

More than 430,000 Chakma people inhabit Bangladesh and adjoining areas of north-east India. Approximately 300,000 live in the Chittagong Hills area of south-east Bangladesh, including Chittagong City. They are the largest Buddhist group in that Muslim-dominated country. The Chakma are not the same as the smaller Chak tribe, who inhabit areas further south.

In India the Chakma are a scheduled (official) tribe.¹ They number over 100,000 people spread over five states, including south-western Mizoram along the Karnafuli River (39,900 in 1981), northern Tripura (34,797 in 1981)² and Assam (22,789 in 1971, living in the Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and Cachar districts).³ Small numbers of Chakma live in West Bengal (141 people)⁴ and Meghalaya (103 people).



Julian Hawken

The Chakma have inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts since long before the region became part of the Mughal empire in 1666.⁵ Buddhism flourished in Bangladesh from the 5th to 12th centuries. Since the 13th century, Buddhism has been confined to the Chittagong area. The Chakma 'continued to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Arakanese king until 1784'.⁶ They have long found themselves at odds with the predominantly Muslim Bengalis. The construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s caused 18,000 Chakma people to lose their homes, and this is believed to be the origin of the present problems. Since the mid-1970s the Chakma have been involved in a secretive guerilla war against

Bangladeshi soldiers. The fighting stems from the influx of large numbers of Bengali settlers, who have moved into the Chittagong area and taken over Chakma land by force. The government does little to stop the illegal settlers, and the Chakma have fought back out of frustration as they see their lives being rapidly decimated. In 1987,

Amnesty International reported 'arbitrary arrests, torture and unlawful killings'⁷ of tribe members by security forces. Thousands of Chakma have been killed, hundreds of women and girls raped, and Buddhist temples smashed and looted.⁸ Tens of thousands of Chakma refugees have fled across the border into India.

According to K S Singh, 'The Chakma are Buddhists and worship Lord Buddha. At the family level they worship deities like Lakshmi and Ganga. . . . The monk, who may be from another Buddhist community, acts as a religious teacher and performs various rites.'⁹

The 1981 census in India recorded 97.62 per cent of the Chakma in Tripura as followers of Buddhism, 2.32 per cent as Hindus and the rest as Christians and Muslims. The 1961 census had returned a higher figure of 99.44 per cent as Buddhists. In Mizoram, 98.83 per cent of Chakma are Buddhists.

According to the India Missions Association, 7,275 Chakma in India are Christians.¹⁰ In Bangladesh, the Christian presence among the Chakma is scarcer, although there are small pockets of believers in scattered villages. Overall, the troubled Chakma people remain an unreached and unevangelized people group. Experiencing turmoil and an uncertain future, they need the inner peace and hope that only faith in Christ can bring.



Population:
404,600 (2000)
471,900 (2010)
552,300 (2020)
Countries: Bangladesh, India
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 12,000

Overview of the Chakma

Other Names: Takam, Chakama, Thet, Chawngma, Tsak

Population Sources:
260,577 in Bangladesh (1991, United Bible Societies)

103,747 in India (2001, India Missions Association)

Language: Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Eastern Zone, Bengali-Assamese

Dialects: 6

Professing Buddhists: 95%

Practising Buddhists: 80%

Christians: 2.9%

Scripture: New Testament 1926

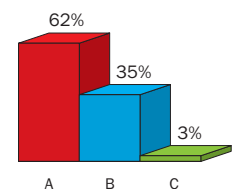
Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Chakma: Bangladesh, Chakma: Assam

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: CCP

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity