



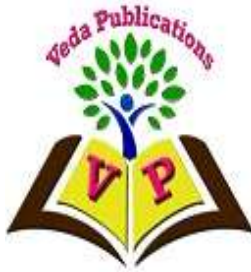
## SOCIO-LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF CHAKMA: AN INDO-ARYAN LANGUAGE SPOKEN IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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### ABSTRACT



The aim of this paper is to look into the socio-linguistic aspects of Chakma, an ethno-linguistic community settled in Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh, a north eastern state of India. Chakma (Alternate names: Chak, Dainak, Thek, Sak) is an indigenous ethno-linguistic group settled mainly in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya and West Bengal of India and in some parts of Burma. The total population of Chakmas in India according to the 2011 census was 2, 26,860 persons. The paper will focus on the various socio cultural aspects of the Chakmas including custom and tradition, food habits, dress, housing pattern, economy and education. This paper will also look into the status of the language and the attitude of the people toward their language.

**Keywords:** *Chakma, Indo-Aryan, ethno linguistic*

**1. BRIEF PROFILE OF THE CHAKMAS**

Chakma (Alternate names: Chak, Dainak, Thek, Sak) is an indigenous ethno-linguistic group settled mainly in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya and West Bengal of India and in some parts of Burma. The majority, 2,39,417 in 1991 Census<sup>1</sup> are residing in Chittagong Hill Tracts, around 15,000 in Assam, 64, 293 in Tripura (*Census, 2001*), 71,283 in Mizoram (*Census, 2001*), around 42,333 in Arunachal Pradesh (*Census, 2001*) and 20,000 in Arakan. The total population of Chakmas in India according to the 2011 census was 2,26,860 persons, with 96,972 persons in Mizoram, 79,813 in Tripura, 2,032 in Assam, 466 in West Bengal, 106 in Meghalaya and 47,471 in Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, the Chakma people are mostly found in Lohit, Changlang and Papumpare districts. The focus of the present study is the variety of Chakma language spoken in Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Chakma people are Mongoloid by race and they have resemblance with the Tibeto-Burman group but they speak an Indo-Aryan language, which they call it as Chakma. They are divided into two main clans: *Anokya Chakmas* and *Tangchangya Chakmas*. Further, they are sub-divided into 32 sub-groups called 'Ghoja' or 'Gutti'. They are followers of Buddhism. The Chakmas are multilingual people primarily with the knowledge of Bengali, Hindi, English and

Assamese.

**1.1 TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES OF CHAKMA**

Chakma has SOV word order and person agreement as seen in the following sentence

- (1) mui     bat     k<sup>h</sup>a-ŋ  
1sg rice     eat-pres.1p  
'I eat rice.'

It is a highly agglutinating language (partly inflecting) and it has postpositions. In the Chakma language, stress can be seen to co-occur in gemination with some of the consonants, which are illustrated in the following examples.

- (2) buzzi 'hook'  
(3) nittu 'everyday'  
(4) təkkei 'cap'

In the examples, stress can be seen in the gemination of the consonants *zz*, *kk* and *tt*, which are mostly found in Chakma. It has both open and closed syllabic structure.

- (5) CV     lo     'blood'  
(6) VC     um     'warm'  
(7) VCV    ars     'so'  
(8) VVC    aar     'bone'  
(9) CVC    duk     'sad'

**2. METHODOLOGY**

The fieldwork for this study has been conducted in Papumpare District of Arunachal Pradesh. The interview method was used to collect data. The language consultants of Chakma were interviewed and recorded for further analysis. The questionnaires were based on the model of questionnaires given in Abbi's (2001), "A Manual of Linguistic Field Work and structure of Indian Languages" and "Languages & Cultures on the Margin- Guidelines for field work on Endangered languages" of U.N.Singh, B.Bhattacharjee, R.Chakraborty, A.K.Tripathi (2016). The devices used during the fieldwork were a

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from [http://www.ijpnus.org/jumma\\_ethnic\\_group](http://www.ijpnus.org/jumma_ethnic_group), on 12.03.18



recorder (Sony ICD-PX240 MP3 Digital Voice) and a phone (Vivo Y21L) for data recordings.

