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THE

CHAKMAS

By Nalini Natarajan

Buddhists by religion, yet flesh-eaters—such, it turned out, were the docile, high cheekboned Chakma men and women who started entering the Cachar District of Assam in 1964. The trickle soon became a torrent. The Chakmas had left their hearth and home in the Chittagong Hill Tracts for good. They sought refuge elsewhere. The immediate task was to provide them shelter and food and clothes. Later on, rehabilitation would be necessary. There was a strong political complexion to the situation—for the Chakmas were migrating from the neighbouring country of East Pakistan which, till 1947 was a part of India.

The Chakma tribals then were all news. Buddhists by religion, the asein tenet being 'Ahimsa' (non-violence), most of them agricultural labourers, attached to the soil, what compelled them to leave the motherland? What was their origin? Two theories that generally prevailed are: (i) The Chakmas belong to Assam and were driven out by the Ahoms. (ii) The Chakmas belong to Burma and were driven out by the Ahoms. A third theory current was that the Chakmas originated from the Kshatriyas who lived in Champanagar, the Capital of Aung Bhalgalpur.

Hutchinson has a different view to put forth, thus: This tribe (Chakma) belongs to the eastern group of the Indian Aryan family; the dialect is Chakma and is a corrupt form of the Bengali language written in corrupt Burmese. He traces the origin of this tribe to the Arracanese and the tribes of Bihar, dating somewhere about 1630. According to him, the history of the race is a myth in so far as it establishes connection with the Kshatriyas of Champanagar. The origin of the Chakma tribe is traced by him to unions between the soldiers of Nawab Shaista Khan, Governor of Lower Bengal under the Emperor Aurangzeb about 1670 A. D., and the hill women. They

were Buddhist by birth, but evidently had a leaning to the religion of their fathers, as the Mohammedan names of their chiefs testify. Later on the tendency to Hinduism becomes strongly apparent—especially at the time of Kalindee Rani (1832-1874) and the worship of Kali and Shiva crept into their ritual. It may safely be assumed that the attempt to connect themselves with the Kshatriyas of Bihar originated at that time. At present, the Chakmas protest against any Muslim connection with their origin. They own affinity to the Hindus. Their names too, in many cases, are Sanskritized viz. Kusumi, Jaymangal, Jamini, Mahendra Mohan, Snehlata, Kripamukhi, Gyanranjan, and the like. Typical Chakma names are—Kedabi, Phelyabi, Badagaly, Balya, Kanayaram etc.

Risley classified them as belonging to the Mangolian racial type. The Chakmas are confined to the Northeast Frontier of India.

In the year 1900, the Circle Chief of this tribe was Raja Bhuban Mohan Ray Chowdhary. His Headquarters were at Rangmati in the present Bangla Desh. The area of the circle was 2,421 sq. miles and it was a flourishing settlement situated on a peninsula formed by the river Karnaphuli. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Burmese called them 'Tui Tekh'—living near the water. Around 1964, the Chakma population was estimated to be about 2.5 lakhs. In 1964, the Raja was one Tridib Rai and his headquarters were near Rangmati. He was in charge of three circles (1) Chakma Circle (2) Mang Circle (3) Bomang Circle. All the three circles are Buddhists.

The average Chakma is of medium stature. The build is thickest and the chest well developed. The nature of the Chakmas daily task involved a lot of manual labour, both for him and the female. This, coupled with the

rugged nature of hilly surroundings have caused the arms and legs to develop well. The features are Mongolian—the eyes are slanting and the nose is flat. The average nasal index is reported to be 77.7, and the average cephalic index is 79.9. The hair is straight and its colour varies from black to brown. The colour ranges from medium to fair. The Chakma woman possesses mediocre looks. The build, as said earlier, is excellent. The Chakma male is rarely seen with either a moustache or beard; he generally pulls out by the root the hairs as they appear on the faces. Of course, after contact with other modern men, the blade and the razor have been introduced to him.

On the whole, the memory of the Chakma is retentive and he has a wonderful grasp of details. He is not bound by traditions, mainly where the material aspects are concerned. He is quick to appreciate the advantages and comforts that accrue of industry. I found most of the Chakma refugees stolid, argumentative and stubborn, but truthful and disciplined. They had a sense of humour and were quick at repartee.

In the very early years, the Chakmas were a nomadic tribe—wanderers. Later on, they became settlers. The same village site was occupied from generation to generation. Agriculture was the main occupation. Hence, quality of the soil and nearness to the source of water were important factors in the consideration of the choice of the site for a village.

