

A Study of Contradictions in the Theories on Origin and History of Chakma Migration

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Introduction

Chakmas are the transnational migrants from East Pakistan, presently Bangladesh who were accepted as refugees by the Indian government in 1964 because of devastation caused by Kaptai dam. This gave them the nomenclature of “*development refugees*” or “*environmental refugees*”. However, there are different appellations through which Chakmas have been recognized like Chakmas, Chakams, Chaks, Saks, Sakyas, Sangmas, Theks, Thets and Daingneks. They were officially rehabilitated in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) i.e. in present day Arunachal Pradesh during 1960-1964 strategically as pro-Indian population in the vacant lands of Arunachal near Chinese border. The Supreme Court of India after their long standing struggle gave a verdict in 2015 to grant them citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh. Later, this verdict was challenged by the local government and the natives stating that Chakmas are foreigners. Chakmas have a scheduled tribe (ST) status in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and Assam but not in Arunachal Pradesh. This paper is an effort to trace the origin and history of their migration in Northeast India so that an exact route of their transnational migration can be determined. At the same time, the paper seeks to determine the history and origin of Chakmas before they came to present day Northeast.

The study of origin and history of Chakma migration reveals that there are multiple theories on their origin which are contradictory in nature. Most of these theories have been found in the ethnographic works of British officials and anthropologists who were surveying the interiors of geographically isolated Northeast for the purpose of deeper colonial penetration in the region. These ethnographic works were based on folklores and oral histories, the resemblances of which can be still found in the conversations of older generations of Chakmas who migrated from East Pakistan in 1960s. A reflection on origin and history of Chakma migration state that they were the ruling class of South Asian region with four major South Asian countries of present day under their garb during different time periods of history: starting from ancient India, Nepal, Burma and Bangladesh. Chakmas migrated in not just one particular period but during different

phases of history i.e. during the rule of Sakyan kings, during Arakanese and Mughal rule, during British rule, during and after independence and during post-kaptai displacement.

Mr. Henry Verlest, the first Chief Officer of the Chittagong defined Chakma territory as by Nizampur Road and Bay of Bengal to the west, one-third of Kuki territory to the east, the Feni River to the north and Sangu Rivers to the south belonging to Royal Chakma Kingdom under Shermusta Khan. Despite this claim, there are multiple theories on origin and history of Chakma migration, which are found to be contradictory in nature. Out of these theories, the Chakmas being Sakyans and parts of Northeast region being their original habitations are validated and backed by corroboratory evidences. But there are many theories like Chakmas being Mohammedans which are challengeable and leaves us in doubt.

Research Questions

Chakmas migrated from East Pakistan to Northeast India in 1947 and 1960s but how could some Chakmas exist in India from much before independence is a question this paper seeks to explore. If many of them migrated from East Pakistan, how they are found in parts of present day Burma as well? If Champa in Magadha was their original territory how come other territories of Chakmas are also called as Champa/Champanagri or Champanagar, especially in Northeast region of India? In fact, there is one Champa that existed on the borders of Laos/Cambodia. Further. If Chakmas are Sakyas, how there are claims that they were Mughal descents? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to answer regarding their origin and history of transnational migration.

Methodology

This paper is based on findings of ethnographic research carried out on Chakmas of Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram in Northeast region of India. Eighty-six semi-structured interviews, informal interactions and FGDs were conducted with Chakmas and non-Chakmas of Northeast for the purpose of this research. Many of these respondents were older generation of Chakmas who migrated from East Pakistan

to Northeast India in 1960s in search of refuge. To study the impact of transnational migration on Chakma tribes, it required close observations of their day-to-day actions and lives. Thus, the qualitative method used for this study involved using the following research methods and techniques:

1. Secondary data analysis
2. Field observation and notes
3. Oral histories/Folklores/ballads
4. Published and unpublished related documents
5. Focussed group discussions
6. Ethnography

Apart from above, participation in Chakma meetings/events brought an insight on their community solidarity and cultural traditions. Gold has discussed about four roles of participant observers: as complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant and complete observer. Out of these four roles, for this research adopted mainly the role of observer-as-participant (Bryman, 2011)ⁱ. The ancient and recent maps of Bengal, Arakan and Burma served as useful documents to figure out the past and present location of Chakmas in the region.

