



Language and Identity: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Chakma Community in North Tripura

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Abstract:

The research paper aims to analyze the Sociolinguistic Identity of the Chakma Community in North Tripura. The Chakma language belongs to the Indo-Aryan Language family of India. Languages epitomize identities and are used to indicate identities by those who speak the language. Like other ethnic groups Chakmas have their distinct languages or dialects, which serve as a marker of their aesthetical inheritance and group association. Language serves as a source of honor and unity within an ethnic clique, providing a means to nurture and pass on cultural heritage across future generations. It permits particulars to manifest their exceptional ethnic identity and encourage a sense of belonging. Chakma language is spoken mostly in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal of India and in several parts of Burma. However, the focus of the paper is on the Sociolinguistic Identity of Chakma community residing in North Tripura. According to the census report of 2011 the total population of Chakma community in India was 2, 28,281 persons and in Tripura was 79,813. This paper is an endeavor to represent the glance of their de-emphasizing and agonizing qualms in Tripura. The study reveals the connection between language credence and community customs, as well as the consequences of language affairs on social identity and language conservation. The persuasion of the indigenous speakers towards the language will also be evaluated. The current research is based on fieldwork executed in North Tripura district of Tripura, India.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic, Chakma, Tripura, identity, ethnic community.

Introduction:

Language and identity are inextricably linked, serving as fundamental markers of a community's cultural and social identity. For many indigenous communities, language is more than just a means of communication; it is a repository of history, tradition, and collective memory. The Chakma community in North Tripura, like many other indigenous groups, finds its identity deeply rooted in its language. This essay provides a sociolinguistic analysis of the Chakma community in North Tripura, focusing on how language functions as a key element in the construction and preservation of their identity.

The Chakma Community: An Overview

The ethnological term *Chakma* is of recent origin applied by the British writers to a community living in Chittagong Hill Tracts. In Burmese, the Chakma people are referred to by several names such as '*Thet*', '*Thetkama*', '*Sakkama*', '*Tsakma*', '*Tsak*' and '*Thek*'. There is no trace of historical evidence on the existence of the Chakmas before the 10th century A.D. In the Burmese and Arakanese history, existence of the Chakmas as *Thek* and *Thet* are traced. The scarcity of historical records on the Chakma people can be attributed to their nomadic lifestyle, constant struggles for survival, and frequent migrations due to conflicts with other tribes or nations. As a result, they were unable to maintain written records, and their history was passed down through oral tradition, relying on memory to preserve their cultural heritage. This highlights the challenges faced by the Chakma community in maintaining a written record of their history, making it essential to rely on alternative methods to reconstruct their past. The Chakma people have a long-held traditional belief in their ancestral lineage, tracing their roots to the esteemed Sun Race and Khattias, as well as the revered *Sakya* Clan of Gautama Buddha. This belief has been passed down through generations, transmitted orally from person to person, solidifying their cultural identity and heritage. This inherited tradition has played a significant role in shaping their sense of origin and community, connecting them to a rich and storied past. (Chakma).