The Chakmas followed the 'jhum' (shifting) type of cultivation which eminently suited the hill ranges of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Terrace cultivation was rendered impossible by the absence of stone, the steepness of hill sides and the light nature of the soil. On the other hand, 'jhuming' supplied food and valuable

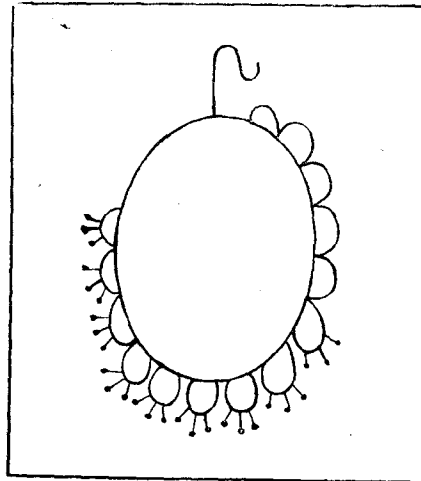
produce for barter to the Chakmas; it is also formed a source of revenue to the Government. For most part, bamboo forest covers the hills and for the purposes of 'jhum', this was selected. Owing to its power of recuperation, the bamboo land is again quite ready for 're-jhuming', after a period of seven to ten years. The advantage of 'jhuming' to the Chakmas were manifold. The Chakma could secure his supply of rice for the year in an ordinary season. There was also a surplus to barter in addition to yams, pumpkins, Indian corn and chillies to vary his diet. The Chakma, further, could secure sufficient cotton to supply all the requirements to weave his cloth, to replenish the stock of clothes of his wife, to make cloth for covering at night, and for the cold season. And yet he could sell the excess with which he could buy ornaments for his wife, mother or sister.

However, the present tendency is towards terrace cultivation. It is fast replacing the 'jhuming' type, as the Chakma thinks it more modern. The following are the principal varieties of crops, grains and vegetables—'jhum' paddy, sesamum, cotton ('shuta'), varieties of pumpkins, yams, onions, potatoes, cucumbers, melons, brinjals (egg plat), chillies, ladies fingers (called 'bindi') and many varieties of spinach. These are almost sown together. Hence, the harvest scene presents a variegated scene. On the average, a young married Chakma couple would jhum 2 acres of land (5 'kanis'). In this area, the couple would sow 150 lbs. (5 'aries') of paddy seed; a similar quantity of cotton seed; a seer or two of sesamum, and other vegetable seeds (mentioned above), and perhaps, a head or two of Indian Corn called 'butta'. Once the couple had done the sowing, and once the grain had firmly established itself, the couple would absent itself from the 'jhum' for two months or so. Of course, it was made sure that there was no chance of the crop being choked on account of the growth of weed. During this time, the couple would go to the forest. There the wife and the husband would cut cane and bamboo. The Chakmas are experts in these twin handicrafts. The bamboo is used for making houses; whole bamboos are used for supports, split bamboos for walls, roof-frame and floor. The bamboo is also used to make

baskets and big bins as also musical instruments, drinking cups, receptacles for holding oil, spears, bows and arrows, and fencing to protect the cultivation. The Chakmas build their villages on hill tops, so the bamboos were also used for fetching and storing water. Bamboo leaves are a decent fodder for horses and cattle. Rafts, too, are made from bamboo. They look like huge yellow snakes as they slowly float down the river. However with the spread of education and the option to choose other vocations, the twin handicrafts of cane and bambao has little chance of survival. It is considered out of date. At present, the Chakmas grow paddy, maize, betelnut, betel-leaf, tobacco, sugarcane cocoanuts, jute and varieties of dal, vegetables and fruits.

Expert weavers as they are, the Chakmas, like the Mizos, wove and dyed their own cloth. Bright colours were favourites—indigo, red, yellow, green, blue, dark pink, black and orange. The older women preferred

Sketch—Nalini Natarajan



Jhumuli

grey and cream. The Chakma woman spun her cotton thread and wove it into cloth. Of these were made weaving apparel, satchels and bed-sheets; also, covering cloths. Dyes were made out of Kalna (black dye), turmeric, indigo, leaves, bark of trees (mango and 'kala gab) and the root of one particular tree, commonly known as 'rang gach'. The Chakma tribals, like the Mizos, mostly used indigeneous mixtures to dye their own yarn. For the actual process of weaving five pieces of bamboo were prepared and stuck in the

ground. Then, the thread was woven round them—two threads at a time. Alternately, these were twisted round the end pieces.

