

Journal of Research and Multidisciplinary

ISSN : 2622-9536 *Print*

ISSN : 2622-9544 *Online*

<http://journal.alhikam.net/index.php/jrm>

Volume 2, Issue 2, September 2019, Pages 127-135



## The Societal Changes among the Tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts

**Dr. Mekhala Chakma**

Assistant Professor of History

Lakshmibai College

Ashok Vihar II, Phase 3, Ashok Vihar III, Ashok Vihar,

University of Delhi

Delhi, India

Email: mekhala2009@gmail.com

### Abstract

The study of the society of the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts, a south-eastern region of present Bangladesh is a significant area. Number of researches have come out on Chittagong Hill Tracts and its people, but the society of the tribes, with the passage of time how changes took place in their customs, traditions and culture etc. due to interaction with the outside world and spread of education have not attracted the attention of the scholars. Issues like origin of the tribes, political background, warfare among the tribes, their chief or king and their court, the royal families etc. have been researched. Many works that dealt with the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its people have not focused on the life of the tribes, their society, its norms and values which have their roots in the past are attributed especially on women that indicates the mind-set of the society. One finds difficulties with the sources as the historical records of this region begin only after the arrival of the British since they are also very scanty and scattered. In spite of it, this research has tried to dig out the nature of the society by using the available historical sources-writings of the British administrators, accounts of foreign travellers and the contemporary history of Arakan and Tripura, and alternative sources, like folk literature, oral traditions etc. and have attempted to focus on the insight of the society, by analysing different social institutions, like family, marriage etc. and other important factors, such as health, education, health. Hopefully, more works will come out on the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the findings will give wider view of the tribal society.

**Keywords:** Tribes, education, family, marriage, religion, ritual.

### Introduction

The region of Chittagong Hill Tracts in present Bangladesh is occupied by different tribal groups. The tribal groups are Chakma, Magh or Marma, Tippera or Tripura, Tonchongya, Mro, Kheyang, Lusai or Kuki, Pankhua, Khumi, Bawm, Chak etc. They were ruled by their own tribal chief or king. The impenetrable geographical location of Chittagong Hill Tracts region kept its people aloof from the outside world. With the

passage of time, they came into contact with the outside people through external political power first with the Mughals and then with the British in the 17th and 18th centuries. Later, they started interacting with the Bangalees of plain areas. So, in the beginning, the social life of the tribes was stagnant, static, unchanging and subsequently, due to interaction with the outside world changes took place in customs, traditions, and cultures. For a better understanding of the society of the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts, it is imperative to study the different social institutions, like family, marriage, norms and values, etc. which have their root in the past. The social institutions represent the social condition and the mentality of the society. Health, education and dress have also been taken as dominant factors which have thrown light on the entire society.

Predominantly, the historians' attention is the on origin of the tribes, political background, warfare among the tribes, their chief or king and their court, the royal families, etc. They have neglected the society, its norms and values attributed, especially on women by analysing different social institutions, like marriage, family, etc. The reason behind this could be the sources (by the historians) that fail to highlight on the issue. The historical records of this region begin only after the arrival of the British whose primary aim was to focus on administration. To know more about the society, alternative sources like – folklore, oral traditions etc. become substantially significant. One needs to explore these thoroughly. Thus, the main objective of this research paper is mentioned in the following sentence.

#### **Objective of the Current Research**

The important factors, such as family, marriage, education, health, and clothing have been analysed to have a deeper understanding of the society of the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts in present Bangladesh.

#### **Family**

Family is one of the most important institutions to understand any society. Murdoc says that family is a social group which is characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults. Murdoc also says that 'economic co-operation' is a characteristic of all families. Family is the basic social unit in which men, women and children live together under one roof, share a sense of belongings, participate together in common family rituals, rites, etc. It performs certain specific roles, like common residence, reproduction, economic co-operation that are essential for the society's survival. In the family, we live in the network of mutual ties and obligations and it is expected to meet the basic needs of all the family members. Family prepares us as social beings through transmission of tradition and the cultural, moral and spiritual values from one generation to another (Mc Dowel & Pringle, 1992). The sexual division of labour is a well-known factor within the family which defines domestic or unpaid work as women's work and public or paid work as men's work. The divisions reflect power relationship and inequality between men and women.

