A TALE OF TWO PEOPLES

Charles John Huffam Dickens, the foremost English novelist of the Victorian era, as well as a vigorous social campaigner, wrote his famous novel A Tale of Two Cities in 1859, set in the backdrop of the French Revolution and the cities of London and Paris. But this is the tale of two peoples, two people of a common root, the connection of which may be more than a thousand year old, but that link remained unknown to both sides, until recently. This is the story of the Assamese and the Chakma-Tanchangya people.

But who are the Assamese and who are the Chakma-Tanchangyas? The Chakmas and Tanchangyas are two closely related or the same people of two subdivisions, native to the Chittagong Hill Tract region of modern day Bangladesh and adjoining areas of Mizoram and Tripura state of India and Arakan or Rakhine state of Myanmar or Burma. Although the name is given as Chakma, the Chakma people actually call themselves “Sangma”. Worth mentioning that Sangma is the name of a clan of the Garo tribe. Garo or the Achik or the Mande is the tribe, that is most dispersed across the whole region.

The question, who are the Assamese, was straight forward prior to the year 1947, but was complicated after the year 1947. Before 1947, that is till the British era, the Assamese were, what the Nepalese are even today. The people, who could be called Assamese, during the British era, have not remained the same people who now identify themselves, spontaneously, as Assamese. The full discussion of the causative factors behind this tragic happening of the Assamese people is beyond the scope of this write-up or article. But it can be stated in short, that, the whole
process was and is taking place due to some well planned, unlawful machinations and manipulations of certain agencies, whose official and legal mandate, does not permit, such actions on their part, against any section of the Indian citizens. Unlike the Chakma-Tanchangyas who are somewhat monolithic in composition, the Assamese people have a composite make-up much like the Nepalese. Nepalese have a central group comprising the Chetris, Rajputs, Thakuris, Bahuns or Bauns (Brahmin), professional castes like Sonars, Damai, Sarki, Badi, Kami etc. who speak only the Nepalese language also known as Khas-Kura. There are a large number of people surrounding this central group, who have their own diverse dialects, in addition to speaking Nepalese or Khas-Kura as their main language. Such groups include Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Kirati etc. The previous Shah Royal family of Nepal hailed from a place called Gorkha in western Nepal, it was here in Gorkha, that the first recruitment centre for Nepalese mercenary soldiers was set up by the British Colonial Government of India. From the name of this place, was named the famous mercenary Gorkha regiment of the British India, which is continued by the present Indian Government also. Now Gorkha or Gorkhali is added as another identity of the Nepalese people in India and elsewhere. Same principle applies to the Assamese people, a central group speaking Assamese as the only language and surrounding segments having their own dialects, in addition to Assamese as the main language.

There are certain features which are unique to the Assamese people and all other people of the world, who are connected to the Assamese, by virtue of being part of the process, of the origination or the dispersal of the Assamese people or their culture, language and script, at various points of time. Such commonality are to be found in the following elements:
* The name element “Kam” embedded in the name Kamrup.
* The unique segment of the composite Assamese anthropological structure, the “Kalita”.
* The unique name elements from Assamese or Kamrup history.
* The unique characteristics of the Assamese language.
* The unique characteristics of the Assamese Script.
* The uniqueness of the Assamese food habits.
* The major Assamese festival element “Bihu”.

For the purpose of studying and analysing the history of the Chakma-Tanchangya people, there exists some written or archaeological sources which can be taken into consideration. The major strong point in this field, is the existence of a reliable oral historical sources prevalent amongst these people, which correlates well with other evidences. But the biggest help comes from integrating and analysing the data with lots and lots of common sense.

Chakma-Tanchangya people bears a dominantly Austro-Mongoloid countenance but speaks a language which is without any doubt an Indo-European language. There is disparity between how they look and what they speak.

In the Linguistic Survey of India edited by George Abraham Grierson,
Chakma language is included as a dialect of Bengali, but any person who is conversant in both Assamese and Bengali, can tell, to which it is actually close. The grammar, particularly the syntax, morphology, and also the vocabulary are strikingly similar with Assamese. In fact the magnitude of similarities that Assamese language has with the Chakma-Tanchangya, it does not share with any other languages. But this connection between the Assamese and the Chakma-Tanchangya languages remained unknown, till the publication of the article of the author in his own website in December 2013, the link to the website is as follows https://drsatyakamphukan.wordpress.com/an-analysis-of-the-ethno-linguistic-roots-and-connections-of-the-chakma-tanchangya-people/. The article was later published in 2015, in the Chakma Literary Journal, Volume I No 1 (ISSN : 2394-1030), published by Chakma Literary Academy, Kamalanagar, Mizoram. In 2016 one Chakma entrepreneur and resident of Guwahati city, Mr Alexander Chakma (Abhay), who is well conversant in both his mother tongue Chakma as well as in Assamese, prepared a list of similar words between Assamese and Chakma languages.

THE

HILL TRACTS OF CHITTAGONG
AND THE
DWELLERS THEREIN;
WITH
COMPARATIVE VOCABULARIES OF THE HILL DIALECTS.

BY

CAPT. T. H. LEWIN,
Deputy Commissioner of Hill Tracts.

"Nullus est liber hominis, ut non aliquis specto presit."
"There is no book so bad as not to be useful in some way or other."

I think that all details become interesting when they relate to, and serve to explain, the characteristics of the country, whose manners, customs, habits, and national life, I have the pleasure of describing. I am authorized to offer to Mrs. John Macpherson, Governor-General of Bengal, 2nd March, 1794.

CALCUTTA:
BENGAL PRINTING COMPANY, LIMITED.
1869.
The oral history of the Chakma-Tanchangya is recorded by Captain T H Lewin, Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in his book, “The Chittagong Hill Tracts & the Dwellers therein & Comparative Vocabulary of the Hill Tracts”, published by Bengal Printing Company Limited in 1869. In that record these important points were noted:

* The Chakma-Tanchangyas relate their origin to a country they call Chainpango, or Champanugger.

* They are descended from a Khettrie family of the name of Chandra.

* They hold the view that they are descended from a Hindoo family of good caste.

* They took wives from among the country people who were Buddhists; and to this it is attributable that they forsook the religion of their forefathers, and have altered also somewhat in complexion and appearance.

Some information recorded from the history of the Arakan or Rakhine province of Burma or Myanmar also give a valuable insight, which corroborates well with the information available from Captain Lewin's book.

* A dynasty of Hindu kings bearing the surname Chandra ruled over Arakan or Rakhine province area in ancient times.

* The King of Kamrup, or Assam of the pre-Ahom era sent soldiers to establish kingdom in the Arakan or Rakhine state area.

* All the scripts discovered in Arakan or Rakhine state area of Burma or Myanmar, proved to be belonging to the pre-Rakhine era of the Arakan...
or Rakhine history, are all perfect specimens of the Assamese script.

* The foundation of civilisation in the whole of Burma was supposed to be laid by people coming from the side of the area of present day India.
* The foundation of this civilisation was started in the area of upper or northern Burma or Myanmar.
* The original name of the important town of Bhamo or Banmaw in the Kachin state of upper or northern Burma or Myanmar is Sampanago.
* The ruins of Sampanago are still present and preserved on the edge of the Bhamo town.
* The bricks seen in Sampanago are the typical square or rectangular, flat and hard type, typically seen in all the archaeological sites of Assam.
Sampanago city wall’s ruins, Bhamo town, Kachin state, Myanmar

Close up of the Sampanago city wall, showing a brick, Bhamo town, Kachin state, Myanmar
Some important points can be found analysing the difference between the mainstream Chakmas and the division called the Tanchangyas.
* Tanchangyas migrated at a later period to the Chittagong Hill tract from the area of the Arakan or Rakhine province of Burma or Myanmar.
* The Tanchangyas call the mainstream Chakmas “Annakya” meaning westerners.
* The Chakmas came under Perso-Arabic linguistic influence during the Mughal era.
* The Chakma dialect has some influence of Perso-Arabic vocabulary and Chakma rulers of Chittagong Hill Tracts adopted Perso-Arabic personal names.
* The Chakma got Bengali influence also, which was more during the British era.
* The Perso-Arabic influence is negligible and Bengali influence less in the Tanchangya dialect.
* The Tanchangya dialect is more closer to Assamese than the
mainstream Chakma dialect.

