

Chakma Manuscripts, its Preservation and conservation: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The Chakmas have a huge and varied number of manuscripts reflecting religion, folk medicine, knowledge on human anatomy, socio-cultural life, etc. However, a large number of manuscripts were already lost and the rest available are mostly in a state of decay. The Chakma manuscripts are found only with individual possession. This indicates that till today no initiatives have undertaken to survey, collect, conserve and preserve in libraries, archives, etc. The paper tries to discuss the problems relating to rapid disappearance of Chakma manuscripts from the society and the need to preserve and conserve these manuscripts.

Introduction:

The Chakmas: The North-East India and its adjacent areas may be identified as an anthropological museum where we find a large number of tribal groups, major and minor, dwelling in this large tract. The Chakmas are one of the Buddhist tribes residing mostly in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, in the states of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram in India and in the Arakan hills of Myanmar. They profess Buddhism and speak a dialect belonging to the Indo-Aryan family. However, their appearances resemble to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic stock of Mongolian race.¹ The history of the Chakmas called 'Bijag' and 'Radhamohn-Dhanpudi Palha' (Ballad) claimed that they are the descendants of the Sakya race of Kshatriya family.

The total population of chakma in the world is estimated to be around 5,50,000, majority of chakmas around 2,39,417² resides in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, around 15,000 in Assam, 64, 293³ in Tripura, 71,283⁴ in Mizoram, 1,00,000⁵ in Arunachal Pradesh, and 20,000⁶ in Arakan in Burma.

The etymological term manuscript means something that is hand written on physical materials such as leaf, paper, cloth or wood⁷. The term manuscript derived from Latin word *manu scriptus* meaning written by hand, *manu* is 'hand' and *scriptus* is 'to write'. Manuscripts are considered as the literary and cultural tradition of any nation. The Chakmas too have a huge and varied number of manuscripts reflecting religion, folk medicine, knowledge on human anatomy, socio-cultural life, etc. of the Chakmas. However, a large number of manuscripts were already lost and the rest available are

mostly in a state of decay. The Chakma manuscripts are found only with individual possession. This indicates that till today no initiatives have undertaken to survey, collect, conserve and preserve in libraries, archives, etc. The paper tries to discuss the problems relating to rapid disappearance of Chakma manuscripts from the society and the need to preserve and conserve these manuscripts.

There are abundant of manuscripts preserved and possessed by the Chakmas from generations to generation. This paper will try to highlights the different types of manuscripts available in the Chakma society at the present day, methods for preparation of indigenous writing materials and issues and challenges for preservation and conservation of Chakma manuscripts.

An informal survey and interview has been conducted by the author during 2010-2017 and found the following names of manuscripts under six categories⁸:

1. Religious Manuscripts:

- I. Agaratara: The *Agaratara* is the oldest holy scriptures of the Chakmas. There are 28 *Taras* and all these are collectively known as *Agaratara*. Each *Tara* has been recited by the *Raulis* or *Loris* (Mahayanai Buddhist Monk) in a particular religious and customary rite of the Chakmas. The names of 28 *Taras* are- 1) *Malemtara*, 2) *Sadengiritara*, 3) *Anijatara*, 4) *Sigal Mangaltara*, 5) *Sarga Arohantara*, 6) *Sadha Paramitara*, 7) *Barakuruktara*, 8) *Sadakuruktara*, 9) *Fuduratara*, 10) *Arentamatara*, 11) *Suvadijatara*, 12) *Fudumfulutara*, 13) *Porangfulutara*, 14) *Serakfulutara*, 15) *Rakhimfulutara*, 16) *Samifulutara*, 17) *Sahasfulutara*, 18) *Parifulutara*, 19) *Patumfulutara*, 20) *Arinamatara*, 21) *Buddhahfulutara*, 22) *Fudumfulutara*, 23) *Tamma Panyatara*, 24) *Jiyandarantara*, 25) *Triputtara*, 26) *Aditnamatara*, 27) *Dadasyatara* and 28) *Dasaparamitara*.

