

# Representation of Nature-born Chakma Folk Culture: An Ecocritical Study of *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*

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## Abstract

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Chakma is a Mongoloid tribal community having a rich cultural heritage (but linguistically Indo-Aryan). The famous folk-ballads like *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*, *Lorbut Midungi Pala*, *Lakshmi Pala*, *Chadigang Chhari Pala*, *Langya-Langani Pala*, etc., are the concrete evidence of the Chakmas' rich oral literary tradition which focuses on the primeval sweetness of literature affecting everybody. These are still sung in their different religious and socio-cultural festivals or functions according to the relevance and local needs. *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*, considered as the oldest and widely accepted folk-ballad of this community, centers round the romantic love story of iconic legendary couple Radhamohan and Dhanapudi. It artistically depicts the socio-cultural, religious and economic aspects of the agrarian Chakma tribal life strongly founded on ecocentric tradition and beliefs. Even this ballad has gained the status of myth among the natives who are endowed with the consciousness of conserving natural resources. The oral performance of this ballad by the *genghulis* (Chakma minstrels) attracts one and all of this tribal community even in the present day of globalization as it provides them with the literary means to seek and trace their own identity and folk culture based on ecocentric imagination. The present paper proposes to make an ecocritical study of the oral discourse of *Radhamohan Dhanapudi* and trace in it the reflection of the multidimensional intimately integrated relationship between the humans and Nature / ecology as (un)consciously cherished and maintained by the Chakmas.

**Keywords:** tribe, orality, folk culture, folk-ballad, ecology, ecocriticism.

The Chakmas are one of the hill tribes living in the Chittagong Hills Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, in the Indian states of Mizoram (Lawngtlai, Lunglei and Mamit districts), Tripura (Northern and Southern districts), Arunachal Pradesh (Tirap, Changlang, Subansiri and Lohit districts) and Assam (Hailakandi and

Karbi Anglong districts) and in the Chin Province and Arakan Province of Myanmar. From the anthropological point of view, the Chakmas are the people of South-East Asia physiologically identified as the Tibeto-Burman family but their native language called 'Chakma' is characteristically Indo-Aryan. The total population of these parts is around nine (approximately) lakhs. Like other tribal communities of India, the Chakmas have a very rich oral cultural tradition actualized by the historic accounts called *bijok*, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, anecdotes, lullabies, folksongs, cultural and religious rituals, customs, etc., implicating 'a transmission of the past within a 'formal' context of continuity' (Fiorio 68) as well as bearing the wide ranging significations specific to their oral culture. In this context the relevant observation on the oral tradition made by Fiorio (68) in the article "Orality and Cultural Identity: the Oral Tradition in Tupuri (Chad) " can be cited here: "The totality of messages, which a social group considers significant for its proper continuity over time, confers its particular characteristics to the collectivity, by allowing it to distinguish itself from other surrounding realities" (68).

Oral literature endowed with the primeval sweetness makes us feel to be in "contact with a truly universal soul in the oral culture of humanity" (Nemade 70). We find that both native and non-native scholars like George Abraham Grierson, S. R. H. Hutchinson, Chitta Ranjan Chakma, Niranjana Chakma, Ashok Kumar Dewan, Pannalal Majumdar, Rupak Debnath, Lakshimibhusan Chakma, etc., have studied the linguistic and literary aspects of this tribal community along with other socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political aspects. As mentioned above, Chakmas possess a rich treasure of folk-ballads sung in accompaniment with fiddle, flute and other folk musical instruments by Chakma *gengulis or genghulis* (minstrels). *Genghulis* have been singing the oral folk-ballads mainly relying on their memories generation after generation. As the minstrels belong to the different places and times and sing these with their own spontaneous creative and imaginative powers, these ballads have evidently got different oral versions in different Chakma dwelling areas. In course of time the minstrels have tried to write down in Chakma script these oral folk-songs and some such manuscripts preserved by the minstrels' families ancestrally or influential native speakers have been discovered in the second half of the last century. Most of the manuscripts, to speak the truth, have been destroyed for several socio-political and socio-academic reasons. The folk-songs, popularly called *Genghuli Geet* are, as claimed by Pannalal Mazumdar, "composed on heroic events, love stories, mystery of the creation of the earth and life or the life story of Lord Buddha and his fables, etc." (188). Some of the most popular well-sung folk-ballads(-songs) of the Chakmas are *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*, *Lorbut Midungi Pala*, *Lakshmi Pala*, *Chadigang Chhari Pala*, *Langya-Langani Pala*, etc., and these are still sung in the different religious and socio-cultural festivals based on their relevance and local needs.