DRESS

The normal dress of the Chakma consisted of two pieces of cloth. The 'pinnow' was a cloth 48" wide and 2½ yards long. Generally, it was black with red borders running along lengthwise ('rangaphil') and the other running across ('chabugi'). Another piece was 'khade' for covering the upper portion of the body. It was one foot wide and five foot long. The dress for the male and female consisted of the above two pieces. But later on, the dresses became more elaborate and there crept in a slight difference in the dresses of the male and the female. The dress of the male consisted of:

- (1) 'Jhumbaganyakhani'—tied with a knot, this is the lower garment, parted in between like a dhoti.
- (2) 'Kjumbasalam'—is used for the upper portions of the body. The dress of the female consists of:

- (1) 'Khabang'—a head-scarf, 2 yds. x 1½ yds.
- (2) 'Khade'—scarf to cover the breasts - 1½ yds x 16".
- (3) 'Pinar'—waist and hip garment - 1½ yd x 1 yd. 'Gadhunikhani' - 2½ yds x 39" is worn during bathing.

At present it is only the poorer ones who still practise the art of weaving—the others buy their cloth from the market. The Chakma male today wears 'gamchas', turbans, shirts, trousers, socks and shoes. A few females wear sarees.

JEWELLERY

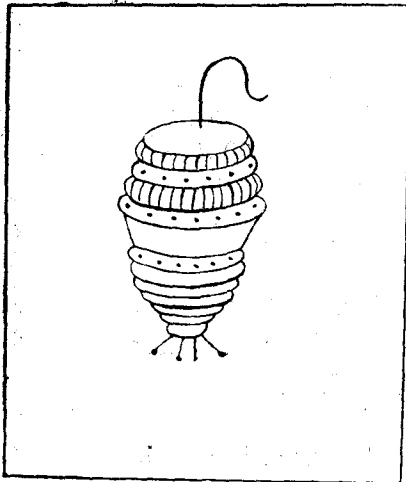
The Chakma female is very fond of jewellery. She adorns herself with a lot of jewellery made of gold and silver and beads. She wears bangles, armlets, necklaces and ear-rings—big and chunky. Jewels are also made of ivory or bones of animals. Ornaments in common use are as follows:

1. 'Nakphool' - the nose-ring. It is either made of gold or silver.

The common varieties are—'Sarnas, aesh, and kakketa'.

- 'Kanphool' - the generic name for the ear-ring. There are three different varieties—'Kajaphool, rajjur and jhumuli'. The former two consist of two parts both of which are screwed together. 'Jhumuli' - the third variety, is worn at the top portion of the ear. A fourth variety, an ancient one is known as the 'nadung'.

Sketch—Nalini Natarajan



Nadung

- 'Alsora' or the 'Telawarishara'—the necklace.
- 'Churis'—bangles of different varieties, worn in the hand. Four varieties are popular—'bala, kharu, sakha, baghi'.
- 'Thatjur'—the armet.
- 'Anghuti'—the ring.
- 'Paykaru'—the anklet.
- As a rule, there is no ornament for the head. Aristocratic families wore crowns known as 'thos'. Hairpins are made of silver, gold or ivory, and are known as 'sanik' and 'sarang'.

HOUSES

The houses of the Chakmas are built entirely of thatch and bamboo. There is a 'machan' (platform) floor raised some six feet above the ground. The house is divided into small cubicles and the requirements of the married members of the family are first attended to. If many families live together, as it happens sometimes, forming a homestead, rooms are allotted in order of seniority. At times,

the rooms are further divided by hanging mats to serve the purpose of walls.

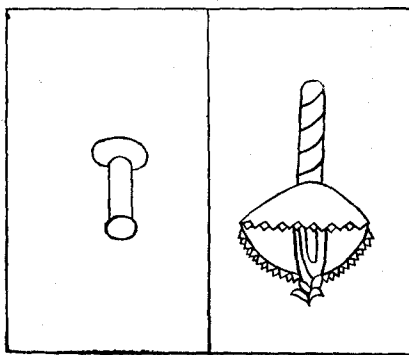
In spite of their professing Buddhism, the Chakmas all eat flesh of animals—goat, cow, fowl, pig, buffalo as also fish, frogs and reptiles. Beef, however, is the exception, although it was eaten formerly. The normal diet includes rice and rice-bread ('peeta') milk, variety of pulses, vegetables—leavy ones ('sak'), radish, pumpkins, yams, chillies, brinjals, cauliflower, tomato and peas and fruits—mangoes, jackfruits, oranges, plantains, guavas, berries and other jungle fruits.