Apart from these, the data were collected from secondary sources like, different books, study materials, journals, various online articles and textbooks.

### 3. SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE CHAKMAS

Every indigenous group has its peculiar and diverse ethos, art, music, literature, tongue and traditional institutions. The fact of belonging to a group gives rise to fellow emotion and understandings. The Chakma ethnic group witnesses numerous rites and rituals in relation to their everyday activities. The Chakma culture is rich and multi-faceted. They follow the patriarchal form of society; even though they follow the patriarchal form, the Chakma women enjoy equal status with men. The male member is the head of the household. Chakma community has a long history of rich cultural tradition which is a hidden treasure. In the following section, socio-linguistics aspects of Chakmas such as food habit, housing pattern, dress, customs and traditions, economy and education and literacy will be discussed.

#### 3.1. FOOD HABIT

The Chakma people have very simple food habits. Their traditional foods are *batsuri* (bamboo shoot) and *sugon matf* (dry fish). The staple food is *bat* (rice) and they live on *utse ton* (boiled food). They depend on vegetables, leaves, herbs and fruits that are found in the surroundings of their home. Usually, they live in the hills and therefore they eat the natural produce from the forest. Fish, poultry and meat like *sugor era* (pork) are consumed, despite the fact that

many of them are Buddhists. The use of oil and spices is very less in their traditional food.

#### 3.2 HOUSING PATTERN

Chakma people build their *gor* (house) by using *batf* (bamboos), *bawng* (woods), canes, reeds etc. The lower part of the house is used as an enclosure for the animals. The floor has certain holes on it. A corridor is enclosed to the mid of the house or in a side by which they can differ various rooms for certain purposes.



Figure 1: A typical house of Chakma<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.3 CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Mostly the Chakma people follow **Theravada Buddhism**. However, there are some Chakma people who follow Christianity. In almost every Chakma village, there is a **Buddh Vihar (kijon)**. The people also worship **Hindu deities**. For instance **Sri Mahalakshmi** is worshipped as the Goddess of the Harvest. They offer the sacrifices of goats, chickens, or ducks to satisfy the spirits that are believed to bring bad diseases. Even though animal sacrifice is totally against Buddhist beliefs, they practice animal sacrifice during various festivals.

<sup>2</sup> The photograph was taken during the fieldwork at Papumpare.



### 3.4 FESTIVALS

The most important festivals celebrated by the Chakmas are **Bizu**, **Alpaloni**, **Buddha Purnima** and **Kathin Civar Dan**.

#### 3.4.1 BIZU FESTIVAL

This festival is celebrated for three days- the second last day of *Chaitra Sankranti* called '**Ful Bizu**', the last day of *Chaitra* called '**Mhul Bizu**' and the first day of *Baishak* called '**Gosya Bizu**' of Bengali calendar. During these three days, people visit each other's house and drink **hanzi** (local liquor), **Pajan Tyong** (Mixed vegetable curry), different kind of cakes, sweet mates, etc. The young boys and girls play different traditional games, sing and dance with utmost merry making in groups.

#### 3.4.2 BUDDHA PURNIMA

It is the anniversary of three important events in **Buddha's life - his birth, his attainment of enlightenment, and his death**. It is observed on the **full moon day** of the month of *Baisakh* (usually in April). The people offer flowers to the image of Buddha, light candles, and listen to sermons from the priests. **Alms** (offerings) are given to the poor, and feasts are held for the monks.

#### 3.4.3 KATIN CHIBOR DAN

**katin** (difficult process), **tjibor** (dress for monks) and **dan** (offering) is performed once a year in a particular temple. This ceremony is performed between the months of **atfin** and **kadi** of Bengali calendar. Generally, the **tjibor** is prepared within 24 hours starting from spinning, weaving and colouring and hence it is called **katin tjibor**. The offering **katin tjibor** is performed in the presence of at least five

monks, which is called **sana** (virtuous association) who represent all the monks.

### 3.5 MARRIAGE SYSTEMS

In Chakma, marriage system is called subhlong. There are several forms of marriage in the Chakma society. They are discussed in the following section.