The Chakma Community in Tripura, an Indian state, rich in cultural diversity, faces the challenge of preserving their unique identity amid the influences of modernization and integration. The Chakma community in Tripura has its roots in *Arakan*, from where they traversed through the Chittagong Hill Tracts to reach their current homeland in a distant past. The migration of Chakmas from *Arakan* was a gradual and ongoing process, characterized by a series of movements along river courses, where they navigated from one tributary to another, eventually settling in their current location. In Tripura, there are nineteen constitutionally defined Scheduled Tribes and the Chakmas are one of the Scheduled Tribes with its rich culture and heritage. Apart from Tripura, the Chakmas are also residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and in the Indian states of Assam, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal. At present there are three major groups in Chakma: **(a) Anokya** **(b) Tongchangya** **(c) Doinakyas**. The word *Anokya* signifies the people came over in the western part of *Arakan*, because in the Arakanese language the meaning of the word *Anok* is *a little west* and the Chakmas who remained in the Arakanese hill regions they were called by the name of *Tongchangya*. Similarly the word *Tongchangya* also has a meaning of its own, the word *tong* means hill and *Tongchangya* means *people from the hills*. There is another group of Chakmas called *Doinakyas*, the word *Doina* means *the badly defeated* and the word *Doinakyas* signifies the badly defeated people. They served and remained in the Arakanese army. The *Anokyas* and *Tongchangyas* have been living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Tripura and Mizoram and the *Dainnaks* have been living in the *Arakan*. Apart from the previously mentioned three major groups of the Chakmas there are some other small groups and are regarded as *Gozas* and *Gutthis*. Different clans living under the control of the *Dewan* are called *Goza*. Each of the clans which comprises of a *Goza* is known as *Gutthi*. Among the Chakmas forty *Gozas* and one hundred and thirty-three *Gutthis* are there. (Majumdar)

Language is a fundamental aspect of human identity, and the relationship between language and identity is complex and multifaceted. For marginalized communities, language can be a powerful tool for asserting identity, resisting cultural assimilation and preserving cultural heritage. The Chakma community in North Tripura, a region in the northeastern part of India, is one such community that has faced significant cultural and linguistic challenges.

The Chakma language also known as Changma, is a member of the Indo-Aryan language family. Despite its significance, the Chakma language is considered vulnerable due to urbanization, cultural assimilation and lack of documentation. The Chakma language has faced historical marginalization, cultural suppression and

linguistic stigmatization, which have contributed to the decline of the language. This study aims to explore the complex relationship between language and identity within the Chakma community in North Tripura. By employing a sociolinguistic analysis, this research seeks to understand how Chakma speakers use language to construct and negotiate their identity, maintain social boundaries and resist cultural assimilation.

Significance:

- The study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by exploring the complex relationship between language and identity in a marginalized community.
- The study provides insights into how language shapes identity and how social categories intersect with language and identity.
- The study highlights the importance of preserving linguistic diversity and promoting language rights.
- The study informs language policy by highlighting the need to recognize and support linguistic diversity.
- The study provides insights into how social inequality is constructed and maintained through language and identity.

Research Questions:

- How does language use reflect and shape Chakma identity in North Tripura?
- What are the language attitudes and ideologies of the Chakma people, and how do these impact language use and identity?
- How can language preservation and revitalization efforts support the maintenance of Chakma identity and cultural heritage?

Existing Literature:

- **Afreen, Nayma. “Language Usage in Different Domains by the Chakmas of Bangladesh”(2020)** explains how Chakma speakers borrowed words from Bengali language and how the Chakmas had to speak Bengali language because of the language policy of Bangladesh regardless of having a distinct vernacular and also how the situation evoked the possibility of language shift by the Chakmas to Bengali in Bangladesh.
- **Saikia, Jonali. “Language Endangerment with special reference to Chakma”(2023)** examines the nature and degree of language endangerment with reference to Chakma, the attitudes of the native speakers towards the language and the causes leading to language endangerment and also the measures to save the language from further endangerment.
- **Saikia, Jonali. “Socio-Linguistic Profile of Chakma: An Indo-Aryan Language spoken in Arunachal Pradesh”(2021)** discusses the socio-linguistic aspects of Chakma and focuses on the various socio cultural aspects of the Chakmas including custom and tradition, food habits, dress, housing pattern, economy and education as well as the status of the language.
- **Tanchangya, Shanta R. “A comparative analysis of Chakma and English Vowels” (2013)** examines the different features of Chakma and English language, the similarities and dissimilarities

of Chakma vowels with English on the basis of description of vowels, diphthongs, phonemic contrast of vowels, vowel length, nasalization and vowel stressed.