The Chakmas are very fond of drinking liquor. It is made out of rice, and a root called 'mali'. 'Jagara, kanyi and davini' are kinds of rice-beers. The odour is strong and sweet and pungent. The drink leaves a burning sensation on the tongue. As a rule, women do not drink. The Chakma male is also fond of smoking the 'hookah' and eating the betel-leaf. The betel-leaf is also eaten by women.

MATRIMONY

As far as customs regarding matrimony go, the tribe of the Chak-

Sketch—Nalini Natarajan

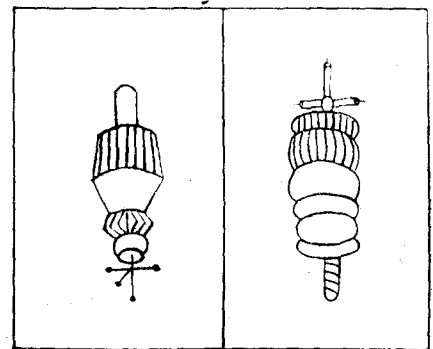


xaja Phool

mas are not an endogamous unit. It is not considered obligatory to marry within the tribe. There are Chakmas who have married the Buddhists from the plains, as also from Tripura. There are also Chakmas who have married into Hindu society. Some have married the 'Mughs' from Chittagong and also 'Baruas'. As a rule, however, this refers to the men alone. The children born of such unions are absorbed in the tribe. Few, or almost none, of the Chakma women, however,

are known to marry outside the tribe. The septs known as 'gozas' may intermarry freely. As enumerated by Hutchinson, the septs are 35, some of them being 'Baga, Dhamai, Heiya, Baruah, Babura, Mootuna, Laksara, Lagura, Kiurakutuiya, Sadanga, Tanya and Wangi'. But, the 'gusti', a subsection of the 'goza' is an exogamous unit. A Chakma may marry within the same 'goza' but not within the same gusti. It is customary for the girl's people to approach those of the

Sketch—Nalini Natarajan



Rajjur

boy and then the marriage is finalised. But, there are a few love-marriages also, and these are not looked down upon. It is not necessary for the sons to live with the parents after marriage. They are free to set up independent establishments. Generally, the boy's father helps in setting up a new house for the bridal couple. Again, it is he who pays money—'dava' (price) for the girl to her father. But there is no fixed rule. The party who is better off financially spends more on marriage festivities and celebrations. The boy's people do make ornaments for the bride. In the present day, young men and women are not allowed to mix freely and there is no sexual freedom. A girl is normally married at the age of 16 years and a boy around 20 years. The age of marriage, of recent, has gone up by 2-5 years in the case of both.

The final ceremony which is in the boy's house, is performed by the priest—called the 'oza'. The invitees assemble to witness the wedding and to take part in the celebrations. The priest 'oza' comes and gives the auspicious time for performance of rituals. As a rule, the rituals take place at night. A lamp is kept burning in front of a couple, and then the rites take place. After these are over, the

couple invokes the blessings of all elders present. For conducting the ceremony, the priest is given some clothes and cash. There is a restriction on the choice of mates, as among the Khasis. It is taboo for a man to marry the following (1) sisters (2) step-sisters (3) nieces (4) first cousins on paternal side (5) maternal aunts (6) paternal aunts and (7) grandmothers on either side. With the change of sex, the same rule applies in the case of the woman. The restrictions are the same in the choice of a mate for her too. Polygamy is permitted and it does prevail. But, the wealthy alone go in for this. For, it is expensive to pay for and support many wives. As a result, polygamy is reserved only for the wealthier classes. Polyandry is also practised but not on a very wide scale. Chakma society also permits the remarriage of widows.

DIVORCE

Divorce is recognised and can be obtained on the grounds of (1) incompatibility of temperament (2) neglect of household duties or (3) adultery. Although the Chakmas consider adultery to be a valid ground for divorce, they do not look upon it as a serious offence. It can be settled by a fine by the village headman who generally deals with divorce cases. A woman can obtain divorce if the man is convicted of desertion or cruelty. If an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, normally, a match is arranged for her. While adultery is not considered to be a serious offence, fidelity is valued and unchastity after marriage is rare.

