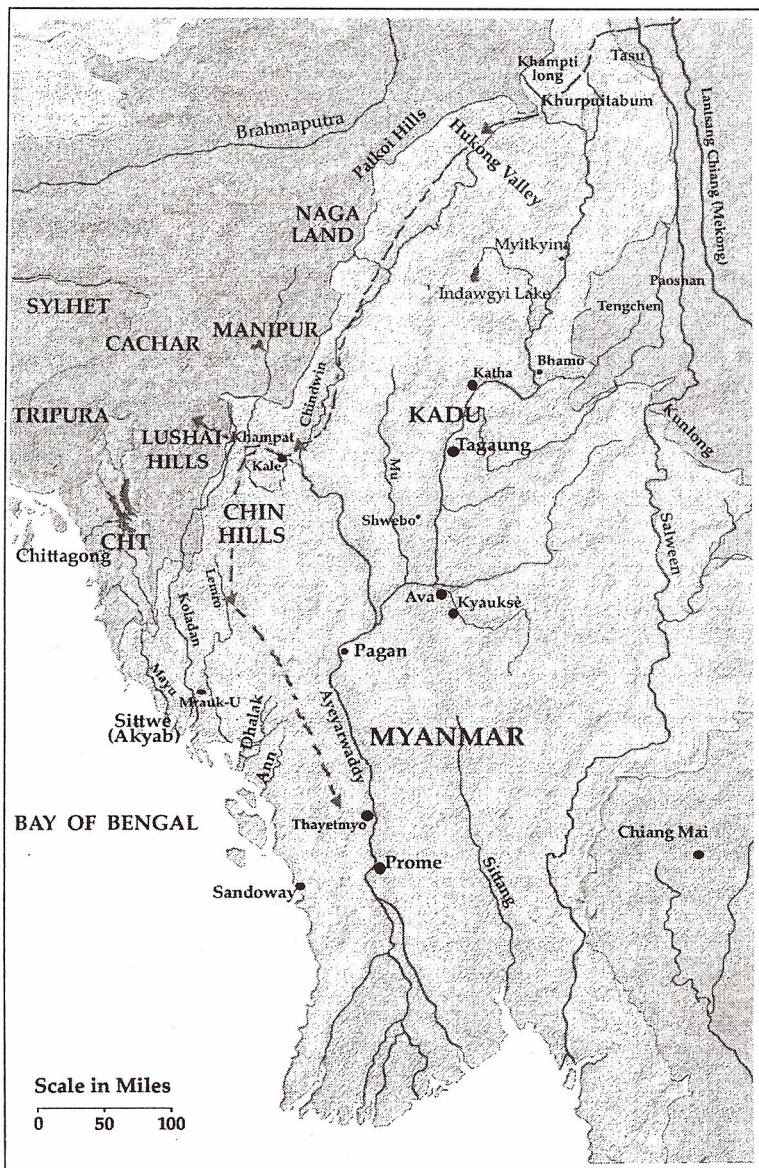


Exploring Highlanders of Tripura and Chittagong Hill Tracts



Rupak Debnath



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A lot of photographs were taken during fieldwork. I took some shots while the credit for taking several pictures is due to my friends, Dinanath Tanchangya and Goutam Borua. Unavoidable constraints have compelled the inclusion of only a few photographs in greyscale in the present work. Perhaps, sometime in the future an exhaustive picture gallery would find a place in another publication.

—Rupak Debnath

Preface

It is almost a decade now since I began to work on the Tibeto-Burman tribes of Northeast India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The experience is very different from any of those I had when I began my early schooling in Nagaland and then moved on to Meghalaya before settling in Tripura. Many Naga, Khasi, Garo, Darlong, Bru and Mizo boys were my friends and during my school and later on college and university days, they aroused in me no additional interests than good friends did. Interests in ethnicity, tribes and races did not matter at that time. To them, I was more of a school or college friend than a Bengali or an ethno-racial competitor. The same old relationship continues even today and when occasions allow friends to meet, we spend most time in talking of the good old school and college days, about our teachers, our favourite footballers and the heroes of the 1980s and the 1990s.

