



Importance of Traditional Occupations for Sustainable Livelihood Practices by the Chakma Community in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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BRIEF NOTE

Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), also called 'Hill Tracts', is one of the most diverse regions in Bangladesh in geography, demography, economy and culture, bordering India and Myanmar. The Chittagong Hill Tracts includes three hill districts: Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari. The CHT is home to eleven different ethnic groups, including the Chakmas (Uddin, 2016). Chakma, also called Changma, Sakma, or Sangma, are the largest of Bangladesh's indigenous populations (Chowdhury, 2015). The Chakma people have a distinctive way of living and engaging with the world following many unique practices that differentiate them from other communities.

Traditional Occupations of the Chakma People

Traditionally *jhum* cultivation ('slash-and-burn' or 'shifting' cultivation) is the predominant form of subsistence agriculture for the Chakma people (R. Roy, 2000). Their agriculture is mainly oriented towards subsistence, with a limited production of cash crops. Their economy was almost exclusively based on *jhum* cultivation. Consequently, other livelihood

forms did not develop substantially (Curle, 1960). According to the Chakma people's tradition, when a boy matures, he goes out to cut his first *jhum*. This is a sign of achieving 'manhood', and the parents give a feast to their relatives on this occasion (Lewin, 1869). Other traditional occupations include weaving, basketry, hunting, gathering, and boat making (Gosh, 1909). Handloom weaving is one of the key traditional economic activities through which Chakma women preserve the culture by passing the knowledge of weaving specific patterns to future generations (R. Roy, 2000).

Impact of Different Forces on Chakma people's Livelihood Practices

Many different development projects starting from the British colonization period have impacted the Chakma people's livelihood and economic activities. This may have started with the Reserve Forest Policy in 1865 (Rasul, 2007). Later the British government's introduction of plow cultivation led to the exclusion of people practicing *jhum* cultivation (R. Roy, 2000). Similarly, the establishment of the Kaptai Dam in 1960, the promotion of horticulture during the Pakistan period in the 1960s, followed by the massive influx of settlers in the Bangladesh period after 1971 (Nayak, 2015), seriously hampered livelihood

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practices and forced many Chakma people to abandon traditional livelihoods and engage with other occupational alternatives (P. Roy, 2018). As a result, over the last 150 years, the Chakma people are witnessing an erosion of their cultural capital.

Can a Culturally Oriented Approach be the Solution?

Arulmani (2014a), in his cultural preparedness framework proposes that cultural learning and enculturation work together to instill a cultural preparation status equilibrium that predisposes people to engage with the world of work in ways that vary from one culture to another. In the same writing, Arulmani further points out that acculturative forces can cause a shift in this equilibrium. Interpreting the Chakma people's experience into the cultural preparedness framework, it may be stated that their enculturated ways of living and engaging with the world of work have been affected by a wide variety of acculturative forces such that the recognition of their traditional occupations as their primary occupation for livelihood has been severely weakened. However, it may be possible to resist or at least adapt to these acculturative forces (Teske & Nelson, 1974).

The sustainability of traditional occupations lies in access to natural capital and adaptation to the changing environment and ecosystem and access market niches in the marketing chain to trade-off short-term and long-term produce (Xu, 2003). Culturally approached, career guidance may become the key to helping a community identify and gain those required skills to manage their traditional occupations in a viable manner (Arulmani, 2014b). In addition, community led initiatives to acknowledge traditional occupations as meaningful work might also energize the process of ensuring sustainability, such as: recognising skills relating to traditional occupations through institutional certification as formal education, building strong community organizations, and establishing the appreciation,

acceptance, and re-functionalization of own values and cultures (Forest Peoples Program, 2016). Along with that, it is important that mainstream society is aware of the traditional occupations and practices of the Chakma people.

The phases the Chakma people's culture and livelihood structure has gone through raises the question: to what extent can their traditional occupations be revalorized. If occupational revival is possible, will these professions be relevant in the contemporary, modern world? If yes, how will that be possible? Acculturative forces are forcing many Chakma people to make nontraditional career choices, resulting in cultural erosion. This is partly because government and development agencies do not recognize the resources the Chakma people already have. Recognition of these resources and ways of living could go a long way in answering the questions raised above. As an outsider, the government and development agencies can play a significant role by facilitating the Chakma people in reconstructing the emerging knowledge systems and adaptive strategies in their interactions (Xu, 2003). Still, there are not enough studies exploring the potential of the indigenous knowledge the Chakma community carries. Before it is too late, more attention is needed to understand how culture can be integrated into their livelihood to secure sustainable livelihood and cultural identity.

Conclusion

Communities can derive significant benefits if their livelihoods and culture are integrated into development planning (Daskon & McGregor, 2012). As a member of the Chakma community, it is the intention of the author of this paper to understand to what degree acculturative forces have affected the Chakma people's livelihood structure and how it will be possible to revalorize their traditional occupations and ensure sustainability or at least adapt to these acculturative forces ensuring cultural preservation.

About the author

Joseph Chakma, is presently pursuing doctoral studies in Career education focusing on the effects of acculturation on the career development of the Chakma people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. He holds an MBA degree with a specialization in Strategic and International Management from the University of Dhaka.

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