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SOJAAK

The Chakma community magazine

STRUGGLE FOR CHAKMA SCRIPT



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Cover Photo: Rally for official recognition of Chakma script in Agartala, capital of Tripura state in India, on 18 August, 2011. (Photo: MAADI)

“SOJAAK” is a monthly online magazine of the Chakma community. Its editors are: Paritosh Chakma, Tejang Chakma, Dilip Kanti Chakma and Rup Kumar Chakma.

This online magazine is for private circulation only. Its principal objective is to discuss issues that matter to the global Chakma community and thereby educate ourselves. Articles should be submitted via email only at: sojaak.emagazine@gmail.com

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On October 13th, the Government of **Canada** appointed University of Western Ontario president Amit Chakma to head an expert panel tasked with guiding Canada's international education strategy as part of the next phase of Canada's Economic Action Plan. The panel will advise the government on attracting the best and brightest international students to Canada; strengthening Canada's engagement with emerging priority markets; expanding the delivery of Canadian expertise, knowledge and education services abroad; and promoting partnerships between Canadian and international education institutions.



On September 30th, Jumma Peoples Network-Korea set up a library named as "JUM LIBRARY" at its office in **Korea** in collaboration with some Korean human rights NGOs and publishers.

On October 8-9th, a meeting was convened at Madhab Master Para (Manu Gaang) in Dhalai district of **Tripura** to draft Chakma Customary Law. The three contentious issues which cropped up during the discussion were (i) whether Chakma women marrying to non-Chakmas will be allowed to inherit properties (whole or a part of it) of her father/parents, (ii) whether to allow Chakma men to have more than one wife, (iii) what shall be done with Chakmas who do not obey adjudication under Chakma customary law?

On September 23rd, a Chakma identified as Lobindra Chakma and his wife Milebo Chakma were allegedly beaten up by Lungsens Block Development Officer (BDO) John Tanpuia at Siphirtlang village in Lunglei district of **Mizoram**. They were beaten up for complaining to the Deputy Commissioner

against the officer who had allegedly blocked the family's government job (NREGS) wages. No action has been taken against the BDO.



B. Lalkhumchhinga, SDEO, Lungsens, addressing the gathering. Also seen are NK Chakma, Minister, (left) and Sushen Chakma, distinguished teacher.

On Sept 30th, Chakma School Teachers Association was formed in a conference held at Nunsury village in Lunglei district of **Mizoram**. The meeting was attended by Hon'ble Minister of State, Govt of Mizoram & local MLA Nihar Kanti Chakma as Chief Guest, B. Lalkhumchhinga, Sub Divisional Education Officer, Lungsens; and R. Laldawngliana, District Project Coordinator SSA Lunglei, among others.

On September 27th, the Political Department, Government of **Arunachal Pradesh** issued notification inviting all the members/special invitees to the "First Meeting of the Committee constituted by the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi under the Chairmanship of Shri Shambhu Singh, Joint Secretary (NE) to discuss issue relating to Chakma and Hajong Refugees of Arunachal Pradesh" to be held at Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh on 17th October 2011 at 2.30 PM. But the meeting was postponed due to political instability in the state.

In September 2011, the Extra-Assistant Commissioner (EAC), Diyun circle in **Arunachal Pradesh** revoked its earlier order dated August 24th which terminated the admission of 22 Chakma students of Class IX in Government Secondary School, Diyun in Changlang district. The Chakma students were readmitted after the intervention by Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students' Union (APCSU).

Chakma: A language utterly neglected in Mizoram

The Chakma is a community with distinct culture, traditions, and a language having its own written script. They mostly inhabit the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh; the Arakan or Rakhine state of Myanmar; and Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh & Assam in the North Eastern region of India. The Chakmas, though in less numbers, are also living in various parts of the world.

In Mizoram, Chakmas have Autonomous District Council, protected under the Constitution of India. The Chakma ADC protects and preserves the community's culture, language and script, apart from enjoying political autonomy (though in limited measure). With a population of 71,283 which constitute 8% of Mizoram's total population (Census 2001), Chakmas are the second largest community, after the Mizos. (See, http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_mizoram.pdf)

But, Chakmas are very much neglected in Mizoram. This article seeks to document an aspect of that neglect, that is, Chakma language.