*Radhamohan Dhanapudi* is considered as the oldest as well as the most popular oral ballad in which Chakmas' genealogy and ancestry have been traced, along with the legendary love story of *Radhamohan* and *Dhanapudi*. It constitutes a part of Chakma folk oral history called *Bijok*, based on commonly shared folk-stories and beliefs, mostly coloured by imagination (Lakshimibhusan Chakma's recently published book *Chakmas of South East Asia: An Anthropological, Social and Cultural Study* has given a detailed discussion on this subject). Though it is purely oral and memory-based, it has several versions available in the not very old manuscripts compiled by *genghulis*. However, the present study is based on the written version of this oral ballad collected, transliterated in Bengali script and edited by the eminent native scholar Sugata Chakma, Chirajyoti Chakma and Susamay Chakma and published by Tribal Cultural Institute, Rangamati, Bangladesh in 2004. It is also known to us that the written version of an oral text restricts its innumerable unrecorded versions existing in the community and the "fluid re-presentations of a fixed body of component material" (Chaudhuri 146). With such limitations, in the present study we will attempt to explore nature-born Chakma culture and the related ecological aspects as depicted in *Radhamohan Dhanapudi* and thereby this ecocritical study will, it is hoped, show intimately integral relation between all its constituents of Mother Earth including humans much needed for the well being of not only this tribal society but also the whole of humanity at large.

The 1972 UN Conference in Stockholm is the first international platform to address the averment as a major issue relating to the man-made threats to life and Nature or ecology on Earth due to industrialization, urbanization, deforestation, etc. An awareness regarding the relationship between literature and ecology or environment and the impact of the imbalance caused by the industrial development on the environment started lurking in the minds of a section of intelligentsia devoted to creative writing and literary study. Consequently, 1970s witnessed the emergence of ecocriticism as a major literary theory alongside the other theories developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the book *The Comedy Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* Meeker uses the term 'literary ecology' in order to study the biological themes and their interrelationships and at the same time attempts to "discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of human species" (9). Rueckert in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* first used the term *ecocriticism* to highlight the study of literature from the ecology-perspectives. However, ecocriticism stood as a full-fledged literary theory with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's book *The Ecocriticism Reader, Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which maps the methods of ecocriticism. Glotfelty argues that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world affecting it and affected by it" (xix). As a critical stance, Glotfelty further claims, "it has one foot in literature and the other, on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human

and the non-human” (xix). The USA-based ecocritical study in the 1990s revolves round the works of three major 19<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) who projected nature, the life-force and the wilderness as manifested in America (see Buell for further reference). At the same time in the UK this literary study got momentum with the publication of Jonathan Bate’s seminal work *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* in 1991, an undoubtedly classic and founding text on contemporary British ecocriticism. Such studies encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts and uphold the proper means and ways as depicted in literary texts for the purpose of saving ecological balance in order to keep or make the world lovable and livable for all its entities. Hence, it is perfectly related to the idea of the interdependence of communities, integrated system of human-nonhuman world, the impact of environment/nature on the human mind and also the consolidated and durable connection among the constituent parts. Hence Chandra and Das in *Ecology, Myth and Mystery* unambiguously opine: “Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affected by it” (12).

In order to make the world free from contamination caused by emission of pollutant gases, chemical spills, nuclear wastes, etc., humans belonging to all levels and lands must be ecologically aware as they were (un)consciously in the pre-stone and pre-industrial age. It should be kept in mind that the ecosphere is the space not only for the humans but also equally for the nonhumans. Such sensible awareness of bio-centric worldview is needed for building the sense of responsibility towards Mother Nature. In this context we can quote a related observation made by Mondal in *The Ecocentric Imagination: A Study of Sri Aurobindo’s Select Poems and Nonfiction*: “... it is an undeniable fact that the concern for Nature from the 1970s, has escalated among the mass. Simultaneously, the concept of environmental justice has become popular. It advocates with assertion the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction” (15).