#### 1. Marriage by Arrangement

where the parents arrange the marriage of their children. This form was popular in the past.

#### 2. Marriage by Love

where the lovers fall in love and consult their parents for marriage. This is the most popular form of marriage in the modern days.

#### 3. Marriage by Exchange

where one pair of brother and sister marries to another pair of brother and sister and thereby, they avoid the payment of bride price called '**dab<sup>h</sup>a**'.

#### 4. Marriage by Elopement

where the lovers elope and get married if their parents do not agree for such marriage.

#### 5. Marriage by Adoption

where the girl's father adopts a man as **zamei** (Son-in-law) for his daughter.

#### 6. Marriage by Service

where the bridegroom has to serve in the father-in-law's house for at least few years. After that, he can marry his daughter and bring her back to his home.



7. **Ghar zamei or zamei tuli dena** where the bridegroom has to stay with his parents-in-law for a few years.

### 3.6 FOLK MUSIC

There are numerous **g<sup>h</sup>it** (Folk songs) in Chakma community. The **g<sup>h</sup>it** are divided into three different types: 1) **ub<sup>h</sup>o g<sup>h</sup>it**, 2) **gjan<sup>h</sup>kuli g<sup>h</sup>it** and 3) **te<sup>h</sup>gabana g<sup>h</sup>it**. However, the **ub<sup>h</sup>o g<sup>h</sup>it** are lustful and related to love songs and hence they are not usually sung in public. They are usually sung by the young boys and girls while collecting vegetables in the jungle or abandoned **zhum** called **rannja** or while they are with only friends. The **oli** (lullabies) are sung to make a child sleep in a cradle. They play different types of musical instruments like **bazi**, **he<sup>h</sup>garan**, **duduk**, **sinja**, etc.

### 3.7 DRESS

The Chakma womenfolk have good skills in weaving. They make their own traditional dresses in their traditional handloom call **bein**. The Chakma women wear an ankle length cloth around the waist which is called **pinon** and **hadi** wrapped above the waist as well as ornaments like **haru** (bangle), **hanp<sup>h</sup>ul** (ear ring), **andik** (finger ring) and **te<sup>h</sup>gasora** (necklace). The **pinon** and the **hadi** are colourfully hand woven with various designs. The design is first embroidered on a piece of cloth known as **alam**. The Chakma men wear **hut (coat)**, **h<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>** wrapped in head, **gunzi (shirt)** and **duti hani** means an ankle length cloth wrapped around the waist.

### 3.8 AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Agriculture and a strong tradition of **fishing**, **rearing poultry**, **piggery**, **cultivation of rice**, **betel nut plantation** are the main means of income. Their

activities in agricultural field and household works and fishing are based on the fulfilment of day-to-day needs, always living in close proximity to nature. They have **double cropping** i.e. **ahu** and **sali**. **h<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>igun** (potato), seeds, **soitso** (mustard), vegetables, **kath aloo** (a local type of potato) etc. are the main Rabi crops. Besides this, **hoits** (sugarcane) and **(tulo)** cotton are planted. Separate gardens are prepared for **h<sup>h</sup>ola** (banana), **suguri** (beetle-nut), and **batf** (bamboo), etc. **sugor** (pig), **sagol** (goat), **huru** (hen), **atf** (duck), **hudur** (pigeon), **bilei** (cat), **hugur** (dog), **guru** (cow), **mtf** (buffalo), and **et** (elephant) are the main domestic animals. They produce agricultural products for their own consumption.

### 3.9 ECONOMY

The Chakma people are mainly **cultivators**. They earn from what they cultivate. Each family has some land owned by them for growing fruits, vegetables and paddy field. Other than agriculture, they are engaged in some other occupations like **handicrafts**, **handloom** etc. In present days, the younger generation are engaged in **business** and **salaried jobs**.

## 4. EDUCATION AND LITERACY

According to Census 2011, the literacy rate of the Chakmas in **Papumpare district** is **43.85%**. A small number of people are found to be literate. The male literacy is higher than the female literacy rate as it is very rare to find literate women in the community. At present, their basic education is till **matriculation**. However, people are beginning to realise the importance of education and therefore the younger generation are encouraged to go for education by the elder generation.