Patrilineal family system is prevalent among the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts. They are recognized by father's lineage which is very important in every aspects of life of the hilly people. In the beginning, joint family system was in vogue and nuclear families were rare. As the head of the family husband takes all the decision in the family. Both male and female child is welcomed in the family though expectation of son is in vogue as son becomes the heir of the family. Generally, the elderly couple live with the family of their youngest son.

The significance of family for women is more vital than men. A man is allowed to have an independent existence, but woman is not socially conceivable without a family. Though son and daughter are welcomed in the family, emphasis was on having at least one son to maintain the kinship ties since the family system is patrilineal. In the hilly area, men are perceived as the major providers and protectors of a family; however, the contribution of women in the family is more than men. She performs all the household chores, like cooking, fetching water from far places, cleaning, nursing the sick and aged and taking care of the whole family. In addition to these, women work in jum, plough and work in the vegetable garden and field with her husband. But she has always got the subordinated position in the family as well as in the society.

The family organization of the different tribal groups does not represent an oppressive institution for women. The reason might be the absence of child marriage, dowry, female infanticide, female foeticide, caste system, etc. that place women in an inferior position. Son and daughter both are welcome in the family as well as in the society. Daughters do not have the inheritance right of father's property.

In the later period, with the spread of education and economy, the sons of joint families went to the towns or urban areas for higher education and took jobs there. After entering into professional life, they migrated to the towns with their families. For education, employment and other non-agricultural occupations, many educated hilly people migrated to the urban areas and got separated from the joint families who remained in the villages. Now a days joint families are rarely found, almost disappeared.

## **Education**

Education plays very significant role in the overall development of an individual. It enables a person to fulfil certain economic, political and cultural functions, and improve socio-economic status. Education is considered a very powerful weapon to bring changes in the society in general and women's status in particular. It is one of the most important aspects that demarcate social changes through the passage of time.

When we consider different tribal groups in this light, we find that some of them had their own language and own scripts from earlier days. Chakmas have their own scripts. According to Surendra Lal Tripura, Chakma script has some similarities with Mankshemor scripts of Combodia and Burmi scripts (Tripura, 1994).

Biraj Mohan Dewan says that in the beginning, there were no schools. Brahmin Pandits (scholars) used to teach the boys in the villages, that is why it is called Bamoni Lekha (writings of the Brahmins). However, sources are silent about the girls' education imparted by the Brahmin Pandits. Royal families and upper class Chakmas used to keep

private tutor to educate their children (Dewan, 1969). Lewin says that around the walls of the Kyang or Buddhist temple are hung with the black boards on which the village youngsters learn to read and write (Lewin, 1869).

Earlier sources do not reflect on education imparted to the hilly people. It seems that in the beginning, the majority of them were illiterate. Earlier, Kyang (Vihara) or Monastic schools were introduced for Buddhist and Arkanese Children (Chakma, 2002). Besides British government, the attempt of Christian Missionaries was also very important towards education among the hill people. During British period, the missionaries along with their preachings played an important role in the field of education. Among the hilly people of the region, Chakmas were the pioneers in the field of education. Satish Chandra Ghosh, who was a teacher in Rangamati government High School in the early 20th Century, says that comparing to other hilly people, the majority of the students were Chakmas and, comparatively Chakmas started going to school at early age (Ghosh, 1909).

Women were far behind in the field of education. Historians and scholars hardly have talked about female education. It has been found that girls were imparted education till the primary or lower primary school level only. In the beginning, the society was averse to female education; as a result, the researchers get references of educated women from late 19th century and early 20th century, and the imparting education to female was also limited to the upper class. Thus, common women remained illiterate. Though education has brought changes regarding women's status by raising the age of marriage and creating employment and empowerment of women, still women's familial and reproductive roles are given priorities and in many families, family responsibilities limit opportunities of female education. In addition, education has not reached yet in all levels of the society. Many young girls in the remote areas and hillocks are not receiving even primary school education where no schools have been set up.