The discourse of the grand folk-ballad *Radhamohan Dhanapudi* has developed in a linear chronological mode. There is a village named Dhanapādā situated within the Champaknagar state of the Chakmas. It consists of one hundred twenty households each residing in *māchāng ghar* (house made on high plank made of bamboo or wood). The peace-loving villagers nurture cordial and cooperative relations among themselves and lead a happy life. The two sisters Menaka and Kapudi got married to Jaymangal and Nilgiri of two very rich and influential families of the village. Menaka and Jaymangal gave birth to a son named Radhamohan and one year later Kapudi and Nilgiri, a daughter named Dhanapudi. Radhamohan and Dhanapudi, cousins, grow in the same cradle and

under the love and care of their parents, grandparents and other villagers. The socio-cultural interactions among the young in the village develop intimate friendship leading to the formation of seven pairs of lovers including Radhamohan-Dhanapudi. These seven pairs lead a lively, jovial life with the help of very affectionate and joy-loving *āju* (grandfather) Chalabap and develop cultural awareness and knowledge of creeds and customs of their own community. Radhamohan and Dhanapudi undergo several trials and tribulations but with the help of Chalabap and their friends they ultimately got married and are accepted by the parents of both.

In the midst of happy joyful life prevailing in Dhanapādā, reports reach that the Maghs of the neighbouring region have started plundering villages after villages in the Chittagang and Tripura regions. Hence, the Tripura king has sought military aid from the Chakma King Samargiri who has assigned the responsibility of fighting with the enemy to his eldest son Prince Vijaygiri. After consultation with the members of the royal court, the prince sends the order to the most competent warrior Radhamohan to lead the army. This order shocks villagers and is also a huge blow to Dhanapudi as she with her recently born son will have to sacrifice most and lead a lonely life if Radhamohan joins the war. Radhamohan along with a number of youths of Dhanapādā joins Vijaygiri's army and defeats the Maghs and saves the kingdom of Tripura and Chakma from their torture. After twelve years Radhamohan and his companions return Dhanapādā with their heads high and are warmly received by the villagers. The oral story concludes with this happy reunion of the hero and heroine and an expectation of their happy peaceful conjugal life ahead.

This much loved oral ballad endowed with multiple dimensions and significances has conquered time and space and acquired the status of an epic in the minds of the natives who try to seek their racial root and identity from this. It has been composed by many generations of *genghulis* working within a poetic and aesthetic tradition nurtured within the Chakma sociolinguistic system and thus it occupies a unique position in the Chakma literary world and in the collective unconscious shared by the natives.

The present folk-ballad linked with *Bijok* refers to the heroic activities of king Vijaygiri (supposed to be belonging to 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century) and his kingdom Champaknagar, as mentioned above. According to *Bjok* Vijaygiri is claimed to be the first Chakma king who gave the Chakmas a dignified identity and space in the CHT and adjoining hilly regions. The natives respect him profoundly for the honour and respect they enjoy as a separate dominant tribal community in the region having their own distinctly rich cultural entity, as depicted in *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*.

The present folk ballad portrays the integral relation between Man and Nature which shapes the Chakmas' life with all its components and phases. From the very beginning of the discourse the life and culture i.e., the way of living borne

generations after generations by the Chakma community across the board, are fully Nature-centric. It describes day-to-day life full of vivacity and vigour, food items, culinary items, cuisine, preparation of various kinds of bread called *pidhe* made of rice, folk-games, weaving of clothes for the self-use and the use of the relatives, house-structure, Jhum cultivation and harvest, observation of socio-cultural and religious festivals and rituals like worship of trees, agriculture-related rituals, Buddhism related worships, marriage, birth and death, Biju etc. All these have been presented pictorially in course of the description of the main story relating to the birth, growth, arousal of love, marriage, separation and union of Radhamohan and Dhanapudi. All pastoral elements in relation to food habit and life-style are still present in a Chakma village and the oral presentation full of contemporary references and rhetorical devices becomes enticing to the native audience as they can easily find themselves in the reality-and-imagination synthetic discourse.