Height of apathy: Chakma speakers are counted as Bengalees

In the Mizoram government's response to questionnaire for 41st Report (for period from July 2002 to June 2003) of the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities (NCLM) there is no mention of Chakma as a language spoken in the state. The linguistic profile of Mizoram was mentioned as follows:

Language	No. of speakers	Percentage
Lushai/Mizo	518099	75.11
Bengali	59092	8.57
Tripuri	26425	3.83
Lakher	22938	3.32
Pawi	15316	2.22
Hmar	9525	1.38
Hindi	8837	1.28
Nepali	8247	1.20
Paite	7726	1.12

The highlight of Mizoram government's response is the exclusion of Chakma language. The fact that the Bengali speakers were mentioned as 8.57% suggests that Chakmas have been counted as Bengalees! (Just look at the figures below; Bengali is spoken by just 1% of Mizoram's population.) Counting of Chakmas as Bengalees is the height of discrimination and apathy against the Chakmas by the administration in Mizoram.

However, Chakmas figure prominently in the response to the questionnaire for NCLM's 42nd Report (for the period from July 2003 to June 2004). The languages are as follows:

Language	No. of speakers	Percentage
Mizo	773058	87
Chakma	71086	8
Hindi	31989	3.6
Bengali	9774	1.1
Others	2666	0.3

The Chakma language has been rightly restored as the second most spoken language in Mizoram after Mizo.

In the responses to the questionnaire for 45th Report (for the period from July 2006 to June 2007), the languages spoken are given as:

Language	No of speakers	Percentage
Mizo	647849	72.9
Chakma	67057	7.55
Lakher	34731	3.9
Pawi	24900	2.8
Paite	14356	1.61
Hmar	14240	1.6
Bengali	13325	1.5

How the number of Chakma speakers came down from 71,086 to 67,057 is a mystery. On the other hand, Census 2001 counted the Chakmas as 71,283.

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If we look at critically, we find the following three things:

First, it is evident that the state government of Mizoram in its response submitted to the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities for 41th Report counted the Chakmas as “Bengalees”.

Second, exclusion of the Chakmas as a distinct linguistic group (despite being the 2nd largest linguistic group) was height of discrimination and apathy against them, and assaults their identity as a distinct community in Mizoram; and

Third, the Mizoram government has been inconsistent with the number of speakers of various languages including Chakma.

Mizoram snubs NCLM: Evidence of apathy against minorities

Article 350B of the Constitution of India provides for “a Special Officer for linguistic minorities” to be appointed by the President whose duty shall be to “investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for linguistic minorities under this Constitution and report to the President upon those matters at such intervals as the President may direct, and the President shall cause all such reports to be laid before each House of Parliament, and sent to the Governments of the States concerned.” The National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities was created under Article 350B.

The NCLM may be a constitutional authority but without any teeth. Its orders are repeatedly violated by the state government of Mizoram, without any accountability.

The 46th report (July, 2007 to June, 2008) of the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities painfully records -

In spite of repeated reminders and letter to Chief Minister from the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, the State Government did not

furnish a reply to the Questionnaire for the 46th Report of the CLM. Therefore, there is nothing new to report, than what has already been reported upon in the 45th Report of the CLM for the period July 2006 to June 2007.

The NCLM merely reproduced its earlier recommendations contained in the 45th Report as below:

i. The State Government should immediately issue suitable directions for maintenance of Advance Registers in schools to enable registration of linguistic preference of minority language students.

ii. It should make efforts to develop expertise in languages other than Mizo. It should also help in preparing the books in Lai, Mara Chakma, Paite and Hamar

iii. The State Government should take steps to publish gist of important rules, regulations, etc. in minority languages in areas where their speakers constitute 15% or more of the local population.

iv. The State Government should publicize the safeguards available to linguistic minorities so as to ensure that speakers of minority languages are not denied their linguistic rights for want of information in this regard.

v. A firm machinery to look after the safeguards provided to the linguistic minorities is required to be established at state and district level. This should also include a monitoring committee to check action taken by the subordinate officers.