### 5. ORTHOGRAPHY

Although the Chakmas have their own orthography they prefer using Bengali script and writing system for writing their language. The Chakma indigenous script is known as **Ojhopath** and the alphabets are almost identical with the Khmer and the Lanna (Chiangmai) characters, which was formerly use in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma. The orthography of Chakma is shown below:



Figure 2: Alphabet of Chakma

### 6. COLOUR TERMINOLOGIES

Every language has its basic colour terms. A basic colour term has to be a single word, not the mixture of two words such as light blue, navy blue etc. Berlin and Kay (1969) are of the view that there exists a universal set for all colours in all the languages. From this basic set, one can have various subsets such as –

- white            green
- > red >            > blue >    brown
- black            yellow

According to Berlin and Kay, if a language has a colour term with focus x, then it also has a colour term for each focus to the left of x in the diagram. Chakma has three basic color terminologies **duk** means **white**, **hala** means **black** and **raja** for **red**.

Although they use the colors such as pink, violet, chocolate, reddish, deep blue etc. in their daily life, they lack these terminologies. Because they do not have these terms in their own language they use Assamese or English terminologies for these colors.

### 7. THE STATUS OF THE LANGUAGE

The Chakma language spoken in Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh, seems to be endangered. Although, the older generation is still trying to retain the language, but the younger generation tend to have less fluency than the older generation. There is a difference between the Chakma used by the older and younger generations. This difference comes in case of pronunciation, use of words, modification of words and this in turn leads to creation of new words. The actual pronunciation of any word can be dependable only from the older generation i.e. above the age of 60 years. The age group between 40-60 years uses the words that are slightly different from the older ones or a modification in the usages.

Since the present age is the time that is totally or partially influenced by modern technology, mechanical and digital systems, it leads in the change of life style, thinking and most importantly, use of a particular language for communication.

The feature of retention is seen among the older generation in terms of language, culture, food habits, etc. But in the present time, some younger people are also playing a great role in showing positive attitude towards preserving their language, culture, food habits, etc. This is because they have developed a consciousness in their minds about the richness of their language. Some native speakers have taken up initiatives like conducting awareness program,



publishing various magazines, etc. in order to make them realize about the importance of their language. The number of the conscious people is very less, therefore, the works they have done for the language is not sufficient to save the cultural heritage of their community and the language too.

The Chakma people are mostly multilingual. They always prefer to talk in their native tongue with the family members and the people within the community. They communicate with the outsiders in Bengali, Assamese and Hindi depending upon the situation. The older generation had their education from Bengali medium schools. Nowadays, the younger generation prefer to send their children to Hindi or English medium schools.

As the attitude of the Chakma people is negative towards their mother tongue, they are gradually shifting to other regional or neighbouring languages like Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and so on.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Having critically observed and analysed the existing views and practical evidences with regard to the socio-linguistic profile of Chakma, this work concludes that the Chakmas are one of the oldest living communities in North East India and in Bangladesh, they have been keeping alive many elements of the tribal way of living based on their customs, traditions, taboos and rituals in spite of the winds of change that have intruded into their socio-cultural lives.

Language is a socio-cultural-geographical phenomenon. There is a deep relationship between language and society. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the socio-linguistic profile of

Chakma. Globalization has contributed significantly to the decaying of aboriginal culture and spreading the true colour of modernity into their tribal way of living. In case of Chakma community, the impact of globalization contributes to the ultra-modern life and lifestyle. Most people are interested towards city culture and lifestyle, which is brought by the process of globalization and modernization.

From the above discussion, it is also observed that the Chakma community has its unique traditional way of life, thoughts, food habits, housing pattern, folklore, festivals, rites and rituals etc. To be a part of the modern society has resulted in integration of their culture and they have been losing their original custom and tradition, folklore, tribal way of livelihood. The wind of globalization exploits their aboriginal customs, traditions, taboos and rituals and giving them the comfort of modern economy. The younger generation is losing the tract of transmission of their rich and vibrant culture and language.

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