In the beginning, the tribal people did not realize the importance of education; hence, they kept their children aloof from it. Slowly and gradually they realized the importance of education. These days, sons and daughters are equally attending schools and colleges. With the spread of education and employment, many educated people started migrating to towns, and cities naturally creates a gap between the educated and illiterate people in towns and villages and divides the society into classes on the basis of education as well as economic status. It has brought changes in the tribal society. The educated group pioneers to modify some rites and rituals, etc.

## **Marriage**

Marriage institution was considered very important. After marriage a girl gets status in the family and as a mother was revered. There was no child marriage practice among the hilly tribes. The marriageable age for girls is generally 15 or 16 years while the age for boys is between 20 and 25 years. In this connection, Lewin says, "Child marriages among the Chakmas or indeed among the hill people in general, are unknown" (Lewin, 1869; p.70). There was no practice of giving dowry to the boy. On the contrary, girl's parents demand dowry from the boy. Dowry does not mean property or huge amount of money. It is rather girl's parents demand of ornaments, cloths, etc. for their daughter, and sometimes they demand rice, pig etc. as the expenditure of marriage from the parents of the boy. Different

tribal groups or different clans of the same tribal group have different systems. Concubinage was unknown among the hill tribes, though polygamy is permissible in the society except among the Bawms and Pankhuas who do not allow polygamy. Widow marriage is allowed among all tribal groups.

Regarding the marriage of Tongtha tribes (Tripura, Loosai or Kuki, etc.), Lewin writes, "For a man or woman to be unmarried after the age of 30 is unheard of. Marriage with them is more a civil contract than a religious ceremony or sacrament. It is entered into by the mutual agreement of the contracting parties, and can be dissolved of their joint request" (Lewin, 1869; p.77). The persons who are committing adultery are punished severely.

In most of the tribal groups, like Chakmas and Marmas, girl's parents' ask dava or dowry from the boy. Dava is not a property or a lump sum money. It is rather ornaments or expenditure of marriage that girl's parents ask from the boy. If the parents of the boy are unable to fulfil the demand of the girl's family, in such case they could refuse to give their daughter for wedlock. Such customs were strictly followed in the beginning. However, the educated people in these days do not follow these traditions.

The marriage customs of the hill tribes are quite interesting and unique. Arranged marriages as well as others like love marriages, eloping marriages etc. are also prevalent in the society. There is no restriction of marriage between upper class or rich and poor people. In spite of some similarities, marriage customs of every indigenous group is different from each other.

After marriage, a girl is expected to be a mother. But if a woman wants to stay unmarried, she can do so, and in such case society cannot force her. Institution of marriage for women does not show an oppressive one. The reason behind it may be the absence of caste system and dowry (taken from the girl's parents by the boy and his family). Apart from arranged marriages, eloping marriages also seen though society does not encourage it. Widow marriage is allowed, and divorce is permissible in the society. Monogamy is prevalent among the tribes though polygamy is also seen in the society.

The marriage rituals of many tribal groups that used to be performed through animal sacrifices like pig, got, fowl etc. are not followed among the educated class. Dava or dowry demanded by the girl's parents is not found in the society.

## **Dress**

The women wear home spun cloths made by them in traditional handloom. From the time immemorial, the women of these tribes know weaving. It is considered as women's work. The way of wearing the traditional dress of all hilly women in different tribal groups is almost similar with slight differences. The women of Chittagong Hill Tracts wear their traditional dresses round the waist with the edges and tucked in.

However, the dress of every tribal group is different from each other. The traditional dresses of women are indicators of the tribal group they belong to. After going into details about the dress of women, it can be said that some groups, like Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuras, Tonchongyas, Kheyang etc. wear long, ankle length cloth while the other groups,

like Bawm, Pankhua, Lusai Mro etc. wear scanty cloths. The unique design of handloom weaving cloths and the way it is worn distinguishes them from each other. The name of the traditional group of every tribal group is different.