* The some of the textile designs of the Tanchangyas are very similar with Assamese textile designs, both to the Assamese lateral, as well as to that of the central stream.

![Image of Chakma-Tanchangya textiles](image)

### Similar textile design on Assamese Phulam Gamosa in a Bihu Dancer and on the Khobang of a little Tanchangya Bisu dancer

The cultural elements similar between the Assamese and the Chakma-Tanchangyas.

* The prime Assamese cultural element, the festival of Bihu, is celebrated as Biju or Bisu by the Chakma-Tanchangyas with many similarities in observance.
* Both Assamese and Chakma-Tanchangyas are rice eaters with similarities of the food preparations.
* “Khaar” the alkaline preparation made out of ashes of dried plantain or banana peel is a delicacy for both the Assamese and Chakma-Tanchangyas.
From the above points the connection between the Assamese and the Chakma-Tanchangyas can be summed up in this way.

**TANCHANGYA BISU DANCE, JHAGRABIL VILLAGE, RANGAMATI, BANGLADESH**

The Assam in the ancient times known as Kamrup was a powerful independent nation, that had record of sending its soldier-adventurers across its western and eastern frontiers. It was one such band of soldier-adventurers coming out of Kamrup who laid the foundation of the civilisation in the area of present day Burma or Myanmar. The ruins of Sampanago in present day Bhamo town of Kachin state of Burma or Myanmar, are remnants of that civilisation. A group of soldier-adventurers from the Sampanago or Sampa Nagar, at some point of time in the ancient times, moved down southwards, to establish Kingdom in
the area of the present day Arakan or Rakhine state of Burma or Myanmar, which may have included part or the whole of Chittagong area of Bangladesh including the hills. The Kingdom that was established there had a long line of Kings with the surname Chandra. The soldier-adventurers who were full fledged Assamese and followers of the Sanatan or Hindu religion, when they arrived there, took wives form among the many tribes that were pre-inhabiting the area. They subsequently took Buddhism as their religion and acquired many characters from that fusion or intermingling. But they retained many of the original elements of their Assamese forefathers whilst imbibing some degree of influence from their tribal fore-mothers. In cases of such fusion, it depends on many factors, as to which language get the dominant status, paternal or maternal. In case of the Ahoms in Assam and the Hazaras in Afghanistan, it was the maternal language which was retained. But in case of the Chakma-Tanchangyas, the paternal language remained dominant, albeit with strong influence of the maternal dialects. Hence the great similarities that the Chakma-Tanchangya language has with the Assamese. The food habits, cultural elements like the Bihu was retained. The Chakma mainstream in the western part of their habitat got Perso-Arabic and Bengali linguistic influence during later part. The Tanchangyas who migrated later to the Chittagong Hills and those of whom, who stayed back in area of the present day Arakan or Rakhine state Burma or Myanmar, got none or little of these influence and so retains more similarities or affinities with the Assamese.