In most ethnographic accounts, I find authors claiming to have spent five, ten or fifteen years in contact with the groups that arouse their interests. Undeniably, that is part of research methodology, which seeks participant observation through frequent, interactive contacts and extended interviews, structured or unstructured, whichever is feasible for generating maximum information within a short period of time. In writing this account, too, a planned study has been carried out in different villages and hamlets of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Among the distinct advantages I enjoy over many ethnographers and socio-anthropologists are an innate familiarity with the region and a wide network of contacts that I could build over the

years through my good old friends. There is no need to make extra efforts to secure reliable contacts to carry out investigations; the only thing needed is to go out of the house and walk into the unexplored recesses of the hills and look for folks who still remember something of the olden days. Ethnic strife, insurgency activities often force suspension of my explorative activities, thanks to the good people who in such situations advise me to postpone work for a couple of months or so. When things begin to settle down, the invitation is made in the most familiar terms, 'When are you coming?' and I get to work again. Today, new friends have grown from old connections and I earnestly hope to enjoy my share of their company for many more years to come.

During the last ten years, I have learnt that my school and college friends come from different ethnic communities, which though coexisting and interacting, differ from one another in linguistic, racial and cultural terms. The kaleidoscopic variation within those communities is vast and, more importantly, in much need of genuine appreciation of the many good things they have, preservation of the positive residual aspects of their fast transforming material cultures, and extension of welfare measures to the economically excluded or marginalised sections. Insurgency in Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts is no doubt the outburst of long denied or repressed aspirations in the wake of Bengali expansion. But there is also another force, that of the dominant valley-dwelling tribes, which has perpetrated counter-hegemony of the Tibeto-Burman type, causing exclusion of the demographically peripheral highlanders from socio-economic and political participation. Though some issues do not come exactly under the present concerns of this work, there is always a humanistic necessity to remove all systemic discriminations against the under-privileged highland tribes and create productive synergies across ethnic intolerance and repression.

The present work deals with the highland tribes of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, documenting the distribution of different ethnic communities, their origins, the traditional and material aspects of life, their social structures, their notions of sex and gender, family and village, and so on. My personal concerns and the methodology adopted in this work are summarised in the introductory chapter, and it would be redundant to explicate the same here again. Accuracy of documentation has been earnestly attempted and available information analysed with impartiality. I hope that the book will interest the readers and encourage researchers to make extensive socio-anthropological studies on many tribes that remain unreached until the present day.

—Rupak Debnath

1

Introduction

The primary concern of this work is to generate a fair understanding of ethnic, economic and socio-political systems of the Kuki-Chin and other highland tribes settled in Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Specific tribe-based studies on Mru, Bawm and Lushai have been carried but works on the other tribes constitute the undone vast; hence, a common socio-anthropological framework is adopted for the highland tribes of the selected region. Invariably, all highlanders are hill-dwellers but not every hill-dweller can be called a highlander. In terms of ethnic stock, the hill men of Tripura and the Hill Tracts are Tibeto-Burmans of the Sino-Tibetan family, but within the Tibeto-Burman population, one finds two distinct divisions. On the one hand, we have the valley dwelling Tippera, Chakma, Sak, Marma and Tanchangya; on the other, we find the highland Kuki-Chin tribes, besides the Bru (Riang) and the Mru.

The Region, Its Physical Aspects

The region selected for this study constitutes the extreme northeastern part of the Indian Sub-Continent, between 20.10° and 24.32° North latitudes and 91.50° and 93° East longitudes. In terms of political boundary, it is divided between India and Bangladesh. Tripura is one of the seven sister states of Northeast India with an area of 10,492 square kilometres and a total population of 3,199,203 in 2001 (compared to 2,757,205 in 1991). The total area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (abbreviated to CHT) is 12,181 square kilometres and in 1991, it had a population of 974,445

individuals. As part of the eastern Himalayas, the region is rich in tropical rainforests, into which ecosystem diverse tribes are integrated. Viewed from the coastal plains of Bengal, the land is amassed into eastward undulations until the chains of the tropical Himalayas are reached. These chains that mostly run north to south break into ravines and patches of lowland along riverbanks. The hills are covered with tropical rainforests and have an abundance of bamboo and creeper jungles. Precariously steep slopes are seen at several places around the Keokradaung (4054 feet) on the CHT-Myanmar border; otherwise, in most places, the hills are generally low running with the average declivity favouring swidden cultivation. In the northern and the eastern parts of the Hill Tracts and in the tri-junction of Tripura, Mizoram and CHT, mountain summits also rise to considerable heights. The Betling Sib in the Jampui range on Tripura-Mizoram border is 3100 feet from the sea-level.

