the poverty and daily struggle for survival that consume the lives of her parents and everyone around her.

"This type of work is so hard," she told me, as motioned to the loom in front of her. "So is working in the field with my parents."

"I want to study so I can get a good job," she added, with a teenager's wistfulness. "I want to stay in my village, but if I get a good job, it doesn't matter. I'd go anywhere."

In January, I visited the Chittagong Hills Tracts (CHT