
GENDER, RELIGION AND CHAKMA WOMEN

Dr. Mekhala Chakma

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Lakshmibai College,
Ashok Vihar, Delhi-110052, Delhi University, Delhi, India*

Received: Apr. 2019 Accepted: May 2019 Published: Jun. 2019

Abstract: This research has a great significance. Though many studies have come out on the Chakmas, women are hardly found place in the history of the Chakmas. Their role, action, contribution are not given priority by the scholars dealt with the Chakmas. The historians on the Chakmas have always tried to glorify the areas like their origin, political background, their chief or king, their court, royal families etc. In every sphere of life women are always discriminated and pushed into the back seat either by religion or traditional practices and beliefs which have their root in the past. Women take active participation in every religious ceremony, rite, ritual held either at home or in the Buddhist temple and play an important role, but they have always got the subordinated position, they are considered as dependent on men. Sources are scattered and scanty and not very helpful. In spite of this, the study has attempted to dig out the required things from the available historical sources like writings of the British administrators, the studies on the Chakmas etc. Along with these, folk lore, oral traditions have also been taken into account. This study has explored how religious rites, rituals from birth to death and traditional norms and values are attributed to women which shows gender bias. Hope this research will contribute to provide a deep sense of understanding about the Chakmas and its women folk which will be helpful for the future researchers, academicians and so on.

Keywords: Gender, Religion, Women, Tradition, Superstition.

Introduction: Theoretically, in every religion, women are venerated as mother, goddess etc. They are worshiped as Durga, Kali, Amba, Laxmi etc. in Hinduism. However, in practice, women are subjected to secondary position in every religion. Women's experiences have not been taken into account. Now interest is taken by the scholars to explore how the religious experiences of women is different from that of men, what religious functions they perform and the degree to which these are private or public and, finally, what implications these rituals have for women's prestige and status. In fact, it is no longer possible to study religious practices or religious symbols without taking into account gender, that is, the cultural experience of being male or female.

In every religion, some beliefs and superstitions are attributed to women, which are considered as traditional norms and values. Chakmas follow Buddhism, so one should see the rituals performed according to the requirement of the said religion. Male and female equally attend religious ceremonies irrespective of class i.e. rich and poor. In every *Puja* performed in the family, wife's presence is equally important (Dewan, 1969). Men, women, including widows together participate religious functions like Buddha Purnima, Buddha Jayanti, Kathin Chibardan etc. held in the Buddhist temple. Buddhist temple is called 'Kyang' in the Chakma tradition.

Different scholars have different views regarding the religious practice of the Chakmas. R.H. Riseley says that though the Chakmas introduced themselves as Buddhist, earlier they practiced animism (Riseley, 1981). One cannot deny the fact that not only the Chakmas, all the people in the world used to worship inanimate objects in the earlier days. However, the Chakmas have been practicing Buddhism from before. Due to the social, political, economic conditions and spreading education, new thoughts and ideas have come in the society, which brought changes in the religion of the Chakmas in many ways. S.R. Maitra writes, 'Now a- days, there are two contrasting religious beliefs among the Chakmas. Buddhism operates in the upper stratum and animism and sacrifices at the lower stratum' (Maitra, 2002). It is true that in these days, upper class or educated Chakmas are following Buddhism, where animal sacrifice (pig, chicken) is disappeared as per rule of Buddhism. While the lower strata in the rural areas are still practicing animal sacrifices, or apply charms and spells for the recovery of sickness etc. In this light, one could say that majority of the Chakma population are living in the remote areas, very far from hospitals or dispensaries, and without transportation facilities are mostly illiterate.

Dr. Heinz Bechet (Bechet, 1967) says that Chakmas were undoubtedly Buddhist since long. According to Taranaths 'History of Buddhism in India' and in Sampa Makhan, Po's 'History of the Rise, Progress and Downfall of Buddhism in India' Assam, Tripura, Arakan, Burma and some other eastern countries were collectively called 'Koki Lands'. Buddhism is said to have spread since Asoka's times in these Koki Lands. When the Muslims occupied Magadha, a large number of Buddhist monks came from here to the Koki lands" (Bechet, 1967; p. 10). According to Biraj Mohan Dewan, Chakmas were Buddhist from before. He points out that the Chakmas came from Champaknagar on the foothills of Himalayas or Thailand or Shan or wherever it might be, history tell us that during the one and half decade after the death of Buddha, Buddhism spread not only in India but also China, Tibet, Malay, Burma, etc (Dewan, 1969).

However, the Chakmas practiced Buddhism since long back though the way of practicing was different. Earlier, they followed Buddhism in indigenous way. Now a-days, because of spreading education and economy changes have come in religious practice of the Chakmas.