The events of this folk story show how the young and old men and women with the spirit of cooperation engage themselves in cultivation, carpentry, weaving, fruits and vegetables collection from the forest and cultivated lands and bamboo collection for making equipment for different works. They competently make different baskets like *Kallyong*, *Pullyong*, etc., using bamboo strips for carrying different essential items for domestic and other uses. Both male and female members actively contribute to the peace and prosperity of the family as beautifully portrayed in this ballad. Hence, Dhanapudi joyfully accompanies Radhamohan to the forest for the collection of vegetables, flower and fruits, etc., and she frantically requests Chalabap to make *Pullyong* for both of them as shown in the following two lines:

āmi ton tagā jade āju / ekko ekko pulluyong lāgina (‘Grandfather, each of us needs one basket for going to forest’, translation mine)

It is worthy to mention that even today Chakmas prefer such bamboo basket to other modern baskets for agricultural work, local marketing etc. In everyday life of the ancient days to keep and preserve the herbal medicinal plants, clothes and ornaments they used *Sāmmuyā*, a small basket made of bamboo strips, as vividly depicted in the poetical discourse of the ballad. The children play several folk-games *ghilā khārā*, *nādheng khārā*, etc., play bamboo-made flutes like *khenggarang*, *dhuduk*, etc., and learn how to weave cloth like *khādi* and *pinon*, preparing food, etc. On a moonlit night Chalabap, like other grandfathers, motivates the teenagers to go to a distant hill area for *Jhum* cultivation. With enthusiasm, all fix the journey-day called *jhum-berā din*. At this time Dhanapudi like other young girls urges her lover Radhamohan to fetch her a set of bamboo-made ornaments, weaving equipment such as *bein*, *suchchek*, *tārām*, *tāgalak*, *ba-kādi*, etc. Radhamohan and other boys in a jovial mood engage themselves under the supervision of Chalabap in the cultivation work i.e., cutting of bushes and trees on the fixed land of the hill, setting fire on those, sowing seed at the appropriate time, etc. Some days later they return home carrying some bamboo-

/wood-made things and ornaments as demanded by their respective beloveds. Moreover, the fact that the entire herbal medicinal system (called *Badyali*) of the Chakmas is very rich (Lakshimibhusan Chakma 2022 gives a detailed study on this) can be traced in every step of life presented in the ballad. One such example is Radhamohan's falling unconscious due to and recovery from the poisonous snake-bite. While plucking flowers for his beloved, friends and Chalabap from a tree of sea shore, Radhamohan gets snake-bite, becomes unconscious and falls in the sea. Instead of being nervous Dhanapudi courageously jumps into the sea, rescues her unconscious lover and applies several herbal leaves and seed-juice to the wound. Next morning he regains sense and finds himself on the lap of his beloved.

Dhanapudi's denial to marry the groom of her parents' choice, Adidhan, and going to the house of Menaka and Jaymangal, the parents of Radhamohan, with water collected from the river as a part of marriage ritual are the offences in the eye of Chakma Customary Law (Customary Law is still prevalent in this tribal society and is in effect to amicably solve the local social disputes among the natives). Abiding by the judgement on the basis of Customary Law Jaymangal provides some amount of money and animals (cock, pig) to Adidhan's father as compensation and arranges *gorā-bānāh* or marriage of Radhamohan and Dhanapudi. After some months Chalabap along with other prominent persons and relatives of the village conducts their *Chumulāng* (worship for marriage following their Buddhist custom performed by Buddhist monk) for the well being of the newly married couple and a large number of invited guests take their food after the completion of the worship.

On the eve of Radhamohan's leaving for war, following the advice of Chalabap, Dhanapudi weaves *Sajanya gāmchā* (decorated napkin having auspicious touch) in one single day starting from spinning thread from raw cotton to weaving and colouring. Whenever a Chakma man goes to an unknown far-off place for some adventurous work or new job, this *Sajanya gāmchā* weaving ceremony is still observed by a wife for her husband's wellbeing, success and above all security.