The Chakma woman does the weaving, cooking, rearing of the children and housekeeping : she also helps in cultivation. Generally, it is the man who does the bamboo and cane work. He does the cultivation, and also the bazar. Literacy is not high, but education is valued. Hence, the number of literate Chakmas is fast increasing. The number of girls in schools is less than that of the boys, but it is increasing. In 1954, there were many graduate girls among the Chakmas. It was reported that Bakuabala, the first woman Chakma graduate was teaching in the Rangamati High School, in East Pakistan.

The status of women is slightly lower than that of men. It is customary for the girl's people to approach those of the groom for settling the

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marriage. Further, some of their proverbs and sayings reveal the digms men have at the women e.g. (1) If a person has one wife, he will get his rice in time; if he has two wives, he will get it late; if he has three wives he will never get it. (2) It is better to have a blind wife than none at all; in her absence, it is better to have a costly princess. (3) A broken oar floating in the river should not be taken, as it is of no use; likewise, a divorced wife should not be accepted.

RELIGION

While the religion of the Chakmas is Buddhism, it is permeated strongly with both Hindu and animistic rites. The general tenets are Buddhistic and their wants ministered by Buddhist priests. But the Hindu God Siva and the Goddess Kali, worshipped by many in Bengal, are also worshipped by the Chakmas. Spirits of the rivers — water deities — are propitiated. Also, 'nameless bhuts' and demons, sometimes by sacrificing animals. The Missionaries tried to win over the Chakmas but this was almost of no avail. Their attempts at conversion were futile. The resistance of the Chakmas was strong. This is striking especially if one considers the fact that in the neighbouring Lushai Hills, the Lushais are all Christians. Even the influence of the Muslims was met with stubborn resistance by the Chakmas. The Chakmas remained Buddhists and even today are predominantly so. However, as said earlier, a strong influence of Hinduism is evident. The Buddhist priests called 'Ozas' are from within the tribe. But to cast the family horoscope by which is determined the exact time of a person's birth, the duration of life, and the probable circumstances — good or evil, of its career, the well-to-do Chakmas employ the Brahmins, as most Hindus do. Every village has a 'Khyang' — Buddhist temple and a monk, who preaches every morning and evening. After this, the devotee bows down before the image of the Buddha. The monk chants hymns — 'mantras' — such as Panchashila, Ashtashila, Dashshila, Mangalsutra etc. The Bengali year and calendar is followed. The priest also explains the scriptures of the Chakmas. Originally written in the Pali language and now translated into Bengali, they contain the following three parts: 'Binay, Abhidharma and Sutra'. For

the performance of 'Pujas' at home, a priest is necessary.

The Chakmas celebrate the 'Baisakh-purnima' and 'Maghipurnima', and 'Bijan' (the 'Chaitra Sankranti', known in Assam as 'Bihu'.)

FESTIVALS

They have other festivals and ceremonies also. In the month of 'Baisakh', the most important festival is that of the Chakma New Year. The Chakma year, on the pattern of the Bengali year, consists of the following twelve months which follow in succession — 'Baisakh, Jaith, Asad, Sagn, Bhadar, Ashin, Khadi, Agan, Paus, Magh, Phagun and Chaita'. The Chakma New Year is a 3-day festival. Of these, the second day of the festival, the last day of the old year, is the main day. It is called the 'mool-bishu' day. Crackers are blown to welcome the sprightly day, and guns are fired at the advent of dawn. The Chakmas bathe themselves and wear new garments. Flowers are offered at the feet of the statue of the Holy Buddha. All the domestic animals and poultry birds are fed. Offerings are made to the priest. The Chakmas-dip gold and silver metal possessions — statues, ornaments etc. Jungle fruit and root called 'gila', 'holoot' (turmeric) and 'Khojali', in water. With this water they wash the statue of the Buddha. In the evenings, lamps and candles again brighten the houses. The 'thakur' chants 'mantras' and in the evening, delivers lectures on religious topics, mythological stories, scriptures etc.

The last day, known as the 'gujadin' is the day of rest in the 3-day festivity for the Chakma New Year. It is the first day of the Chakma New Year and no work is done. This is the day of complete rest. The Chakmas revel in eating, drinking and singing. There is no dancing, though. The Goddess 'Lakki' is worshipped. In the evening, the last of the three-day festival, lamps and candles are again lit. And, the 3-day festivities for the Chakma New Year festival comes to a peaceful end.