British Ethnographers on Chakmas

The works of Lewin, a British official (1869, 1870 and 1885) were the first ethnographic accounts on Chakmas. The works stated that Chakmas in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) were a part of Bengal Sultanate under Mughals and Arakanese rule before coming under the occupation of British. As Lewin (Lewin, 1870)ⁱⁱ remarked:

“The hills and sea-board of Chittagong, until the rise and consolidation of British authority, were the border-land upon which several races struggled for supremacy. Arakanese, Moguls, and Portuguese all preceded us as masters of the country; and all have left behind them traces of their former supremacy.”

Lewin (Lewin, 1885)ⁱⁱⁱ was sure that Chakmas were at one point residents of Arakan. Though he has recorded at different places that they are from a place called Champaknugger, Khatriyas of good caste, belong to Chandra dynasty and came from Straits of Malacca. According to him, ‘*The Radza-wong*’, or history of the Arakan Kings, gave the following account of them (Lewin, 1870)^{iv}:

“It is there written that King Kaumysing, the son of the King of Baranathi, having been assigned by his father, as heritage, all the country inhabited by the Burman, Shan, and Malay races, came to Ramawati, the ancient capital of Arracan, near the modern town of Sandoway. He there collected men from the different countries of Western Hindoostan, having a variety of languages. They then asking for subsistence; to the first who so applied he gave

the name of Thek, and their language being different from the rest, they lived separate.”

Many British officials and anthropologists like Hunter, Hutchinson, Mills, Risley, etc have taken inspiration from works of Lewin. As per Hutchinson (Hutchinson, 1909)^v, during Burmese wars, Chakmas were ousted from Arakan by Moghs and were forced to enter the Hill tracts. They then finally settled in central and northeast portions. As per 1872 census, there were 44, 329 Chakmas in CHT out of which 23, 026 were males and 20, 803 were females and including the outside CHT, they were 50,000. He had mentioned about four circles as a sign of presence of Chakmas in Chittagong, out of which three were mentioned by Lewin and others in the following manner:

1. The Chakma Circle (mentioned by Lewin)
2. The Bohomong Circle (mentioned by Lewin)
3. The Mong Circle (mentioned by Lewin)
4. Government Reserve Forests (additional mention by Hutchinson)

The two letters documented by Lewin (Lewin, 1869)^{vi} in his work are indicating the beginning of mass migrations of Maghs in CHT from Kingdom of Arakan, including that of Chakmas. This confirms their presence in Arakan. These letters are written from King of Arakan to Chief of Chittagong (21st June, 1787) supplemented by a letter from King of Burmah. These letters were received by Chief of Chittagong under the administration of Lord Cornwallis, the then British Governor General of India. The letters spoke of migration of inhabitants of Arakan followed by invasion of King of Arakan into Chittagong. The supplementary letter from Raja of Burma states about how the region had been run on the principles of religion and justice preached by Buddha Dutta (which seems to be mention of Gautama Buddha).

W.W. Hunter (Hunter, 1876)^{vii} has given an account on CHT where he like Lewin added to the fact of British supremacy in the region. A portion of his work is repetition of what Lewin has written in “*The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers therein*”, especially the section on history of Chakma tribes. But Hunter additionally reflected on emigration of Chakmas from CHT to Tipperah Hills during the year 1871–72. In 1870–71, the raiders made many British tea-planters as captives and in the same raids, a daughter of British tea planter Mary Winchester was abducted by the Lushais and taken away as captive to their villages. Mary Winchester was recovered with the aid of Chakma Coolies.