The Deo and the Manu rivers of North Tripura flow in north-south direction; the Gomati of South Tripura District flows west past Udaipur and Comilla towns into the Meghna while another river of the same district, the Muhuri, initially moves west, then turns south through the centre of the Belonia subdivision to feed the Feni, which marks the political boundary of Tripura and Bangladesh. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Karnaphuli (Kynsa Chaung) is the major river; it is fed by the Rainkhyoung (Rain Chaung) from the south, and the Chengri and the Kassalong rivers from the north. The Maini merges with the Kassalong around Langadu while at Barkal, the Subalong joins the Karnaphuli. From the Jampui Hills, the Sajek (Tuipui) runs south past Tlabung (Demagiri), then turns a little west at Barkal to fall into the Karnaphuli; from the opposite direction flow the Thega and the Tuichang, demarcating the flanks of the Chakma Autonomous District Council of Mizoram. In the southern part of the Hill Tracts, small streams like the Bomu, the Lama Chaung and the Tein Chaung (Tain Chhari) form the principal tributaries of the Matamuri (Marit Chaung),

which is also fed by the Harbung river in the Chittagong district. The Sangu (Ragri Chaung) flows due north up to Ruma, then turns northwest to reach Bandarban, after which it runs west into the Bay of Bengal.

The warm humid tropical monsoon climate of the region is conducive to both *jum* and wet-rice cultivation. In summer, the temperature soars to 35°C, while it is around 18°C on average between December and February, occasionally sinking to a low 4 to 5°C on the coldest day of the season. In the higher altitudes, the temperature is usually two or three degrees lower than the average. Between October and February, dense fogs are seen at sunrise and sunset. The prevailing wind is southwesterly but in winter, a strong northerly wind blows, sometimes bringing showers and cyclones. In early March, the morning fog begins to turn thin, and it becomes thinner by mid-April; if during this time, the nights are clear and starlit, one finds dew deposits on the morning grass. But April is also the time of the terrible Northwester (called *Kal Vaisakhi* in Bengali); every year, its devastative fury leaves many trees uprooted, scores of houses destroyed and their roofs blown. Around the last week of April, the weather begins to get dry; with the showers now becoming very intermittent, the average temperature and the human discomfort rise steadily until the monsoons bring some relief in the early part of June. The average precipitation in the monsoon months is 250 cm.

Famine is almost unknown in the hills but food shortages occur when the rains play truant. Besides, during bamboo flowering, which invariably occurs once in several years, rats arrive in hundreds and thousands, and cause much damage to the crops. Diseases attributable to the climate include common fever and malaria, rheumatism and dysentery. Malaria is also particularly acute in the hills. Between January and March 2009, there was in the Longtrai Hills of Tripura an outbreak of meningitis epidemic that killed more than a hundred people. The hill folks, men and

women are all inveterate smokers, which habit makes them vulnerable to respiratory diseases like tuberculosis and whooping cough. Skin diseases too are fairly widespread, in addition to which people often suffer from intestinal worms and stomach ulcers. A tendency to partial amnesia is found in ageing swidden farmers.

People of the Region

The people inhabiting the selected region belong to opposed stocks, Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloids on the hills and Indo-Aryan speaking Bengalis on the plains. For several centuries, the latter cultivated with the plough, their mode of economy favouring extensive agricultural operations on lowlands, permanent settlement and trade, and steady revenue to sustain a centralised polity. On the contrary, the hill groups subsisted on swidden farming, in which mode returns became constrained when the population exceeded the carrying capacity of the environment. As already mentioned, the Tibeto-Burman stock can be divided into valley-dwellers and highlanders, the former having originally occupied the river valleys while the latter lived apart from them in the interior spaces of the hills. This highlander and valley-dweller distinction is drawn on Lewin (1869: 28) who in classifying the tribes of the Chittagong Hills Tracts used the generic Mranma term 'Toungtha' or the "Children of the hills" as opposed to 'Khyoungtha' or the "Children of the river."