The Chakma-Tanchangyas and the Assamese as mentioned before remained unknown about their kinship, till the works undertaken by the author. While both these people remained subject of the British colonial rulers in India, crisis began to loom on both of these people in 1946. In
1947, British government took the decision to partition India into two separate countries, India and Pakistan. Pakistan was made to accommodate the Muslim population of India, many of whom wanted a separate country particularly for themselves. The British government for that purpose made three groups of areas, Group A - Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa, Group B - Punjab, North-West Fronter Province, Sind (Muslim majority provinces) and Group C - Bengal and Assam. While only Muslim majority areas are only supposed to go to Pakistan, a plan was hatched long back to include Assam in the proposed country of Pakistan. But Assamese have an advantage, that few nationalities of the world have, Assamese are one of the most secular people in the world. This tradition had been maintained throughout the history of Assam. Although Assam had its units of the Muslim League and also that of Jana Sangha and Hindu Mahasabha and their likes, Assamese people in majority always remained secular. The conspiracy to include Assam in the Pakistan was smelled out by one of the great leader of Assam, Maulana Mohammad Tayebulla, who was associated with the Congress party, around ten years before the actual execution of this devious plan. Maulana Tayebulla launched a vigorous campaign to make Assamese people aware about the dangerous plan to include Assam in the proposed country of Pakistan. By the time the real moment arrived in 1947 and Assam was in the danger of being included in Pakistan, Assamese people and the leaders were already somewhat prepared to thwart this harmful manoeuvre. All the Assamese leaders got together and the then Prime Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi also took the lead. A movement was launched, but none of the great Indian leaders came out in support of the Assamese cause, with the exception of Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi not only supported the Assamese demand to be included in India, but went that far to tell the
Assamese leaders to declare independence if forced to join Pakistan by the British. Due to the campaign initiated by Maulana Mohammad Tayebulla and strong stand taken by the Assamese leaders particularly Gopinath Bordoloi, Assam did not go to Pakistan. But people now remember Gopinath Bordoloi well, but a vicious secret campaign is being launched by vested interests, which may have the approval of certain government run agencies, to suppress the contribution of Maulana Mohammad Tayebulla, in that movement.

The people of the Chittagong Hills Tracts and the Cox Bazar district of Bengal province of British India which includes the Chakma-Tanchangyas, were not that fortunate. During the time of partition of India in 1947, The Chittagong Hill Tracts had 99% non-Muslim population, majority of whom were Chakma. The Cox Bazar subdivision had around 75% non-Muslim population, majority of whom were Mag or Marma. But this area was unjustly given to Pakistan and from then on started a saga of untold suffering for these people, first during the Pakistan rule, then after the liberation of Bangladesh by the Indian military, in the new country of Bangladesh. The Chakma-Tanchangyas had to come to India as refugees and then conflict started with many local ethnic communities on whose habitat they were settled.

But for the Assamese who joined India after escaping the clutches of Pakistan, it was not much better. Assam was over flooded with immigrants both from the Indian mainland as well as from the East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. There was a massive movement against the illegal foreigner in Assam beginning in 1979. Many lives were lost. But all the actions taken by the Indian government including the laws made in relation to the issue are in favour of the illegal
foreigners. There is evidence to suggest that the Indian government used all their agencies and even manipulated the judiciary in favour of the illegal foreigners.

When India was partitioned in 1947, there was a proportion or ratio in which India and Pakistan was to get their respective land areas. If more area are to be given to Pakistan in the east, then India will get a proportionate land area somewhere else. If Assam was to have been given to Pakistan, then some where in the land mass of the Indian mainland, some area would have been incremented. When Chittagong Hill Tract and Cox Bazar subdivision went to Pakistan, land mass got incremented somewhere along the borders of the Indian mainland. This was well known to all the leaders of the Indian mainland, hence explains their silence when it came to supporting the cause of Assam and Assamese, refusing to get included in Pakistan. They knew well what they stand to gain, if Assam goes to Pakistan. Similar is the case of the Chittagong Hill Tract and Cox Bazar subdivision. But Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, he was different, he was indeed a Mahatma or the noble soul, he was above all selfish deeds and wishes, that is why he alone supported the cause of the Assamese. But he was assassinated on the allegation that he was pro-Muslim, he was not, he was a true secularist and true liberal. He commands genuine respect not only of the Assamese but also the Nagas, whose cause and feeling he had the greatness to understand. But the country is in the hands of people, who take his name, put his photographs in all courts and establishment and are doing things which he would never have consented, sanctioned or supported.

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