Some writers tried to interpret the term *Agartara* and its language, according to Heinz Bechert, *Tara* means 'Dharma' or religion⁹. *Agartara* means ancient religion¹⁰. According to Bankim Chandra Chakma *Agar* means old or ancient and *Tara* means religious scriptures which means ancient religious scriptures¹¹. While according to others, *Agar* stands for house or family and *Tara* stands for religion meaning family or household religion.

It is very difficult to trace out the exact period of writing of this *Agartara* as there is no written records of date and time of writing. However, the existence of *Agartara* can be traced back prior to the period of Bijoygiri Raja, a Chakma King as there goes a saying :

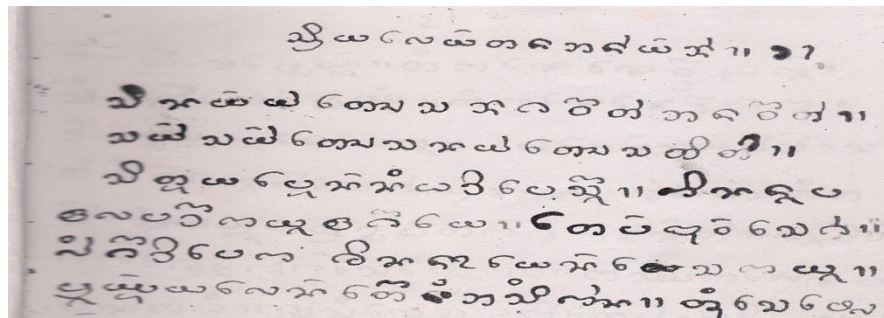
*"Bijoy Giri somareanya Tara Aghare,
Mani labangeyeneh, cholibangsagalesu-dine".*

The above saying implies that Bijoy Giri, a Chakma king, brought *Agartara* during his expedition to Arakan Kingdom. The period of Bijoygiri shall be discussed later.

It is said that the *Agartara* was originally written on palm leaves and later transferred to paper. Heinz Bechert tried to interpret these manuscripts/ languages as, "these texts consists of two main elements: excerpt of pali passage which undergone extremely distorted and long passage in an unknown language which shows similarities to Burmese language¹². According to Biraj Mohan Chakma 'many of the

Taras are nothing but *Pali Suttas* only¹³. Similar view also expressed by Bankim Chandra Chakma and Bankin Krishna Dewan who further added that the *Agartara* was copied down from *Tripitaka*¹⁴. While according to others, it is the original Chakma language.

Here is an excerpt from one of the *Tara* called *Malemtara*:

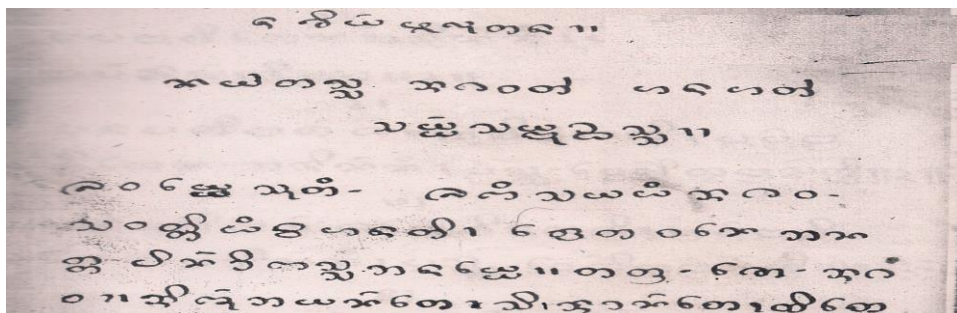


Sri MalemtaraArombha

*Si Nammo Teisa BhagawatoArawato,
SammoSammo Teisa Nammo Teisa Ti Ti.
Si TahmaPeinnangyaDipesu, Kinarapa
Jalapadha Kama Jagame, Tepbuosego.
Longha DipekaKinaryaMensekama,
Prammh Malen TerangAsingkona.*