There are similarities in the material cultures and the economic strategies of the two hill type peoples but there also some telling disparities between them. Proximity to Bengal allowed the valley-dwellers (Tippera, Chakma and Marma) to enter into politically beneficial arrangements with the rulers of the plains, initially the Mughals and subsequently the British, which led to restructuring their traditional tribal organisations after the centralised polities of the plains. The native *Rajas* or Chiefs betook upon themselves the vital function of privileged tax-collectors

and paid annual tribute to the plains' rulers and enjoyed in return territorial powers. Most highland societies have, on the contrary, lived not too long ago in village-based communities, as either band-type egalitarians or cohesive tribes under hereditary Chiefs. Some like the Halam who came under Tippera domination paid yearly revenue. Families of the valley-dwelling tribes paid regular taxes to the Circle Chiefs or their native *Rajas* through the heads of kinship groups initially and through the nominated headmen in later times. A highland family was not required to pay tax to the Chief but he was offered a yearly bottle of rice-beer and a hind leg of a hunted animal in acknowledgement of his right to everything in his village. Besides, most highland tribes recognised no centralised authority above their own tribal Chiefs. But around the mid-19th century, some eastern tribes began making murderous forays into the territories of the valley-dwelling Chiefs and *Rajas*, compelling the British to send punitive expeditions against them. By the close of the 19th century, all highland Chiefs were subjugated and their chiefdoms annexed to the British territory.

Demographically, the highland tribes of Tripura and the Hill Tracts comprise small, marginalised communities, living mostly in far-flung villages and hamlets with little access to the basic amenities of health and education. In Mizoram, the Lushai is the largest ethnic entity within the Mizo group of tribes which returned a total of 646,117 individuals (about 77% of the total population) in 2001. Their population in CHT is around a thousand souls (against a return of 662 in 1991). In Tripura, Lushai is clustered with Darlong, Betu, Puitu, Tirthu, Saimar, etc. under 'Any Kuki Tribe' with a population of 11,674 in 2001. The total population of the Halams, presently a composite of more than a dozen tribes of the Old Kuki, is 47,245 souls or 4.8% of the tribal population of Tripura in 2001, while the combined population of the Khyang and the Khumi tribes of the Hill Tracts is estimated around only 6,000. In the 1991 Census

of Bangladesh, there were 1,241 Khumis and 1,980 Khyangs in CHT. The total for Pangkhua against the same year in CHT was 3,227 while the Bawm numbered 6,431. In the same census, a higher figure (22,167) is given for the Mru but the tribe is economically backward and educationally deprived. The Bru or Riang of Tripura (with a larger population of 165,103 in 2001) gets some economic support from the Government of India following their inclusion within the Primitive Group category.

Among the valley groups, the most numerous are the Tippera with 543,848 individuals living in Tripura and an estimated one hundred thousand in CHT in 2001. The total number of Chakmas is around 400,000 (out of which only 64,293 live in Tripura) excluding 71,283 souls now living in Mizoram. As far as the Marma is concerned, their estimated number in CHT and Tripura is not more than 200,000, the precise figure for Tripura being 30,385 in 2001. In the Bangladesh Census of 1991, there were 239,417 Chakmas, 142,342 Marmas and 61,174 Tipperas in CHT. The valley-dwellers are dominant not only in numeric terms within the tribal populations of the Tripura and the Hill Tracts but they also play an active role in policy-making, political power-sharing and contentious competition with the hegemonic Bengali (who constitute almost 68% of the total population of Tripura and about 50% of the CHT total) and, most significantly, in securing the benefits of reservations meant for the overall uplift of all tribal and backward communities. In their creed, the valley-dwelling tribes profess a mainstream Indian religion; the Tipperas are still predominantly Hindus while the Chakma and the Marma follow Buddhism. Most Kuki-Chin tribes are now Christians though some like the Mru and the Khumi continue to be largely Animists. In very recent times, an indigenous Mru religion called Krama has found partial favour with the tribe. The Khyangs are in the main Buddhists, but a section of their people embraced Christianity in the early part of the 20th century. As for the Bru and the Halam, they were

Hindus up to the mid-20th century but their pecuniary circumstances compelled many families of these tribes to convert to Christianity during the last fifty years. A current passion for Judaism is found among a section of the already Christianised Kuki-Chins.