Figuring Northeast in Chakma history

Further, the work of Alexander Mackenzie (1884) talked about the history of the relations of the Government with hill tribes of Northeast Frontier of Bengal. Following his footsteps, Sir Robert Reid (Reid, 1983)^{viii} had written on history of the frontier areas bordering on Assam being Governor of Assam from 1937 to 1942. His work talked about the transformations

in Chakma inhabited areas due to British migration in the region. Lushai district, as pointed by him was initially divided into two North Lushai and South Lushai under Assam and Bengal government respectively, later to be merged under Assamese government for making Assam as a colonial frontier for British. The transfer of South Lushai Hills was to take place on 1st October, 1897 from Bengal to Assam administration. Demagiri at this time was not situated under Lushai Hills but CHT. Finally, on April 1898, Proclamation under Section 3 No. 591 E.B placed South Lushai Hills including Demagiri under Assam administration. This is how Chakmas became part of present day Northeast from much before independence.

Most of the Chakma settlements in present day are found to be along the river side. It can be inferred due to their presence along river settlements that they could have migrated along the river basins of Ganga, Campa, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Chindwin, Meghna and Mekong rivers, many years ago. Alongside Feni River, Chakmas are found to be both alongside Tripura and Bangladesh. Lewin's categorization of them as "*Kyoungtha*" i.e. children of the river in his works may be considered as corroboration to this fact. The following table lists out places by the name of Champa/Champaknagars/Champanagars in ancient Tripura, Magadha, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh and Burma as well which points out toward a mystery over the nomenclatures of their habitations. Though, still the process of discovery is on for Chakmas in Laos and Cambodia. But the structure of Chakma houses in Arunachal is same as those in Vietnam or Cambodia signifies some connection.

S. NO.	Names of Places	Kingdoms
1	Champaknagar	25 kms east of Agartala in present day Jirania, west Tripura
2	Champa	Anga Kingdom, Magadha (presently south Bihar)
3	Champa	Present day Vietnam
4	Champassak	Present day borders of Cambodia and Laos
5	Chainpango/Sampanago	Bhamo in present day Myanmar (earlier Burma)
6	Champaknagar	Rajshahi, Bangladesh

List of Chakma habitations by the name of Champa/Champanagar/Champaknagars

The Legends of Bijoygiri and other Chakma Kings

King Bijoygiri is being mentioned as the 15th Chakma King in Chakma history called "*Bijags*". It is written on the website of the Royal Chakma Kingdom (Chakma Royal Kingdom)^{ix} that during 630 A.D Raja Bijoygiri marched toward Tamralipta countries (Royal Chakma Kingdom)^x Assam, Arunachal, Meghalaya, etc. Then, he marched toward Tripura in 641 A.D. Presence of Chakmas in Pechartal, Abhaynagar, Khanchanpur, Majmara, Danisora, Nabinsora, Manu, Sammanu, Halajari, Dolajari, Silasuri, Gumethul, Toichangma, etc areas of Tripura is an evidence to this. The website further gives information

that by 645 A.D., Royal Chakma Kingdom was established with capital at Rangamati (now Udaipur). In 674 A.D, King Bijoygiri captured the Kuki areas and in battle with Kukis, his only son Prince Devagiri was killed. His cremation ground was turned into a memorial stone until 1945 A.D. Devagiri later known as Demagiri and now Tblaung was earlier part of Chittagong and then transferred to Assam under British and now comes in present day Mizoram.

On the other hand, it is mentioned on website of Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) (Chakma)^{xi} that the new Kingdom Bijoygiri established was called Rampudi (Ramavati) at the Safrai valley. After Tripura's attack, the Chakma capital Champaknagar was named Manijgir. In the 13th century, Manijgir was attacked by King Mengdi and King Arunjuk was made captive. King Arunjuk as is believed to be the Chakma King. The Chakmas settled at Mongzambroo and then to Kaladan due to atrocities of Arakanese Maghs. After settling in Chokkaido, they sought permission from Bengal Nawab Jallaludin, the son of Raja Ganesh to settle in Bengal in twelve villages in CHT. The twelve Gozas in Chakmas were named by the heads of these twelve villages. One of the blogs states^{xii} that Prince Udaygiri (younger brother of Bijoygiri) remained ruler of Anga. The legends of Bijoygiri are especially popular among the Chakmas of Arunachal who came from East Pakistan.