The first two lines is the Buddha Bandana (Prayer). The last four lines which roughly can be understood, that Malen (Mohendra) visited Tamra Dipa (Srilanka) through Jalapadha (sea). The same *Tara* has been published in a form of book translated by Angu Fulchand Chakma and edited by Indralal Chakma. The above excerpt according to them, 'Lord Buddha was born in this world from heaven who emancipated the people from illness and suffering during the Koli Era'¹⁵. Here the writer totally failed to understand the language of *Agartara* (*Malemtara*) and translated probably according to his own understanding.

Here is another excerpt from *Rakimfulutara*¹⁶:



Rakimfulutara

NamotassaBhagawatoArahato

Samma Sambuddhassa.

EbammeSutangEkang Samaya Bhagawa

SawattiyaBiharatiJetawane Anatta

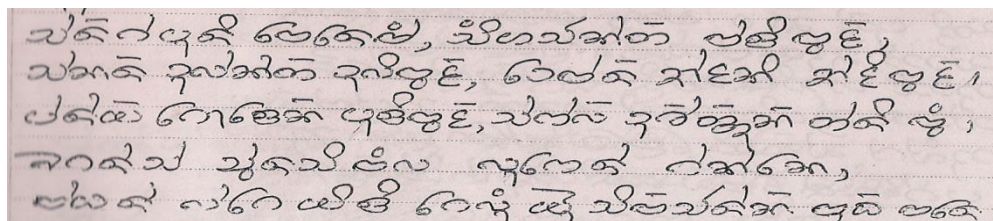
Pindikassa Arame Tatra Ke Bhagawa

BhikkuAmantesiBadanteThite.

Similarly, here the first two lines is the Buddha Bandana (Prayer). The last four lines which runs '*I heard once upon a time while the Buddha dwelling in the temple of Jeta forest grooves constructed by Anata Pindikka, invited all the monks*'. This Tara is nothing but the Pali Dasadhamma Sutta.

Thus, from the above excerpts, it can rightly be understood that the language of *Agartara* is neither Burmese nor original Chakma language but Pali language only. However, due to copying from one person to another, the language has become more distorted and as a result at present it is difficult to conclude the authenticity of it.

- II. Gojenalama: Another popular literature among the Chakmas is the *Gojenalama* written in Chakma scripts and dialect by Shiv Charan, an ascetic. Here *Gojen* literary means creator or god and though the exact meaning of the term *Lama* is not known yet it may be the part of the prayer (Bandana). Here, Shiv Charan prayed to various gods and goddesses, Saraswati, Chandra, Surjyo, tin Dev-Barma, Bishnu, Shiv; Saints, Guru (teacher), Mata-Pita (parents), etc for wealth, beauty, son-daughter, money, chastity, education, abstinence from sin, power to conquer against enemy and all sorts of well being. The *Gojenalama* consisted of seven parts. It was written in 1184 B.E or 1777 A.D as it appeared in the main text. However, Tripur Chandra Sen assigned it as the Maghi Era (Burmese Era) because during this period Maghi Era was prevalent in the Chittagong region.¹⁷ Here is an extract from the last part of the *Gojenalama*¹⁸:



SargapuriBerebongSinghasanatBajibong

Sonar DulanatDulibong Devar BhanganiBhangibong

Param Gojen Pujibong Sakal DugottunToribong

EgarasoSurasi Bangla LukeroGanane

Boyara Loge Miji Gelung Mui Sib Charan Bhudbare.

- III. Other Religious Manuscripts: There are other literatures written by Shiv Charan like '*Jug Sadhan O Pogiri Alam Ved*' and '*Gyanamala*'. *Jug Sadhan O Pogiri Alam Ved* deals with the important of the application of 36 Chakma scripts

(SaitrisaOkkar). The 'Gyanamala' and 'BudhhaSudong' deals with the religious discourse. These literatures are full of idioms and phrases composed with Chakma mixed with Bengali language and hence it is difficult to understand its exact meaning by anyone.