Previous Studies and Present Concerns

At the outset, it must be frankly admitted that there is scantiness of literature on the small highland communities of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. An early seamless narrative on the dwellers of the Chittagong Hill Tracts by Lewin (1869) is a first-hand document on the hill tribes, mainly the valley-dwellers with some observations on the highland Mru, Khyang, Khumi, Bawm and Pangkhua tribes. No considerable note of the highlanders of CHT was taken before German anthropologists (Speilmann, Brauns and Löffler) carried out some extensive work especially on the Mru and the Bawm in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Lewin's account on the Lushai, the Thangluah clan in particular, is vivid and insightful. In Hutchinson's (1909) book, the ethnographic sections are partly derived from Lewin (*Ibid.*) and partly from his personal experiences, while an older work by Buchanan (1798) has interesting observations on the social life of the hill tribes and their relations with each other. Phayre's (1841) paper on the tribes of North Arakan is brief but informative; it also contains an early note on the emergence of the Bawm's ethnic system.

Perhaps, the most inspiring work on the Lushai and other tribes of Mizoram is Shakespear's (1912) account of the Kuki-Lushai clans, which besides furnishing detailed observations on highland customs and manners, accounts vividly for the absorption of different Kuki-Chin tribes and clans by the Lushai. McCall (1949) takes a humanistic approach in analysing the transitional aspects of the Lushai society, as also in detailing the consequences of their exposure to other cultures. Lehmann (1963) adopts the techniques

of Leech (1954) to illustrate that the existing social structures of the Chins are the consequences of their long-standing exposure to the neighbouring societies. Carey and Tuck (1896) furnish valuable information on the complex ethnic situation in the Chin Hills. In the 1960s, Bernot took some notes on the highland tribes but his interests were chiefly centred on the Marma and the Sak. Some preliminary observations were also made on the Khyang. An excellent ethnographic study on the Mru was done by Brauns and Loffler (1990); it illustrates in telling details the diverse aspects of the Mru's material culture, as well as their kinship structures and feasts of merit. Spielmann's (1968) view of the social structure of the Bawm is idealised but the work is an indispensable document for socio-anthropologists working in the region. Changes in the socio-political structures of the highland and the valley-dwelling tribes in the colonial and post-colonial situation in the Hill Tracts are pertinently analysed by Mey (1984) and the work will continue to inspire future researchers, particularly political anthropologists interested in the Hill Tracts.

On the highland tribes of Tripura a brief but effective account is furnished by Rawlins (1792). For the history of Tripura, the chief secondary sources consulted are the *Rajmâlâ* or the 'Royal Chronicle of the Tippera Kings,' Administrative Reports of the late 19th century and the *Tripura State Gazetteer* of 1975. Besides, some ethnographic information is available in the *Census of Tripura* 1931 and in tribe-specific accounts of later times. As the bibliographic material at the end of the present work shows, there are some works on the Bru and the Kuki tribes of Tripura, furnishing partial pictures of the social organisations and the life-cycle ceremonies of those tribes. However, traditions of origin and migration, as also several social and cultural aspects of highland life remain ineffectually explored. Frankly, there remains a lot to be done if any researcher is keen on appreciating the kaleidoscopic components of the highland cultures found in the region. The present author

does not claim to have a pristine understanding of the highland tribal life of Tripura and the Hill Tracts but an in-progress ethno-linguistic field study on the Halams has provided opportunity for acquaintance with this group as also with other tribes allied to them, besides the Bru (Riang), Uchai, Murasing and disintegrated clans of the Central Chins, many of whom are now officially designated as 'Kuki.' Some understanding of Khyang life, both past and present, is humbly claimed after extensive fieldwork in the Hill Tracts. But frankly, as far as the Khumi and the Pangkhua are concerned, the unexplored vast lies beyond familiar domains. In a year or two, the book on the Khyang will be published. In the meantime, it is hoped that there will come another opportunity to go to the Hill Tracts and interact extensively with the Khumi as well as the Pangkhua.