Doctrinally, Buddhism has been egalitarian from its beginning. Buddha gave the same teachings to his male and female disciples, the same spiritual path was opened to all, the same goal pointed out. However, in practice, there are lots of discriminations between Buddhist monks and nuns in the Sangha. Nuns, being women are allowed to live according to '*Ashta Sheel*' or Eight Rules, whereas, monks follow Ten Rules or '*Dash Sheel*' which place women in a position subordinated to the monks. In addition to, the Eight Rules suggest each nun to treat every monk as her senior or superior. Even Shramans, whose position, according to 'Sheel' or Rule, is next to the monks, are in the higher position than nuns. In every way, discriminations are visible between monks and nuns and the distinctions are based on gender. Nuns are allowed to have their meals only after the monks and Shramans take '*Syong*' (meal of Buddhist monks). Thus, the monks naturally reserve the superior position in the Buddhist Temple or Sangha.

Different religious rites and rituals followed by the Chakmas from birth to death which have their roots in the past. Women including widows attend religious ceremonies, rituals etc. held at home

or in the Buddhist temple in large numbers. Most of the rituals and religious ceremonies indicate gender discrimination and deterioration of women's position.

Chamoni: According to the religious belief and the tradition of the Chakmas, a boy has to lead ascetic life as monk wearing *Chibor* (saffron cloths worn by the Buddhist monk or sraman) in the Buddhist temple for three days or five days or seven days at least once in his life before getting married which is called '*Chamoni*'. A man can perform this virtual act any time in his life. During his stay at the Buddhist temple called *kyang*, as per rule his family members offer '*Syong*' or meal for the Buddhist monks living in the temple everyday or they give lump-sum money to the temple for his maintenance, in case, the family does not offer '*Syong*'. After the duration, the boy leaves '*Chibor*' (Saffron cloth worn by Buddhist monks), and comes back home. It is considered as virtuous deed in the Chakma tradition, through which a person gains religious merits. A girl or a woman is not seen performing such virtuous act. The tradition is silent on the issue.

To get remedy from fatal diseases of the son, sometimes parents promise *Chamoni*. After the recovery from illness, to fulfill promise the boy becomes *Chamoni* in the Buddhist temple where he leads life as a monk and spends a week there. Even many adults vow *Chamoni* to get rid of danger or misfortune. Those who prefer to lead a life of a Shraman or Buddhist monk, they could spend their whole life in the Buddhist Vihar. However, in case of girl child, we do not see this ritual of *Chamoni* at all, even at the time of their fatal diseases as we find in case of boys. One can perceive the different positions of man and women in this light.

Mangal Sutra or Pharek: Buddhist monks for the welfare of the family perform Mangal Sutra in the house. The house owner invites the Buddhist monk in the temple with flower. It is called '*phang gorana*'. The family arranges *puja* with fruits like coconut, banana etc. and money, candles on a *kulo* or winnowing platter. A branch of mango leaves is put in a jar filled with water, which is called '*ghoth*'. The '*ghoth*' is kept in the centre of the winnowing platter. Then an odd number (3,5,7) of white threads are encircled around the house and then the threads are tied up with the '*ghoth*'. Husband and wife sit with other family members. Neighbours and relatives also take part in the Mangal Sutra. Buddhist monks recite sutra (incantation). After the *puja*, religious discourses also take place. At the end of the *puja*, Buddhist monk flush water on every one present in the *puja* with the branch of mango leaves and recites '*sadhu*', '*sadhu*', '*sadhu*'. Then the monk ties the threads to the husband first and then the wife and other family members. Though males and females equally participate, males are made to sit at the front row and women in behind. The threads are tied up in the right wrist in case of male and the left wrist in case of female which shows inequality between men and women though male and female child both are welcomed in the family/ Sometimes family arranges '*syong*' (meal of the Buddhist monk) at home in the morning. After having meal (before 12 pm) monks start Mangal Sutra. Mangal Sutra could be performed in the evening also. All the things kept on the winnowing platter are given to the monks who perform Mangal Sutra. After the *puja* a person carries these things to the temple.

Chumulang: *Chumulang* is very important for a married couple without which marriage is considered incomplete in the Chakma society. In earlier days, people used to perform *Chumulang* after 2, 3 years just for the sake of family's welfare or to get rid of danger. The ritual is performed by

the male *ojha* through animal sacrifice. At least three hens and a pig is required to be sacrificed in the *puja*. Female *ojhas* have not been found performing *Chumulang*.

Kathin Chibar Dan: This religious ceremony is held in the last week of October or in the first week of November in the Buddhist temple. During rainy season, Buddhist monks observe a period of three months as seclusion. After getting over the period of three months, **Kathin Chibar Dan** ceremony is held where many Buddhist monks and large number of people take part irrespective of their class i.e. rich and poor. Women weave cloths in indigenous handloom one day before the ceremony. According to the tradition, the process of cotton in spinning wheel, dyeing weaving etc. has to be completed overnight in order to give offerings to the Buddhist monks.