This is not the first time that the Mizoram government snubbed the NCLM. In his 44th Report (July 2005 to June 2006) the CLM also painfully notes that “Reply to the questionnaire

for the Forty Fourth Report has not been received from Mizoram even after a lot of efforts. We are unable, on this account, to give information about the updated position about the implementation of the safeguards for the linguistic minorities.”

Mizoram’s Tribal Research Institute: Mirror of discrimination

The aim of the Mizoram’s Tribal Research Institution (TRI) is to “undertake a systematic study and research in all aspect of tribal life and economy which will help the Tribal Areas and the Government in formulating the Development and Welfare Schemes for the tribal people in the correct lines.”

Its objectives are: 1. collection of factual information about the history, social organisation, language, customs and manners, wedding, birth and death ceremonies, customary laws and usages, system of inheritance etc. for each particular tribe resident in the state; 2. study the old monographs and writings on the customs, social organisations, and other subjects; 3. collection of folk songs, folk tales, prayers, stories, festivals, myths and fables; 4. evaluation of the Welfare Works taken up since Independence particularly noting their impact on the mind and psychology of the people showing which of them harmonise with their modern way of life and development, and 5. to take up social economic survey of each Tribal village.

But the Mizoram’s TRI situated at Aizawl has done nothing for the Chakma tribe. This reflects the biasness against the Chakma community.

The 44th Report stated that “The TRI is not working on any language other than Mizo and is not producing any books in them. At least the folklore of these tribes can be published in their own language. TRI can also help prepare the books in Chakma, Lai and Mara.” Similarly, the 45th Report recommended that the Tribal Research

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Tripura: There is also a script called Ojhaapaat

Photo: TCSA



Delegates at Tripura Chakma Students Association (TCSA) meeting at Jharjari, Tripura, 10 September 2011

The crowd in the streets of Agartala on 18 August 2011 inspired some confidence in those Chakmas who are struggling for the right to use their own script called *Ojhaapaat*. Hundreds of Chakmas marched in the streets of Agartala, capital of Tripura, holding placards and colourful banners written in Chakma, Bengali and Roman scripts demanding official recognition of Chakma script and its introduction in schools. A banner read, “Chakma script is our heart”.

The protestors were trying to convey a stern message to the government of Tripura. That is, *There is also a script called “Ojhaapaat” which is Chakmas’ own script which is in use for centuries, and the government must respect their right to read and*

write in their own script rather than imposing a script used by the dominant community in the state.

Imposition of Bengali script: Naked assault on Chakmas’ identity

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (18th December 1992) states that “*States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.*” (Article 1). The Indian Constitution also provides several safeguards for minority communities. Article 29 (1) of the Constitution ex-

PLICITLY states that “any section of citizens” has the right to conserve the “distinct language, script or culture of its own”.

However, the state government of Tripura has sought to directly assault the Chakmas’ identity by imposing on them the Bengali script.

As per the latest 46th Report (for the period July 2007 to June 2008) of the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities (NCLM), there are 64,690 Chakma speakers constituting 2.55% of Tripura’s population. Yet, the script of the Chakmas is utterly neglected and not recognized. Instead of introducing the Chakma script, the Tripura government has imposed the Bengali script on Chakmas against the wishes of the community in gross violation of

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the rights of the linguistic minorities provided by and under the Constitution of India.

Article 350 A of the Indian Constitution states that it shall be the duty of every state government to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother-tongue at primary stage. As per the 46th report of the NCLM, 27 Chakma medium schools have been recognized by the Tripura government. But the problem is the Tripura government has separated the language from its script with dubious intentions.

Failure of Autonomous District Council

There are two official committees for the advancement of Chakma language in Tripura: one at state level headed by Arun Kumar Chakma, Member of Legislative Assembly, and the other, at Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council headed by Radha Charan Debbarma, Executive Member in charge of Education of the Autonomous District Council. Both the Committees are ineffective. The Autonomous District Council level committee reportedly met only once since it was created. State level Advisory Committee is a failure. In fact, the state of Tripura claims that Bengali script was introduced for Chakmas as per the resolution passed by the Advisory Committee in 1998.

