A LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF CHAKMA LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the history of the evolution of a language is intimately associated with the story of its speakers. This is particularly true of languages spoken by closely knit ethnic groups residing in remote areas of the world. Since these languages often do not get much official patronage as a medium of education or conducting official business the exposure of such groups to more dominating socio-linguistic environments creates many problems. In some cases the communicative needs enforce massive amounts of adoption and assimilations which change the very character of the language. In some other cases the native speakers after a few generations forget their own tongue and adopt a pidgin as a medium of communication for survival. These changes become rampant when forced migrations or traumatic changes happen in their lives. Either these factors influence the language and make the task of classification and codification difficult.

The case of Chakma language is a classical one where migration from eastern India to Arakans and subsequent movements to Chittagong Hill Tracts has brought in so many changes that today it is difficult to trace its origins. Linguists since the middle of the last century have given a variety of theories regarding its origin and almost all of them have been questioned in one form or the other. Their demographic distribution distribution in three countries namely Bangladesh, Myanmar and India and within India in four north-eastern States namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura has created a situation where Chakmas in one administrative unit have little contact with each other. Naturally this has affected the adoption of an uniform
Orthographic system and recognition and codefication of the
standard form of the language. Issues of survival naturally
take precedence over codefication of the language, but this
makes the task more difficult.

THEORIES REGARDING ITS ORIGIN

Grierson (1904) classified the language as a sub
dialect of Bengali and Chatterjee reiterated this view in
1967. Both of them were quite obviously guided by the
presence of a large number of words from the Bengali spoken
in and around the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Similarities in
the phonological structure and the syntactic structure were
perhaps other factors which guided them to their conclusion.
Native speakers like Chakma (1992) and Talukdar (1994) have
pointed out features like the presence of a number of
Arakanese words, the script which resembles the ancient
Pali script and the differences in the morphemic features
to question this view. It is a fact that lexical items from
Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan language are present and
there are remarkable differences between the morphemic and
syntactic structures of Bengali and Chakma. Indeed it is
difficult to accept or reject any of the theories in toto.
A look into the history of the people explains many of the
problems associated with the language.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are no recorded histories of the Chakmas
and most of the reconstruction of the history is done on
the basis of examination of oral traditions and folklores.
Most scholars believe that the Chakmas are connected with
the Sakya dynasty (the dynasty of Buddha) and that they
originally belong to Kapil Nagar an ancient Kingdom in the
northern Bihar or south-eastern Nepal. It was perhaps the
missionary zeal to spread Buddhism that encouraged Dhaja
Raja, a Sakya prince, to migrate to the Arakan with some
followers, in the 5th century before Christ and establish a
kingdom there (Gogoi 1976 p 104). Talukdar believes that
the kingdom was set up at Champak Nagar in northern Burma
and its inhabitants came to be known as Chakmas (1994:9).
Pemberton (1994) believes that the Chakmas are a mixture of
the Shakyas of Kapilavastu and the Thek tribe of Burma.
There are some scholars who believe that the Chakmas are
mixture of Theka and the descendents of Shah Shuja and
Mughal Prince of the seventeenth century (Rizvi '976:65
and Karim 1965).
One may never be able to reconstruct the past precisely. However, what is certain is that the Chakmas have a long history of migration to escape persecution and subsequent assimilation with the local environment to create a new identity for themselves. The Sakya line perhaps explains their Buddhist faith, their Pali script and their Thak influence their mongoloid looks and the Arakanese lexicon.

The migrations from Burma began again the 10th century AD as unsettled conditions prevailed in Arakans. In fits and starts they began moving out to Chittagong Hill Tracts and established themselves in Chittagong. This slow but steady process of migration continued for about six centuries. Harvey believes continuous persecution and barbarism was one of the major factors leading to migrations (1967:137-216).

1769 marks a watershed in the history of the Chakmas. In this year Chittagong Hill Tracts was annexed into the British Empire and the seat of Chakma power shifted from Chittagong to Rangamati. It also exposed the Chakmas to formal education and their exposure to the Bengali language also began from this period. As the medium of instruction was Bengali the Chakmas were forced to learn Bengali. This was to have profound impact on the Chakma language.

On the one hand long years of survival in Arakans had naturally influenced their language and many semantic and lexical items had automatically crept in. However, from the late eighteenth century they found that Bengali was a language of opportunities for them. For a small ethnic community which had constantly moved around in search of security and stability the contact with Bengali was a God sent opportunity. The comparatively safe environment and the opportunities available through a knowledge of Bengali saw large-scale adoption of the language and the assimilation of Bengali words in the Chakma language. The massive adoption perhaps explains the close proximity between the two and the background to view that Chakma is a dialect of Bengali.
PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES

The phonetic features of the language and very similar to that of Hindi and Bengali. All the consonants in Hindi are present in Chakma language. A list of the consonants has been added in the Appendix. It is interesting to note Bengali does not distinguish \( b \) and \( s \) and both are articulated as \( b \), however, Chakma like Hindi does distinguish between the two and these two sounds and these form minimal pairs for contrasts in meanings. Peculiarly, enough typical sounds like the breathed \( m^{\text{H}} \), \( s^{\text{H}} \) or sounds like \( t^{\text{H}} \) so common in the Sino-Tibetan languages like Lushai, Kuki or Burmese are absent in Chakma language. In fact when one studies the consonant chart of Chakma one cannot but be surprised by the similarities with the Indo-Aryan languages.

The native speakers of the language often do not distinguish between \( s \) and \( z \) though they are separate phonemes. There is also a lot of interchangibility between \( t \) and \( s \). So much so that \( s \) is often pronounced as \( t \). There is also a natural tendency to transform alveolar plosive \( t \) to a more soft dental fricative \( s \), though both these phonemes do not form minimal pairs and there are separate orthographic symbols to distinguish the two. These are perhaps examples of the influence of Assamese and Bengali exerting their influence on the spoken form of Chakma.

The vowel inherent in the Chakma consonant is \( a \) and not \( a \) as happens in Bengali, Hindi or Assamese. This indeed is something unique to the Chakma system of consonants. The orthographic symbol for the consonants includes the vowel \( a \) and a special mark has to be put over the consonant symbol to show that it is breath of the vowel. For example, if \( x \) is the symbol for the consonant \( k \), it would be read as \( k\text{t} \) and \( x \) or the consonant with marker on top would be read as \( k \).

The Vowel system of the language is similar to that of Bengali and Hindi. As far as Cardinal vowels are concerned there are no differences. A list of the vowels and diphthongs is given in Appendix II. The orthographic system like that of Hindi and Bengali uses special markers to indicate vowels occurring a ter the consonants. The use