- **Deb, Debraj. “Media and Stereotypes on Ethnicity : A study of framing Chakma Migration in Tripura”(2015)** analyses the media coverage on migration of Chakma refugees from Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh to Tripura and attempted to draw conclusions from framing and priming effects of the local media and related polarization of population on ethnic grounds as an impact of mediatized communication of ethnicity and stereotypes generated in media coverage.
- **Chakma, Sujana. “Chakma language : survival from being extinct in Bangladesh”(2014)** focuses on Chakma community to explore the factors to language shift from Chakma to Bengali and some steps that can be used to save the Chakma language from language loss.
- **Bala, Anju. “Depicting the Marginalization and Excruciating pangs of Chakma Tribes in Tripura”(2022)** explores the social, political and economic condition of the indigenous people of northeast India with reference to the Chakma tribe and attempts to portrait the glimpses of their marginalization and excruciating pangs in Tripura.
- **Chakma, Jyotirmoy. “Origin and Evolution of Chakma Language and Script”(2010)** states that the present day Chakma dialect is considered to be Indo-Aryan but Chakmas are purely Mongoloid in origin and hence the present language may not be their original tongue and the Chakma script has proximity with the Burmese, Khmer, ancient Tamil and Brahmi.
- **Chakma, Urme. “Empowerment and Desubalternising Voices through Education: A Case Study of Diasporic Indigenous Chakma in Melbourne”(2021)** investigates how the Chakma, a small Indigenous community from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, have utilised educational affordances to migrate to a developed country like Australia and what role these educational affordances have played in their attempts at retaining, promoting and enriching their ethnic Chakma identity after immigration.
- **Chakma, Mitan. “A Study of English Loanwords Spoken in Chakma language in Bangladesh”(2016)** explores English Loanwords spoken in Chakma language and also discusses the history of loanwords, process and type of loanwords and the analysis of English loanwords spoken in Chakma language.

Research Gap:

Despite the growing body of research on language and identity, there is a lack of studies exploring the complex relationship between language and identity among marginalized communities, specially the Chakma people in North Tripura. This study aims to address this research gap by examining how language shapes identity and how social categories intersect with language and identity among the Chakma people.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design:

This study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of sociolinguistics, language and identity, and social constructivism.

- **Sociolinguistics:** This framework examines the relationship between language and society, highlighting how language use reflects and shapes social structures and power dynamics.

- **Language and Identity:** This framework explores how language is used to construct, negotiate, and perform identity, including how social categories like ethnicity, religion, and class intersect with language and identity.
- **Social Constructivism:** This framework posits that knowledge and reality are socially constructed through language and interactions, emphasizing the role of language in shaping our understanding of the world.

Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative research design, using a case study approach to explore the language-identity nexus among the Chakma people in North Tripura.

- **Case Study:** This study focuses on the Chakma community in North Tripura, examining the complex relationship between language and identity within this specific context.
- Data is collected through in-depth interviews with Chakma individuals, focus groups with Chakma community members, observations of language use in everyday life, collection of language texts and documents.

This research design allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between language and identity among the Chakma people, providing rich insights into the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape language use and identity.

Discussion:

Language as a Marker of Identity:

For the Chakma community, language is a crucial element of cultural identity. It is not merely a tool for communication but also a means of expressing and preserving their cultural heritage. The Chakma language encapsulates the community's myths, legends, oral traditions, and religious practices, which are integral to their identity.

- **Cultural Transmission:** Language plays a vital role in the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. In the Chakma community, traditional songs, folktales, and rituals are passed down orally in the Chakma language. These cultural elements are imbued with the community's values, beliefs, and historical experiences, making the language a vessel for cultural continuity. The transmission of language and culture is often facilitated by community elders, who play a pivotal role in teaching the younger generation. However, with the increasing influence of formal education in other languages, particularly Bengali and English, the intergenerational transmission of the Chakma language is under threat. This shift poses a risk to the preservation of the community's cultural identity.
- **Religious Practices:** Religion is another domain where language and identity intersect. The Chakma community practices Theravada Buddhism, and many religious texts and rituals are conducted in the Chakma language. The use of the language in religious contexts reinforces its sacred status and its role in maintaining the spiritual identity of the community. The Chakma language is also used in the performance of religious rituals and ceremonies, such as weddings and festivals. These occasions serve as important sites for the reinforcement of Chakma identity, as they bring the community together in the shared use of their language.