The traditional attire of Chakma women is called pinon and haadi. Pinon is an ankle length rectangular piece of cloth like long skirt usually with red borders on top and bottom called pale, and at the edge in the right side there is an intricate design which is called sabugi. The sabugi is a trade mark of the traditional dress of Chakma women as no other indigenous groups weave this kind of design in their traditional dresses. Both the edges of pinon are unstitched. Haadi is a long rectangular colourful piece of beautifully designed cloth worn around the bosoms. It is also worn in the left shoulder which is tucked in the waist at the right side.

The dress of Magh or Marma women called thami, a beautifully designed cloth with unstitched edges. They wear a blouse or top called bedai. They do not wear breast cloth or dupatta. Young girls wear a scarf round the neck and leave it on both shoulders. Regarding the dress of Khyongtha women T. H. Lewin says "The women generally do not wear turban, but on feast or festival days they bind a bright colour kerchief loosely round the hair. Around the bosom is wound a cloth about a span wide, the arms and neck being exposed. They wear also a 'tabween' (called 'tamuin' in Burmese), or a petticoat of cotton or silk. It has no tie or fastening, but is brought around the waist with the edges twisted in and kept on by the swell of the hips" (Lewin, 1869; p. 45). These days Marma women are wearing thami with a modern top.

The dress of Tripura women is called rinai and risa. Rinai is an ankle length rectangular cloth like the pinon of Chakma women, but the design is different. Risa is a breast cover. They wear a blouse. The important thing is that different dofa or group of the Tripura tribes like Tripura, Jamatia, Reang, Uchoi etc. have different traditional dress. Tonchongya women wear pinon and haadi like the Chakmas but the design is different. Their pinon or wrap cloth does not have sabugi and borders. It has colourful stripes in the centre and broad borders which is usually black. They wear a traditional blouse which has woven work around the neck and shoulders. Tonchongya women wear haadi or breast cloth round the chest. They wear fa-dhori (it is bundle of thread worn around the waist) like a belt which holds the pinon tight in the waist. Women wear white traditional khabong or turban which has delicate work at both ends. They also use a thin home spun cloth as khabong. Males wear dhuti and silum or shirt.

Bawm and Pankhua women used to wear a home spun short petticoat with a blouse. Their sheet is even shorter than the Lusais. Like Lusai women, they used to leave their breasts uncovered (Hutchinson, 1909). With the interaction with the other people and the spread of education, many changes took place in their society. These days they are wearing wrap skirt and blouse. Women wear necklaces of beads and chaplets, brass bangles, etc. Regarding the attire of Mro or Mru tribes Lewin writes, "They weave their own cloths from cotton grown in their jooms. Their clothing is of the scantiest sort, the men wearing merely one strip of cloth round the waist and between the legs, while the women wear a short petticoat, and have their bosoms completely bare" (Lewin, 1869; p. 94).

Mru women wear a cloth called wanglai. The breadth of this cloth is about 11 inches which comes till their hips. They wear wanglai in a manner that the left side remains almost

open. It is usually of blue colour which has embroidery in the centre. They did not wear blouse or breast cloth. Males wear a narrow piece of cloth called don which is worn round their waist and between two legs (Tripura, 1994).

With the passage of time many changes have come in the designs and the style of traditional dresses of the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Some tribal groups now do not wear scanty traditional cloth as they used to wear before. These days, educated women are also wearing salwar kamiz, saree and males are wearing lungi, trouser, suit and shirt.

## Health

Health not only comprises absence of disease but it also includes the overall well being in the society. It can be defined as a state of complete social, mental or physical well being. Women's health can be determined from their access to health care system i.e. food, medical attention and the degree of control women have over their body-events which influence health, such as pregnancy or child bearing and the amount of rest and recuperation available after sickness, after childbirth and after work. The need of women's health care is much more important because of their reproductive roles. An undernourished woman will give birth to a premature and undernourished baby. So, the health of women is an important indicator to judge a society.

The study shows that as a whole the health of the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts was very good. The reasons behind it may be manifold, as the absence of evil practices, such as child marriage, dowry (from girl's parents), female infanticide and foeticide, location, environment and weather.

In earlier times, there were no professional doctors and no dispensaries or hospitals set up near the villages. People were wholly dependent on indigenous method of treatment of the indigenous medicine men. All the hilly tribes possessed certain knowledge of useful drugs of jungle produce. Lewin writes "they are well acquainted with herbs and simples and possess a rough pharmacy of their own" (Lewin, 1869; p. 74). Hutchinson also says "Chukmas specially have studied the matter fully and their pharmacology is considerable" (Hutchinson, 1909; p.61).