It is understandable that the Tripura state government, led and dominated by Bengalis, has refused to recognize the Chakma script but neither is the Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council which is headed by fellow tribals seemed interested. The Autonomous District Council, if it wanted, could have followed the Chakma Autonomous District Council in Mizoram by introducing the Chakma script at ADC level. But it has not done anything like that. It is interesting to know that the Chakma Language Development Committee of the TTAADC is headed by a non-Chakma. (<http://ttaadc.nic.in/>)

[LANGUAGE WING WEB % 20VERSION.pdf](#)) . It is not about the community of the person who is heading the Chakma Language Development Committee, but about empowering that community for safeguarding of whose rights the committee was constituted.

State's performance unsatisfactory

The measures taken by the state government of Tripura for protection and promotion of the linguistic rights of the minorities are utterly unsatisfactory. This has been stated by none other than the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities which is a constitutional body.

The NCLM in its 46th Report stated that -

“the performance of the state government in the implementation of safeguards for linguistic minorities can hardly be termed to be satisfactory. The state government ought to sensitize itself towards the genuine grievances of linguistic minorities and initiate remedial steps for their redress. It is observed that there was a Commission set up in year 2002 or thereabout for enquiring into the scope for development of the minority languages. Despite requests, we were not informed about the contents of the Report or about the action taken thereupon.”

The sooner the state government follows this prescription of the NCLM, the better will be the state's future. ■

Our script is our birthright

By **PARITOSH CHAKMA**

The rally by Chakmas in the street of Agartala, the capital of Tripura, on 18th August 2011, three days after the India's Independence Day, is an unforgettable event. Although I was not physically present there, the photos flashed through the Facebook inspired me to write this article.

The Chakmas participated in the rally holding placards and banners written in Chakma script, Bengali and English conveying their demands. Most of the placards and banners were written in Chakma script but they were also written in Bengali and Roman scripts so that others and Chakmas who cannot read the Chakma script can read and understand.

The rally was participated by over 400 people, including women and girls, from the nook and corners of Tripura. Given the lackluster attitude of Chakmas towards social movements across India, the number (400) is significantly higher, also given the fact that the rally was held at Agartala where not many Chakmas live. The number reflected the honour Chakmas would like to have by getting official recognition of their script and language.

Constitution vs Tripura govt

The Constitution of India has provided adequate safeguards for minorities, including linguistic minorities. While all the constitutional safeguards like the right to equality, non discrimination etc, are also applicable to the minorities, the Constitution has spelt out several safeguards specifically for the minorities. Article 29 (1) of the Constitution explicitly states that "any section of citizens" has the right to conserve the "distinct language, script or culture of its own". The Constitution also says that

it shall be the endeavour of every state government to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother-tongue at primary stage (Article 350 A).

But the Tripura government has "imposed" the Bengali script on Chakmas. It is an insult to the whole Chakma community and naked violation of the fundamental rights of the minorities in India.

Not many tribal languages have their own scripts. Since Chakma is an endangered language, the State must take adequate measures to safeguard it. The first and most important measure would be to officially recognize the

Chakmas must use various constitutional mechanisms to protect their own language and script. If nothing works, we must seek legal guidance as to whether or not this case could be taken to the court. The Chakmas' understanding is: Our script is our birthright. What does the constitution say?

Chakma language and script and give all the protections under the law.

But the Tripura government has separated the Mother Tongue from its script. The state government had agreed to introduce Chakma language but not the script. The million dollar question is: why should the Chakmas read or write their language in some other's script when they have their own script which is centuries old and well developed?

Who's to blame?

If the Tripura government has refused to adopt the Chakma script who is to blame? The Tripura government has squarely blamed the Chakmas themselves, and to be more specific, the Advisory Committee for Development of Chakma Language (hereafter "Advisory Committee") which is headed by a Chakma. Figure this. Vide letter dated 16 August 2010, Director of SCERT, Tripura informed the General Secretary, Undandhi Sadhak (NGO) that "Chakma Text-Books are being prepared in Bengali Scripts on the basis of the resolution adopted in a meeting of the Advisory Committee for Development of Chakma Language held on 10/08/1998, which was approved by the higher Authority vide DO.No. 256/Min/Edn/99 dated 1-4-99". "In this regards, it may be mentioned here that the Authority of School Education is acting on the basis of the advise/ recommendation of the Advisory Committee for Development of Chakma Language," the letter further pointed out.