Current Status of the Language in Tripura

The Chakma language has received official recognition from both the Indian Government, specifically in the state of Tripura, and the Bangladeshi Government. The population of Chakma speakers in Tripura are 79,813 as of 2011 Census report. Within India, it is predominantly spoken in the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC), which encompasses the Tuichwang constituency of Lawngtlai district in Mizoram, as well as various regions in Tripura, acknowledging its significance and widespread use in these areas. As of 2011, while there were no dedicated radio or television channels broadcasting in the Chakma language, the language has found a presence online through social media platforms and YouTube. Additionally, the Hill Education Chakma Script website offers a range of resources, including tutorials, videos, e-books, and online forums, to promote and support the Chakma language, providing a digital space for its use and learning. In 2012, the Tripura government introduced the Chakma language, written in its native script (Ajha Path), as a subject in 87 primary schools located in areas with significant Chakma populations. This move aligns with the national policy of providing elementary education in the mother tongue, aiming to promote linguistic and cultural heritage among Chakma students. By incorporating Chakma language instruction in its own script, the government seeks to preserve and develop the language for future generations.

Linguistic Challenges and Language Shift:

Despite the strong connection between language and identity, the Chakma language faces several challenges that threaten its vitality. These challenges are primarily driven by external factors, such as government policies, migration, and the influence of dominant languages.

- **Language Policy and Education:** In India, the official language of instruction in most schools is either the regional language or Hindi, with English often used as a second language. For the Chakma community in North Tripura, this means that children are primarily educated in Bengali, which has led to a gradual erosion of the Chakma language among the younger generation. The lack of institutional support for the Chakma language in the education system has contributed to a language shift, where Chakma children are more proficient in Bengali or English than in their mother tongue. This shift not only threatens the survival of the Chakma language but also weakens the community's cultural identity.
- **Migration and Urbanization:** Migration and urbanization have also played a significant role in the language shift within the Chakma community. As members of the community move to urban areas for better economic opportunities, they are exposed to dominant languages and cultures, which can lead to the gradual abandonment of their native language. In urban settings, the Chakma language often takes a backseat to more widely spoken languages, which are seen as more useful for social and economic mobility. This trend is particularly pronounced among the younger generation, who may view proficiency in Bengali or English as more advantageous for their future prospects.

Efforts towards Language Preservation:

Despite these challenges, there are ongoing efforts within the Chakma community and beyond to preserve and revitalize the Chakma language. These efforts are crucial for the maintenance of the community's cultural identity.

- **Community Initiatives:** Grassroots initiatives within the Chakma community have played a significant role in language preservation. These include the establishment of community schools where children are taught the Chakma language and culture. In some cases, these schools operate independently of the formal education system, relying on community resources and volunteers.

Cultural organizations within the Chakma community also play a crucial role in promoting the language. They organize cultural events, such as traditional music and dance performances, where the Chakma language is prominently featured. These events serve as important platforms for the reinforcement of Chakma identity and pride in their linguistic heritage.

- **Media and Technology:** The advent of digital media and technology has opened up new avenues for language preservation. The Chakma community has increasingly turned to social media, online platforms, and mobile applications to promote their language and culture. For example, online groups and forums allow Chakma speakers to connect with one another, share resources, and engage in discussions about language and identity. Efforts are also being made to create digital content in the Chakma language, including websites, blogs, and YouTube channels. These platforms provide a space for the dissemination of Chakma language and culture, particularly among the younger generation, who are more likely to engage with digital media.