For the remedy from illness, charms and spells, black magic are also applied by the indigenous healer, like boidya, ojha, achhya or achai etc. of different tribal groups who try to cure diseases by applying herbs etc. or through animal sacrifice, like chicken, pig, goat etc. When people fall sick, they approach the indigenous healer as majority of the population live in the remote villages far from hospitals or any primary health care centre.

Dhai or midwife also had an important position in the society. Midwife is called ojhaburi, ojhamela and gomajookma among the Chakmas, Tonchongyas and Tripuras respectively. During the time of childbirth, dhai is brought at home. Earlier, women were solely dependent upon the midwives during the time of childbirth. Even in these days, women in hillocks or remote villages are dependent on the midwife at the time of childbirth.

British administration and Christian missionaries also took considerable steps to give medical aid to the hill people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts by opening up hospitals and primary health care centres in the region. With the spread of education and awareness, changes came among the hill people. Educated population has abandoned the practice of animal sacrifice and other indigenous way of treatments. Rather, they approach the medical practitioners if they fall sick. However, the remote hill top living groups are still practicing the traditional way of treatments as there is no hospital, nor even any primary health care centre nearby.

## **Conclusion**

The social institutions like family, marriage and the other important factors, such as education, health, clothing have been taken as essential tools to understand the society of the different tribal groups. Family is one of the most important institutions to understand the society. The patrilineal family structure in which father or husband takes all the decision for the family and the absence of daughter's inheritance rights shows discrimination between male and female despite of her active participation in every family matter. It is found that the economic contribution of women in the family is more than men. The marriage institution reflects the structure of the society. Though it is not an oppressive institution for women, woman's reproductive role and expectations of male child is given priority though birth of a daughter is also welcomed in the family. By analysing the growth of education, the researchers trace how the society of the hilly people of Chittagong Hill Tracts has been transformed. Education has played a vital role in the society, which was helpful in creating awareness among the people. Educated people have pioneered to bring changes in the age long stagnant society. Dress is also an important indicator to understand the society. With the passage of time changes came in clothing in some tribal groups like Mro or Mru who used to wear scanty pieces of cloths now do not wear the same. The health of the tribes in this region as a whole is very good. The absence of evil practices child marriage, dowry (from girl), female infanticide and female foeticide etc. contributed the good health for woman also. Caste system an inherent part of Indian society is not found in the tribal society. However, the spread of education and employment among the tribes has now divided the society into classes like educated and illiterate, urban and rural as well as on the basis of economy—rich and poor.

## References

- Chakma, B. K. (2002). *Shikshangane Chakma Jatir Agragati* (in Bengali). Rangamati: Upojatio Sanskritik Institute.
- Desai, N., & Raj, M. K. (1987). *Women and society in India*. India: Ajanta Publications. (original from the University of Virginia).
- Dewan, B. M. (1969). *Chakma Jatir Itibritto* (in Bengali) (The history of Chakma race). Rangamati, Bangladesh: Saroj Art Press.
- Ghosh, S. (1990). *Chakmajati* (in Bengali) (The Chakma race). Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Granthabali, Vol. 24.
- Hutchinson, R. H. S. (1909). *Chittagong hill tracts. East Bengal and Assam district gazetteers*. (Reprint, New Delhi, India: Vivek Publishing Company, 1978)
- Lewin T. H. (1869). *The hill tracts of Chittagong and the dwellers therein*. Calcutta: Bengal Printing Company.
- Pringle, R. (Ed.). (1992). *Defining women: Social institutions and gender divisions*. New Jersey, USA: Wiley.
- Roy, A.D. (2005). *Indigenous textile of the Chittagong hill tracts*. Rangamati: Charathun Publishers.
- Tripura, S. L. (1994). *Parbattya Chattogramer Prakriti O Sanskriti* (in Bengali) (*The Nature and Culture of Chittagong Hill Tracts*). Rangamati: Tribal Cultural Institute.