Earlier, responding to an RTI application filed by Aniruddha Chakma, GS, Chakma Students' Association, S. Debbarma, Deputy Director, SCERT, Tripura reiterated the same thing on 25 February 2008: "Bengali script was adopted [for Chakmas] as per recommendation of Advisory Committee for Development of Chakma Language".

The allegation also goes that the Advisory Committee on 10 August 1998 secretly embraced the Bengali script. Interestingly, the Advisory Committee has never publicly refuted these allegations.

However, to be fair to the Advisory Committee, prior to 1998, it had indeed recommended to the state government for adoption of Chakma script. For example, such a resolution was passed on 8 October 1993 but the state government did not accept it. Instead, the state government vide letter No. F.19(8-11)-DSE/88(2-3)/850-58, dated Agartala, the 05 September 1995 announced that Chakma subject will be taught in Bengali script!

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So, it is evident that prior to the Advisory Committee's resolution of 10 August 1998, the state government had already approved Bengali script.

There is also evidence to suggest that the Advisory Committee did indeed lobby for Chakma script. In a letter dated 2 November 1995, Officer-in-Charge, Tribal Language Cell, Directorate of School Education, Agartala informed Pragati Chakma, Member of the Advisory Committee that *"the Hon'ble Education Minister has kindly agreed to introduce only Chakma Language subject in Chakma Scripts from Class III onwards at the Primary level as per report submitted to this office by the Chairman of Advisory Committee for Development of Chakma Language."*

But the state government of Tripura never kept its promise. It needed an excuse to scuttle the Chakma script. That excuse came in the form of the Advisory Committee's resolution of 10 August 1998 that was passed under mysterious circumstances.

That however does not exonerate the Advisory Committee which has a lot to answer.

On August 29th, Chakma social leaders and Advisory Committee members held a meeting with state's Education Minister. The Education Minister decided to send the proposal for Cabinet consideration. Chakmas believe this is a delaying tactic. Only god knows how many more years it will take to come to a solid decision.

Way forward

We must not be disheartened by the August 29th event. Chakmas must continue to keep the movement for Chakma script alive.

Our fight must be both at state level and national level. We must bring our demand to the notice of the President of India and the National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, who reports to the President. Under

Article 347 of the Constitution, "On a demand being made in that behalf the President may, if he is satisfied that a substantial proportion of the population of a State desire the use of any language spoken by them to be recognised by that State, direct that such language shall also be officially recognised throughout that State or any part thereof for such purpose as he may specify." There are several pockets in Tripura where Chakma speakers could be considered "substantial" in number. We must make it clear that language and script are inseparable.

The National Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities, created under Article 350B of the constitution, has the authority to "investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for linguistic minorities under this Constitution and report to the President".

Chakmas must use various constitutional mechanisms. If nothing works, we must seek legal guidance as to whether or not this case could be taken to the court.

The Chakmas' understanding is: Our script is our birthright. What does the constitution say? ■

(The views expressed by the author are his own)

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Institute "should make efforts to develop expertise in languages other than Mizo. It should also help in preparing the books in Lai, Mara Chakma, Paite and Hamar."

No monitoring Body

No independent body has been set up to monitor and implement the safeguards provided to the Linguistic Minorities.

The Mizoram government refused to provide answers in a lot of questions, mainly relating to machinery for implementation of the safeguards of rights of linguistic minorities. It did not reply to questions for 45th Report concerning the safeguard mechanisms.

It is surprising that the Mizoram government while responding to questionnaire for 42nd Report stated "Items 43 to 47 come under the purview of State's Home Department". "Items 43 to 47" related to Machinery for Implementation of Safeguards and Pamphlets in minority languages.

Minorities' silence: No complaint

The state government has stated that no petition/ complaint has been filed by any linguistic minority group. When asked to indicate major problems faced by the government and administration in actual implementation of safeguards provided to linguistic minorities, the Mizoram government replied "N.A" (Not Applicable) (Response to questionnaire for 40th Report). ■

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