There are other important Pujas also. 'Kaliathakur' is worshipped in the month of Baisakh. This worship is believed to bring wealth, health and prosperity to the worshipper. It is also supposed to ward away the evil effect of ghosts. Barren women

worship this God in the hope that he will grant them the boon of bearing children. Along with this male God 'Kalia', the goddess 'Lakki', is invariably worshipped.

The worship of the God 'Thammana' takes place in the month of 'Jaith'. This worship is bi-annual and is repeated again in the month of 'Magh'. It can be on any day. It is a community festival and the worship consists of 15 deities together. These are: (1) 'Biatara' (2) 'Ganga' (3) 'Mayani' (4) 'Hayani' (5) 'Moithya' (6) 'Athiya' (7) 'Phulkumari' (8) 'Bonat' (9) 'Neel kumari' (10) 'Dulukumari' (11) 'Malkumari' (12) 'Jala Kumari' (13) 'Lagochial' (14) 'Bat Kumari' (15) 'Borsila'. The joint worship of this group is supposed to secure a good harvest and prevent epidemics like the Cholera and Small-pox. The entire male community participates in the worship — women cannot participate. This worship takes place on the bank of a river or rivulet. Animals and birds are then sacrificed. Paddy and flowers are also offered.

The 'Puja' of 'Madhado' or 'Burapara' takes place in the month of 'Asad'. It is also by the banks of the river. The idea is to get rid of one's general ill luck e.g. preventing disease, getting involved in a litigation, attack by wild animals etc. It is an individual worship by a family. The worship is conducted by the 'Ozas' who chant the hymns.

The 'Gangapuja' is performed out of fear if anyone falls ill, or any kind of bad luck falls on the family. The 'Oza' conducts the puja. If he is absent, any one can conduct it.

A sore or abscess or a boil of a small child is believed to be caused by two mischievous children 'Poa' and 'Puri'. They are appeased by offerings of fruits, flowers, coconuts, a rupee, sweets, rice and fowl. When the fowl is sacrificed, a talisman is dipped in its blood and tied round the neck of the suffering victim. When the elders have ulcers, they also perform the 'puja'. 'Sinnipuja' or the Puja of 'Satyapir' is a community puja and is supposed to ensure wealth and propriety. The offering is known as the 'sinni' and is offered in a jar contains molasses ('gur') milk, a lamp, 'atta' cocoaunut, sugar cane, betelnut, the leaves of the 'bel, tulsi' and the 'durva' (grass). The worship

is conducted by the 'Oza' who also reads out the legends of 'Satyapir' thrice or five times

The 'Buddhapuja' is generally offered as a thanksgiving. The 'Bhikku' chants the 'mangalsutras'. Articles such as cash, grain and animals are distributed in charity.

All the 'purnimas' — full moon days, are important and they are observed. Tenets such as 'Panchsheel Ashatasheel, and Dashasheel', are preached.

POETRY

The Chakmas are poetic by temperament. Their poetry has many beautiful love songs. Constancy in love is a favourite theme. One song is thus worded: 'the birds may cease to fly high but you will always possess my heart's deep love'. There are many lullabies also, and in one of them, the mother thus pleads with her very young one: 'Little one, your body is softer than the tender leaves of the yams. But the cat has claws, sharper than the leaves of the sugarcane. Should she scratch you, darling, you will be hurt. So please, go sleep quietly'. The proverbs, too are wise, witty and some of them pointed. They reflect the richness and depth of the ethos of the Chakmas. It is permeated with subtle humour, shrewd observation and practical wisdom e.g. (1) A wise man is the loftiest of all. (2) Someone else's child is for ever dirty, your own is always clean. (3) Practice makes a man perfect.

RITES

The Chakmas cremate the dead, generally by the banks of the river. In the event of death by Cholera or small-pox, the corpse is buried. Many of the death rites are similar to those of the Hindus and like them, the 'sradh' ceremony is observed. Even distant relatives will assemble to partake in the 'shradh' of the deceased. The rites connected with birth among Chakmas, too, have certain similarities to those of the Hindus. In the fifth or seventh month of pregnancy, special care is taken to carry out the wishes of the expectant mother if she fancies anything in particular to eat. The wealthier classes observe birthdays. These are generally celebrated as they are in most Hindu households. There

(Contd on Page 49)



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