In course of this study, sufficient time in several phases was spent interacting with the highland tribes. The method of unstructured, participant observation with direct and consented interaction was adopted in collecting field notes from suitable informants and verifying those notes with other informants from the same community living in the same village or in different villages. Notes were also taken of cases wherein different versions of a single tradition existed. To gain access to a selected research setting, permission of village gate-keepers was sought. Also, the rights-based approach as envisaged by the Social Research Association of Great Britain was adopted and respect for informants providing information ensured. At no point were informants compelled to provide any information they were unwilling to provide. Most importantly, to ensure commitment and motivation of informants, they were familiarised with the research background, as well as with the significance of the study. As already stated, information obtained from a particular informant was not automatically presumed as correct; it was subsequently verified with other informants. The last part of the technique helped make possible stronger generalisations as well as ensure checks on reliability and

validity. Extant information on historical and cultural aspects of the tribes as found in secondary data was rechecked through pertinent inquiries and notes taken accordingly. In the process, new information was gathered. Emphasis was also given on folk traditions, tales of dispersion and notices on the customs of particular tribes as also on the things that the neighbouring tribes said of those who were being investigated. Gatekeepers were responsive and no hurdle was encountered in gaining access to potential informants.

As stated at the outset, this work attempts to furnish a reliable account on the highland societies of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Ethnic subdivisions in terms of tribal groupings and clusters, linguistic affiliations, clan structures and functions, as well as traditions of origin, causes of ethnogenesis, etc. are analysed in an early chapter. Earlier writers had accounted for the origin and migration of the Kuki-Chin tribes mainly in fragments; in the present work, the origin and the probable route, time and causes of Kuki-Chin dispersion and their arrival at the places of present settlement are proposed on the basis of extant traditions, as well as available historical accounts. Aspects of highland life and dwelling, their attitudes to sex and gender are examined against socio-economic developments in time and space. A separate chapter on head-hunting is incorporated for better understating of a most significant aspect of the tribal past of communities locked in at internecine feuds. The concluding chapter accounts for social changes or transitions in the highland societies of the region.

Credits for Ethnographic Information

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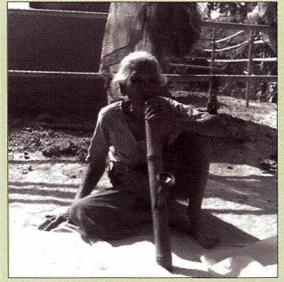
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This book makes a comprehensive study on the highland societies of Tripura and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Ethnic subdivisions in terms of tribal groups and ethnic blocks, their clan structures and functions, as well as traditions of origin, the causes of ethnogenesis, etc. are elaborately presented. Earlier accounts give fragmentary pictures on the migration of the Kuki-Chins; in the present work, their origin and the probable route, time and causes of dispersion and their arrival to the places of present settlement are proposed on the basis of extant traditions, as well as available historical accounts. The significant aspects of highland life and dwelling, the people's attitudes to sex and gender are examined against social and economic developments in time and space. Head-hunting is now a thing of the past but the tenet of gore as endorsed by some Kuki-Chin tribes has never been studied in such kaleidoscopic details as it is done in this book. The impact of social changes and transitions on highland life is deep and an inquisitive reader can learn much from this account.

Rs.600/-

Rupak Debnath is an ethnographer and an ethnolinguist; he is presently associated with the Directorate of Distance Education, Tripura University, as Assistant Director. He has carried out extensive field research and published a number of works, both books and articles on different ethnic groups of Northeast India, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Northern Arakan. He has participated in a number of seminars and workshops and has also played a core role in formulating the script and the orthographic system of the Tanchangya. Some of his works are *Introducing Stylistics* (2002), *A Glossary of Phonetics & Phonology* (2004), *Chakma Folktales* (2006), *MacCabe's Report on Eastern Lushai Rising* (2008, ed.), *Origin of Chakmas: Ethnogenesis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (2008), and *An Ethnographic Study of the Tanchangyas of CHT, CADC, South Tripura and Sittwe* (2008).

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