Efforts taken to preserve the language

A meeting was held on 29th August 2011 for the Development of Chakma Advisory Committee in the chamber of Honourable Minister, School Education. As per Government decision, Chakma Language in Bengali script was introduced in 9 schools in 2004 and subsequently extended the facility to 49 schools. As a result presently Chakma language is being taught up to Class-V in 87 schools. The list of Schools where education on Chakma language is provided under different District and Inspectorate of Schools are:

- Manikpur Proper Jr. Basic School
- Jamini Para J/B School
- Kamunchya Para J/B School
- Subal Karbari Para J/B School
- Shakya Adam J/B School
- Gourchandra Para J/B School
- Langicherra J/B School
- Panchakacherra J/B School
- Salbagan J/B School
- Purba Laxmikanta Para J/B School
- Sukramani Para J/B School
- Kanchancherra J/B School
- Sukiya K/P J/B School
- Purba Dupatacherra J/B School
- Purba Santipur J/B School
- Indrajoy Chakma Para Jr. B. School
- Buddhajoy Para Jr. B. School
- Kamini Chakma Para SB. School (Pry)
- Rajchandra Para Jr. B. School
- Japan Chakma Para SB. School (Pry)

- Senbari Para Jr. B. School
- Ramchandra Para Jr. B. School
- Taramohan Para Jr. B. School
- Kalabijoy Para Jr. B. School
- Bijoy K/P Jr. B. School
- Chailengta Cl-XII School (Pry)
- Laxmipur Laipada S.B. School (Pry)
- Dhalajhari S.B. School (Pry)
- Pancharatan (M) S.B. School (Pry)
- Kamala Ashram Col. S.B. School (Pry)
- Tuichakma Colony S.B. School (Pry)
- Noaram Karbari Para S.B. (Pry) (ADC)
- Biswakarma Karbari Para High (Pry) School (ADC)
- Girish Karbari Para S.B. School (Pry)
- Elmara High School (Pry)
- Gaburcherra S.B. School (Pry). (Iswar Ch. S/B School)
- Kali Prasad Bari High School (Pry)
- Hemtabari S.B. School (Pry)
- Bhanu Karbari Para S.B. School (Pry)
- Laipadapara (Lebacherra) S.B. School. (Pry)
- Jharjaria S.B. School (Pry)
- Hezacherra High School (Pry)
- Dhanyaram KP High School (Pry)
- Lalcherra TMC High Scholl (Pry)
- Chawmanu Cl-XII Scholl (Pry)
- Kshetricherra TKP S/B School
- Nandakarbaripara S.B. School
- Larai KP S.B. School (Pry)
- Arjun mani KP LB. School
- Chawmanu Bazar LB. School (ADC)
- Paisharam KP LB. School (ADC)
- Makarcherra S.B School (Pry)
- Boxamani KP S.B. School (Pry)
- Getua KP S.B. School (Pry)
- Gezacherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Phanguram KP S.B. School (Pry)

- Dalucherra S.B. School (Pry)
- East Chawmanu S.B. School
- Bhangamura CP (AP) S.B. School (Pry)
- Bhuban Sindhu CP S.B. School (Pry)
- Khailya CP S.B. School (Pry)
- Trailakya CP S.B. School (Pry)
- Lazmancherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Akshoymani DC High School (Pry)
- Nabincherra High School (Pry)
- Kinacharan TDP S.B. School (Pry)
- Kamdabcherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Ujanbagicherra High School (Pry)
- Andharcherra High School (Pry)
- Dhanicherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Depacherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Gandhacherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Santipur PTL High School (Pry)
- Kaipaia S.B. School (Pry)
- Nalkata High School (Pry)
- Pechartal H.S. School (Pry)
- Ledrai Dewan H.S. School (Pry)
- Bakra Debbarma Para J.B. School (ADC)
- Dasda S.B. School (Pry)
- Kawnpui LB. School (ADC)
- Santipur High School (Pry)
- Hemsukla S.B. School (Pry)
- Dopatacherra S.B. School (Pry)
- Uricherra SN S.B. School (Pry)
- Mritinga Cherra SN S.B. School (Pry)
- Balananjoyanti High School (Pry)
- Rabindranagar H.S. School (Pry)