According to the Buddhist literature, the origin of **Kathin Chibar Dan** ceremony can be traced from the time of Gautama Buddha (563 B.C. to 483 B.C.). During His (Buddha) stay at Shravasti, a group of 30 (thirty) monks came to visit the Buddha after the three months rainy season period. After continuous three months rainy season, i.e. the period of seclusion, their *Chibar* or cloths were almost worn out. One of the maidservants of Bishakha, the main woman worshiper, informed the matter to her. According to Buddha's advice, Bishakha arranged to make many *Chibar* and next day before sunrise, she offered *Chibar* to the monks (Dewan, 1969). It seems the ragged cloths of the monks forced Bishakha to make *Chibar* for them in haste. From the time onwards, it has become a tradition to weave cloths for monks by women within 24 hours, before the day of **Kathin Chibar Dan**. Among other virtuous acts, offering *Chibar* to the Buddhist monks is considered the great virtuous act to get religious merits. Male and female worshipers in large number offer *Syong* to the monks and shramans in this ceremony.

This religious ceremony is one of the most important religious ceremonies among the Chakmas as well as among the Buddhist people. Women irrespective of their class i.e. rich and poor including widows attend in large number. In fact, performing of this religious ceremony is not possible without the participation of the women folk among the Chakmas because weaving *Chibar* in the traditional hand loom is an essential part of this ceremony. Among the Chakmas, weaving is considered as women's work. Men are not engaged in it. According to the Chakma tradition, it is a bad omen if a man is weaving in the traditional hand loom. This entire ceremony emphasizes on women's active participation. In spite of this, women's participation or contribution is always taken as supplementary. Even the *Sadhumas* or Buddhist lay women usually old, widows, who wear white cloths work like other ordinary women in this ceremony. Being a *Sadhuma* her position though higher than any other ordinary woman, she is given lower position than a *sraman*.

Funeral: Usually, Chakmas burn the dead body. According to the tradition, Chakmas burn the dead body in the afternoon. In case of newly born baby's death or if an adult dies because of contagious disease, the dead body is buried. According to the Chakma tradition, a dead body is not burnt or buried on Wednesday. When a person dies, a fire of husk in a bowl is kept at the main door of every house in the village so that evil spirit can be banned from entering the house. The family abstains from cooking till the body is cremated. From the obsequies rite, seven days' period is considered impure and the family abstains from taking non-vegetarian food.

Gender discrimination is visible in the death rites of the Chakmas. Before cremation as per tradition the eldest son makes rounds around the funeral pyre. In case of man five rounds and in case of woman seven rounds are taken. Similarly, the pyre for deceased man is made with five wooden layer whereas, there are seven wooden layers in case of female. Male and female together attend funerals among the Chakmas, but a son, usually eldest son performs death rituals. The eldest son first put fire in the pyre, and then the other members of the family follow him. If a man is died with no sons, his brothers or male relatives perform the death rites. A daughter or the widow of the deceased do not perform death rites. The next day of cremation sons of the deceased's person shave their head. However, daughters are not found performing such rite. It is also a rule among the Chakmas that women can not go to leave bones and ashes in the river which usually held the next day of cremation.

Conclusion: Chakmas have been following these religious beliefs, rites and rituals for generations. Some of these unreasoning beliefs and superstitions following by them are something that questions on this issue are still taboo. This research has revealed that some traditional norms and values are attributed to women only and the religious rites, rituals etc. followed by the Chakmas indicates gender discrimination and women's position lower.

With the passage of time and with the spread of education several changes have been taken place in the society. These days the educated Chakmas do not follow irrational way of performing religious rites, rituals etc. *Chumulang puja* these days is performed only with flowers. Buddhist monks suggest performing *Chimulang* or any other *puja* without sacrificing animals, as Buddhism advocates not killing any living being.

References:

1. Aditya Kumar Dewan, Class and Ethnicity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (Ph.D. Thesis, Mc Gill University, Canada), 1991
2. Chakma, Sugato, *Bangladesher Upajati O Adibasider Samaj*, Sanskuti O Achar Byabohar, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, 2000
3. Debbarman, Suren, *Tripurar Adibasi Jiban O Sanskriti*, Agartala, Tripura, 1997
4. Dewan, Biraj Mohan, *Chakma Jatir Itibritto*, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, 1969
5. Dewan, Bankim Krishna, *Chakma Puja Purban*, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, 1989
6. Debbarman, Suren, *Tripurar Adibasi Jiban O Sanskriti*, Agartala, Tripura, 1997
7. Dr. Heinz Bachet, *Contemporary Buddhism in Bengal and Tripura*, Vol. IV, VII, No. 3,4, 1967
8. Ghosh, Satish Chandra, *Chakmajati*, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, 1909
9. Maitra, S. R., *Ethnographic Study of The Chakma in Tripura*, Anthropological Survey of India, Department of Culture, Kolkata. 2002
10. Riseley, R. H., *Tribes and Caste of Bengal*, Vol. I. Delhi, 1981
11. T.H. Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein*, Calcutta, 1869