According to Hutchinson, the last of this Champak line Rajas was Sher Daulot or Pagla Raja who was believed to have mystical powers. He could take out his intestines inside out, washed them and keep them back. His tyranny grew out of control and the people assassinated him and moved toward Karnaphuli River. It is believed that the widow of Pagla King (also known as Sattua) fled to Tripura with her daughters when the subjects killed the King. One of the daughters was married in Royal family of Tripura. During this period, the Chakmas in batches immigrated into Tripura in search of cultivable land (Biswas, 2014)^{xiii}. The Imperial Gazettes of British government also wrote about migrations of Chakmas from Chittagong to Tripura along with Maghs in search of Jhooms. The works of Lewin, Pannalal Mujumdar and others have given the long list of Chakma Kings including Pagla Raja.

Mengdi was the King of Arakan who had invaded the Shan states of upper Burma in 13th century (Bhikku P. , 2015).^{xiv} Many Shans that time fled to Assam through the Patkoi range of Manipur and to Cox Bazaar and Southern Chittagong through the Naff river that later came to be known as Chakmas in CHT. Meng Raja (Salim Shah) conquered Bengal between 1593 and 1612, wrote a letter to a Portuguese merchant Philip de Brito in 1607 and addressed himself as the most powerful King of Arakan, of Chacomas and of Bengal. The King Minthi or Mengi (or Mengdi) with the support of Portuguese had defeated the Chakma King Arunjuk and made thousands of Chakmas as captives and arranged their settlement at Engkhong and Yangkhang. He named them Thoin-nha,

meaning the defeated. It is believed that these captives were settled in south (Daghin) of Arakan.

According to another theory, King Tsula Chandra and his descendants were Indians (Kotaochay, 2011).^{xv} Arakan was ruled by the Chandra dynasty, the rule which extended till the Chittagong (Ali D. M., 2005)^{xvi}. Arakan history coincided with the history of Bengal. The Chandras founded the city of Wethali as mentioned in the inscriptions. The Wethali Kingdom composed of Chittagong, Arakan and western Burma. The map of Bengal drawn by Diego de Astor and published as *Descrição do Reino de Bengalla* in the book by Joao de Barros *Quarta decada da Asia* (Fourth decade of Asia) in 1615 CE depicts a place called "*Chacomas*" on the eastern bank of the Karnaphuli River, modern day Chittagong in Bangladesh (de)^{xvii}. Infact, there are other maps also from 16–18th century which mark presence of Chakmas in the same place as part of Bengal and Arakan. The Kingdom was later called Mrauk-U where there exist Daingnets till today and where Chakmas call themselves Sangmas. Daingnaks also called themselves Kheim-ba-nago (Tsampaynago). It is confirmed by now that there was a place called Sampanago in upper Burma.

To explain more, the term Daingneks comes from the word "*Dain*" and "*nek or nak*", where Dain means "*protected shield used in war*". It is said that there were two kingdoms in Burma: Anoka Dain and Asi Dain. Anoka Dain was the Western Kingdom and Asi Dain was the Eastern Kingdom and there was Rakhine Kingdom in the middle. Though both Kingdoms were possibly belonging to Chakmas, the eastern side were belonging to Daingneks. The Rakhine state asked a tax from the Daingnek people and that tax was a protective shield black in colour which was very useful in fighting at nights. These black shields also made a sound which terrified horses and elephants in the war field. Rakhine went for war with the eastern Kingdom so that it could protect itself from the western Kingdom. Daingnets/Daingneks of Myanmar were cut off from rest of the Chakmas till many years. Only recently, a contact has been established with them by Indian Chakmas.



Portuguese map of Chittagong Hill Tracts showing "*Chacomas*" on the eastern bank of the river Karnaphuli

and Arracan (present Rakhine State of Myanmar).

Source: João de Barros, Harvard University, Houghton Library.