Apart from these schools, other important efforts are also taken to preserve and promote the Chakma language. An important primary endeavors involves the progression of written materials in the Chakma language. This includes the creation of textbooks, dictionaries, and literature that serve to document and standardize the language, making it more accessible for learning and reference. A meeting of the advisory committee for the development of Chakma language was held on 18th April, 1991. In the year 2007, a letter was written to the General Secretary of Chakma Students' Association for the demand of special schemes for

overall upliftment of the Chakmas of Tripura. A memorandum to implement special schemes for overall upliftment of Indian Chakma Tribal in Tripura was sent to the Honorable Minister of Tribal Welfare & Forest etc. by the Chakma National Council of India. In the year 2009, All India Chakma Cultural Conference was held in North Tripura for the development of Chakma language and culture in Tripura.

Language and Identity in a Multilingual Context:

The Chakma community in North Tripura is part of a larger multilingual and multicultural environment. In this context, the community's language and identity are constantly being negotiated and redefined in relation to other linguistic and cultural groups.

- **Bilingualism and Multilingualism:** Many members of the Chakma community are bilingual or multilingual, with proficiency in Chakma, Bengali, and sometimes Hindi or English. This multilingualism is a product of the community's interaction with other linguistic groups in the region. While bilingualism can be a source of cultural enrichment, it also poses challenges to the maintenance of the Chakma language. For some Chakma speakers, the use of multiple languages can lead to language mixing or code-switching, where elements of one language are incorporated into another. This phenomenon can result in the gradual erosion of the Chakma language as it becomes increasingly influenced by dominant languages.
- **Identity Negotiation:** In a multilingual context, the Chakma community's identity is often negotiated in relation to other linguistic and cultural groups. This negotiation is particularly evident in interactions with the Bengali-speaking majority, where Chakma speakers may feel pressure to conform to the dominant language and culture. However, for many members of the Chakma community, the maintenance of their language is a way of asserting their distinct identity and resisting cultural assimilation. The use of the Chakma language in everyday life, as well as in cultural and religious practices, serves as a form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of the dominant culture.

Conclusion:

Language is a powerful marker of identity, and for the Chakma community in North Tripura, it is central to their cultural and social identity. Despite the challenges posed by language shift, migration, and the influence of dominant languages, the Chakma community continues to engage in efforts to preserve and revitalize their language. These efforts are crucial for the maintenance of the community's identity and cultural heritage. The sociolinguistic analysis of the Chakma community highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and power in a multilingual context. It underscores the importance of language preservation as a means of safeguarding the cultural and linguistic diversity of indigenous communities. As the Chakma community navigates the challenges of modernization and globalization, their language remains a key element in the construction and preservation of their identity. This study has explored the complex relationship between language and identity among the Chakma people in North Tripura, a marginalized community in India. Through a sociolinguistic analysis, this research has demonstrated how language plays a crucial role in shaping Chakma identity and how social categories like ethnicity, religion and class intersect with language and identity. The findings of this study highlight the importance of language in maintaining social boundaries and group membership within the Chakma community. This study also reveals how language attitudes and ideologies impact language use and identity among the Chakma people. This research has addressed a significant gap in the existing literature by examining the language-identity nexus among the Chakma people. The study's findings have implications for language education, language planning and community development initiatives aimed at supporting marginalized

communities. Ultimately, this study underscores the need to recognize and value linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. By promoting language rights and preserving linguistic diversity, we can empower marginalized communities like the Chakmas to maintain their cultural identity and social cohesion. Future research should continue to explore the complex relationship between language and identity among marginalized communities, with a focus on developing context-specific solutions to support language preservation and cultural heritage.

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