The present ballad, a living example of organically artistic assimilation or fusion of fact and fiction, integrates the peace-loving Chakma people spread in different regions and at the same time motivates them to uphold themselves as a historically, culturally and spiritually united tribe which has been leading happy peaceful life in and by Nature from time immemorial. It is thus evident that the integrated, cooperative and collective Chakma society, enriched by and endowed with Nature-born folk culture, is represented in this ballad which is no doubt a spontaneous collection of the experiences gained by the community. Chakma folk wisdom that has evolved out of the local belief system and the practices of indigenous institutions is context-bound and community-specific but has its own rationale and validity, as represented in the rhythmic description of the events and allied elements. Hence, even in the 21st century, the Chakmas take pride in linking and then identifying themselves with the rich heritage as projected in this

and so they sincerely and consciously try to uphold and carry out this folk cultural heritage as the dynamic aspect of ethnic as well as cultural identity as a distinct race called Chakma.

The so-called civilized progressive society needs to rediscover Nature, her various energy-fields from such tribal folk culture engendered by the eco-centric life and imagination. This can only guarantee a better tomorrow of the world, accommodating symbiotic principle of life system, value-cosmology dependence worldview. This Chakma folk ballad does really exhibit, rather uphold a panoramic view or picture of Chakma societal structure, tradition, food habits, customs, cooperation-based culture and value system etc., along the love story of their legendary hero and heroine. Moreover, it can be reflectively stated that this indigenous tribe leads Nature-centric and ecoconscious life not only in the pragmatic way but also in the metaphysical, moral, ethical, cultural and aesthetic way. Keeping Nature with all its biological and transbiological components at the centre, the text and texture of this ballad spontaneously honour the fundamental claim of ecocriticism and thereby, it can be claimed, put forward the bio-centric worldview, not the anthropocentric one. In this context it seems relevant to quote the comprehensive observation made by Chandalia in his 2017 book *Tribal Literature, Culture and Knowledge System*:

Eco-consciousness in the mainstream society, thus, emerged in the late twentieth century though one may trace linkages between nature and literature right up to the Elizabethan Age in English Literature. The literature of the margins, both in the West and the East, does exhibit a closer link with nature and a deeper concern in the masses to conserve its resources. The oral literature of the indigenous people is full of such description and depiction. The very life of these people depends on a close association with Nature and its components including air, water, vegetation, wild life and land. In this sense, though the power rests with the mainstream, the marginal sections of the society exhibit greater consciousness and concern in their life style. The literature present in the form of songs, stories, idioms and dance-drama reflects a kind of consciousness which has developed through a close living relationship with nature. (57)

As a whole, the ballad *Radhamohan Dhanapudi* with all its components emerges as composite artistic discourse which metaphorically represents the deep-rooted Chakma tradition and culture of which each and every Chakma individual feels proud. The central feature of this tradition and culture, as evinced in the present oral discourse, relates to the presence of the strong bondage between human being and his/her environment sincerely nurtured and maintained eternally. Even today both men and women of this tribal society contribute to this effort to project and utilize Nature as the abode of peace and happiness.



To conclude, *Radhamohan Dhanapudi*, studied so far with ecological decoding key, reveals Chakmas' instinctive and intuitive knowledge of cause-effect relations of natural phenomena including life processes. Moreover, the ballad with all its materials categorically testifies to the fact that the sacrosanct Nature functions as the eternal abode of all the Chakma rites and rituals as portrayed in every bit of its story. Thus, the entire ballad beautifully foregrounds a holistic humanistic life-cycle governed by Nature and guided by deep ecological consciousness of the characters representing Chakma community in particular and tribal communities across the board in general. Now the tribals' life principle strongly based on the idea of the integration of self and Nature can undoubtedly and succinctly be claimed to be the alternative mode of development for peaceful biocentric subsistence and sustenance of all on the Earth and of saving the Earth or universe from eco-precarity.

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