The You Tube videos of Daingnets reveal that some of the Daingnek villages in Arakan are by the names: Maezaligone, Nankya, Latpangone and they speak Chakma language largely influenced by Burmese (Video, 2009)^{xviii}.

The Chakma–Sakya connection

British explorer Francis Buchanan (1798) visited CHT and he asked a Chakma man (Buchnan, 1992)^{xix} that if they were the same as Sak people in Rakhine State. The man according to him replied the Saks of Rakhine State were Moishang Saks. In the Rakhine language, Moishang means primary or superior. What the man meant was, the Saks of Rakhine State were the original Chakmas. This confirms the popular origin theory of Chakmas that they are Sakyas, the clan of Gautama Buddha. The Glass Palace Chronicles (Maung, 1921)^{xx} by Kings of Burma have specified in detail the history of Sakyans who migrated to ancient Burma from Kapilavastu, India. As per the Chronicles, the Sakyans Kings in Burma established new kingdoms and dynasties like Tagaung, Srishetra, Dhanyawadi, Wethali, etc and spread their influence till Arakan and Khmer Empire.

As per another theory by Lewin, Chakma tribes were ordered to marry within themselves by Jan Bax Khan, which was not accepted by the tribe and they fled to Arakan. Now, they were returning and remembered their ancestry at Karnaphully river. They according to him were aware of the Arakanese dialect and were not acquainted with the Bengali, because of the huge amount of years, they have spent in Arakan. He stated (Lewin, 1869)^{xxi}:

“Colonel Phayre treats the Thek and the Doingnak apparently as if they were two separate tribes. In this idea, I venture to think that he is mistaken, as the Doingnaks are known and recognized throughout the tribe as a branch of the Chukmas that abandoned the parent stem during the Chiefship of Jaunbux Khan about 1782. The reason of this split was a disagreement on the subject of marriages.”(Lewin: 64-65)

Further, there is a theory of Chakmas being offsprings of Mughal soldiers and Magh women that needs deliberation here. The Mughal army had sent his Wazir of Chittagong to attack the Arakan Kingdom. But the Wazir had lost the battle because of the art of "*Phoongye*" applied by a Buddhist monk. The Mughal soldiers were taken as captives. Later on, the King of Arakan settled them by giving them land and wives for earning their loyalty. This was Lewin's theory of Mughal descent of Chakmas. Lewin (Lewin, 1869)^{xxii} has corroborated this theory by mentioning about the list of 8 Chakma Rajas who reigned in CHT from 1715 to 1830 and used Khan names in their titles. But this theory has been

refuted (PrajnalankarBhikku, 2015)^{xxiii} based on the fact that that the title Khan does not mean that they were Mohammedan in origin. The reason cited is that according to genetic studies, offsprings inherit the genes of their parents and Chakmas do not look like non-Mongoloids. Bahar's following remarks in his book "*Burma's Missing Dots*" (Bahar, 2010)^{xxiv} is a contradiction to this theory:

"To avenge the death of the prince and to stop Mogh-Portuguese piracy in the Bay, Shaista Khan launched the conquest of Chittagong. General Hossain Beg and General Umed Khan led the forces. The end of Mogh control of Chittagong and piracy in lower Bengal led an "incredible rejoicing of Bengal." Moghs left behind their Bengali wives and concubines and children now called the Baruas. Baruas also call themselves as the Rajbanshis meaning the offsprings of the Moghs." There are two large Barua settlements in Satbatia and another one in Chokroshala of southern Chittagong."

In 1712 A.D, there were fights between Chakmas and Mughal Governor of Chittagong. The Chakmas in these disputes captured two cannons of Mughals which are known as "*Kalu Khan*" and "*Fateh Khan*" (Talukdar, 2010)^{xxv}. However, in 1713 A.D the Chakma King made peace with the Nawab of Bengal to allow to do trade with hill cultivators. As per peace treaty, he agreed to pay eleven mounds of cotton to the Nawab. This cotton grown in the hills and was transported through Karnaphuli River. Shermasta Khan then paid the cotton tribute to British. At this time, Chakma palace began to be called as "*Karpas Mahal*". Sher Daulat Khan after him revolted against the British. Raja Jan Bux Khan along with his able general Rano Khan fought with British many times. Raja Jan Bux Khan surrendered to the British after economic blockades put up by them. A "*Cotton Treaty*" was signed which included the following provisions:

1. Jan Bux was recognized as the Chakma Raja.
2. Collection of revenue was Raja's responsibility
3. Autonomy would be given to Chakmas
4. British troops will remain in Chakma Kingdom for law and order

The Partition Folly and Chakmas

Till 1860, the British did not interfere in the internal affairs of the Chakma Kingdom. Under the Act of XXII, CHT was separated from Chittagong. Subsequently, the region of CHT was divided into two circles. During Kalindi Rani's reign, British started penetrating into the Northeast. Lewin, in his autobiographical account has shared about the hard times he faced in dealing with Rani Kalindi. As per the 1881 Regulation, people of CHT were allowed to form their own police. CHT was declared as an excluded area under 1900 Regulation Act called CHT Manual. The Regulation banned settling of foreigners into CHT. Later on, the government of

India declared in its Act of 1935 that CHT is a totally excluded special area.

The tragic point came when India was partitioned into two nations on communal lines. The Bengal Boundary Commission published on 17th August, 1947 that CHT has been made part of East Pakistan, instead of India. The Chakma leaders were unaware of these developments and unfurled the Indian flag at Rangamati assuming that they were enjoying their freedom as Indians. Many young Chakma leaders fled East Pakistan to Tripura after this declaration. Though leaders like Sneh Kumar Chakma and Ghanshyam Dewan later advocated for their inclusion in India but all their pleas failed and even Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rejected their proposition in New Delhi, quoting fear of subjugation of the country again by British.

Rulers turned Refugees

Muslims started pouring in CHT, which was a violation of the "*Excluded Area Status*" and Regulations of 1900. Muslims were considered as foreigners intruding in Chakmaland. Further, what added to their misery was scrapping off the autonomous status in 1963. In 1964, the Kaptai dam construction displaced thousands of Chakmas from their original homeland. Many Chakmas proceeded to Kasalong Habitat Areas and around 40,000 fled to India. The hill people were sent to strategic hamlets leading to class struggle. (Chakma S. , 1992)^{xxvi} Because of this dam construction, the "*rulers turned into refugees*" in various parts of Northeast India like Tripura, Assam, Mizoram and majorly Arunachal Pradesh. Chakmas were torn off from their glorious past though some allege that it was a pre-planned move by East Pakistan government to oust them of their ancestral lands, because of their pro-India inclinations.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of theories on origin and history of Chakma migration imply that there are various versions available of origin and history of Chakma migration. But it is difficult to determine which theory is the authentic one. Most of the theories do not have any factual backing except that they are based on ethnography done by British officials and anthropologist. Much of these versions came from popular folklores and oral histories. The contradiction in theories makes the exercise of determining the origin and history of Chakma migration a difficult task. Mey (Wolfgang, 2009)^{xxvii} specified reasons of why examining the history of Chakmas had been a difficult exercise. He had quoted Mills who wrote in his tour diary of Chittagong (1926) in the following manner:

"I have spared no pains to unravel the history of the Chakma Chieftainship. In the days of Kalindi Rani, things were simpler; that intensely practical woman (26) confined her attention to cold fact, and in the inscription she set up in the Mahamoni temple she recognised no Chief earlier

than Shermust Khan, the sixth before her late husband. Yet the present Chief, the second after Kalindi Rani, signs himself 45th Chakma Raja, so greatly has the antiquity of the line increased! This has made investigation most difficult, for the truth has deliberately concealed.” (Mey: 80. 2009)

Nevertheless, apart from the above contradictions, on the basis of fieldwork on Chakmas and review of secondary sources and ancient maps, it can be said that the origin of Chakmas and history of their migration can be traced to India and its South Asian neighbours. The Chakma kingdom existed as Royal Chakma kingdom when British came to India. India’s partition had ripped them of their autonomy and henceforth, their identity crisis began.

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