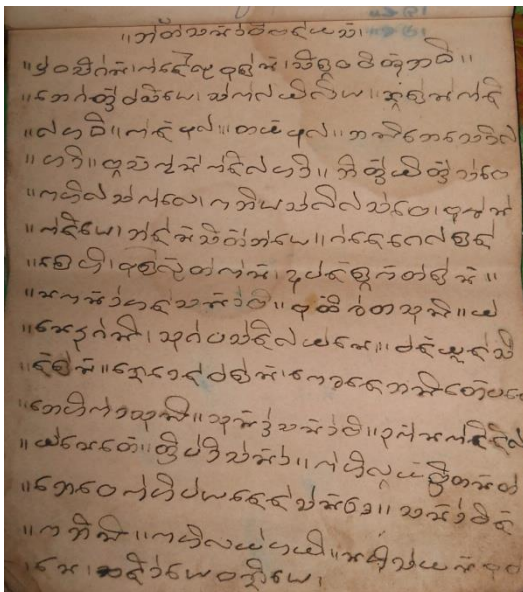
2. **Baromash:** The term '*Baromash*' is a Chakma word- *Baro* means twelve and *Mash* means months which means twelve months. Each *Baromash* narrates the round the year love story of a particular beautiful Chakma woman. Further, the *Baromash* also throws flood light on the socio-cultural life of the Chakmas during that periods.

Some of the *Baromash* are:

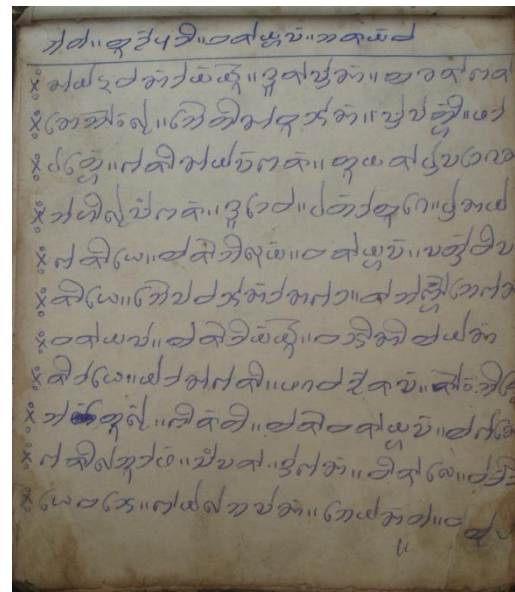
1) *ChandobiBaromash*, 2) *ChitrarekaBaromash*, 3) *ChintadeviBaromash*, 4) *Ma-Baba Baromash*, 5) *KirbiabiBaromash*, 6) *KalabiBaromash*, 7) *Rati baromash*, 8) *RatanmalaBaromash*, 9) *Lal Baromash*, 10) *BanjanbalaBaromash*, 11) *MayabiBaromash*, 12) *KinabiBaromash*, 13) *JuddhapudiBaromash*, etc.

All the *Baromash* were written in Chakma scripts in Bengali language mixed with Chakma. The period of composition of all these *Baromash* is not known. However, the *ChitrarekaBaromash* was composed in 1903 AD (1310 BE) and the *ChandobiBaromash* also composed during this period¹⁹. Therefore, it is possible that the *Baromash* tradition might be prevalent during 16th to 20th century AD. Besides, the language used in the composition of the *Baromash* also testifies the same because during this period the influence of Bengali was felt enormously upon the Chakmas. Here are two excerpts from *ChandobiBaromash* and *JuddhapudiBaromash*:

*Chandobi Baromash*²⁰



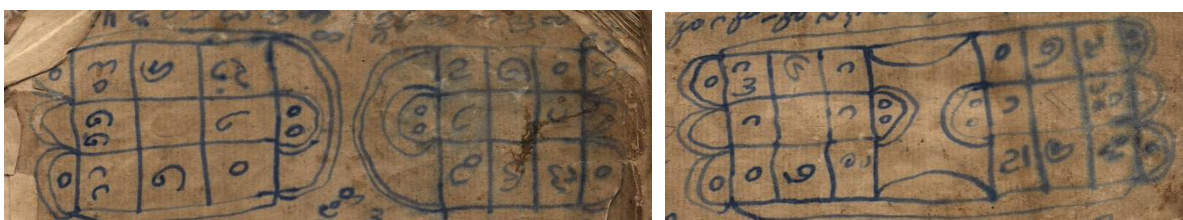
*JuddhapudiBaromash*²¹



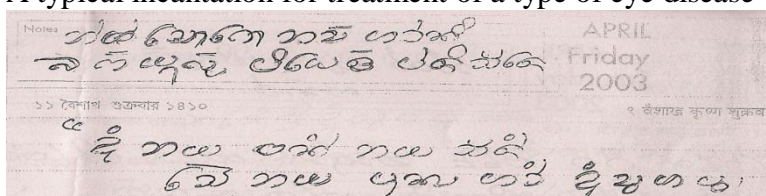
3. **Medicinal Manuscripts:** *Vaidyo* literary means physician and *Pudhi* means manuscripts. It is the physician's books dealing with medicines and its application, methods of treatment, history of different deities and their methods of worship, physical science, magical formula and incantations, history of diseases and their symptoms, etc. The medicinal manuscripts broadly categorized into five groups: 1)

Talik (Medicinal formulae), 2) *Mantra* (Incantation), 3) *Ang* (Magical formulae), 4) *Hidep* (History of deities, methods and materials of different rituals) and 5) *Kalpa/Tapta* (Human anatomy). The manuscripts of *Kalpa/Tapta* consist of four categories: i) *Manab Kalpa/Tapta* (deals with human physical anatomy), ii) *Nari Kalpa/Tapta* (deals with nerves and veins), iii) *Deha Kalpa/Tapta* (deals with important parts in a human body) and iv) *Bayu Kalpa/Tapta* (deals with air circulation in human body)²². The Chakmas have been practicing this *Biadyoali* since long time and its still in existence. However, in modern days, this tradition lost its importance to some extend due to advancement of modern medical treatment. It is said that these *Pudhis* initially written on palm leaves and animal skins in Chakma language and scripts but later copied on paper.

A typical magical formula²³



A typical incantation for treatment of a type of eye disease²⁴:

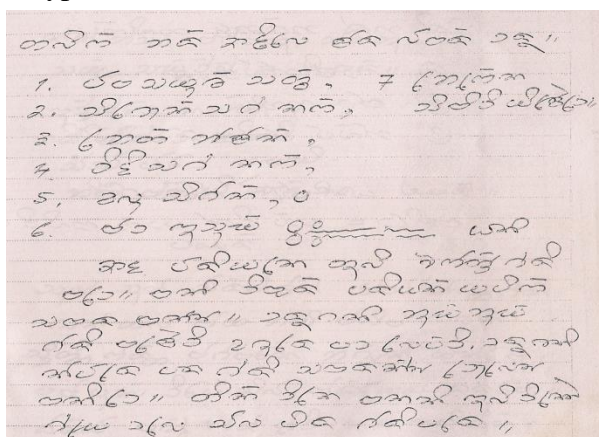


Ata Chogo Ash Hajoni

Ek MhuPiyejporijare

“Ung Ama Banang Ama Jarang Sei Ama PunnoiHadang Ung Sua Po”

A typical medicinal formula for treatment of broken bones:



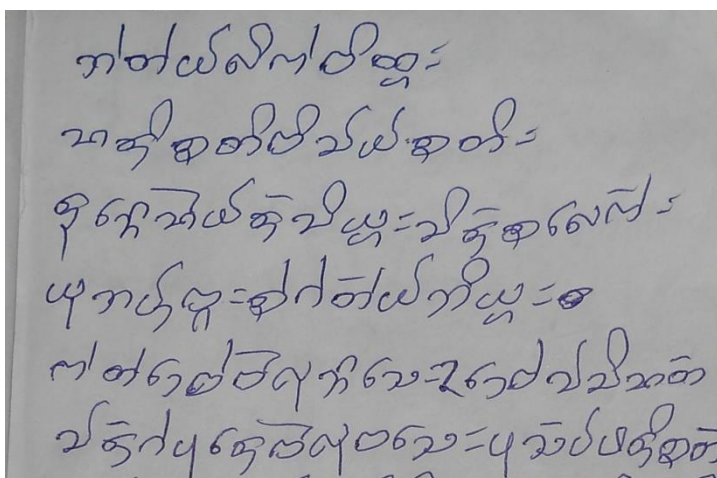
Talik: Medicines to Join a Broken Bone

1. PubaSamuk Atto
2. Sigon Saga Nak
3. Et Ojon
4. Dingi Saga Nak
5. Ulu Sigon
6. Boda Kusum
7. Sibidi

All these medicines are grinded together and fastened with the help of leaves by warm steam vapours in the affected areas for three days.

- 4. Kobiday (Poems):** There are numerous poems composed by Chakma poets. However, the composition of poems started amongst the Chakmas only from the 20th century as is evident from the available manuscripts. The *Muli Kobida* and *Alsi Kobida* were composed during the period by Dharma Dhan Pandit and Firingchand Chakma. Both the poems have an admixture of Chakma and Bengali languages.

Excerpt of Muli Kobida



Ata MuliKobita

Narijatibisamajati

Rube nai mor sima sirjalekka

Mua prabujagatamuhima

Kata deva balabase deva sachinta

Swargapurebala base pusparijata

English Translation:

“Women are such community

Whose beauty is boundless

Which is Almighty’s trick

Even the spirits love them

Like the pusparajita (a flower in heaven)”.

- 5. Sodija:**1) Koli Sodija, 2) Srimati Sodija, 3) Anji sodija.

- 6. Other Manuscripts:** Apart from these, there are abundant of other manuscripts prevalent among the Chakmas. They are 1) Koli Sodija, 2) Srimati Sodija, 3) Sudannya Tap, 4) Radhika Mangal, 5) Gurakka Bijoy, 6) Anji sodija, 7) Bidya Sundar, 8) ChogiSambad, 9) Panjali, 10)Sivalam, etc.

Indigenous Method used for writing:

The Chakmas produce manuscripts by using different methods for preparation of physical materials (leaves, plant fibres, surfaces of bamboo, handmade papers), pen and ink. Before availability of handmade paper, they used indigenous materials and methods.

1. Preparation of Physical materials: The Chakmas used traditional methods in preparation of physical materials for writing such as *talpada* (palm leaves), *bajo shani* (bamboo tissue) and *sumo* (surface of bamboo)²⁵:
 - a) Palm leaves: The Chakma used palm leaves for producing manuscripts. It is said that the *Agartara*²⁶ was originally wrote on palm leaves and later on paper. The *Agartara* preserving by Kudra Nri-Ghosthir Cultural Institute, Rangamati, Bangladesh well testifies the same.
 - b) Bamboo Tissue: The Chakmas made paper from bamboos. Usually, the innermost soft tissue is extracted from a young bamboo and dried²⁷.
 - c) Bamboo surface: The surface of a bamboo tube was also used for writing.
 - d) Handmade Paper: With the advent of *otyalikagos* (handmade paper) and their availability in the market, the Chakmas abandoned the traditional method for making physical materials for writing.
2. Preparation of pen: The Chakmas traditionally made pens with feathers of cock and duck. They also made pens with bamboo splits²⁸.
3. Preparation of Ink: The Chakmas knew the art of making indigenous ink of different colours. The black ink is produced with *sakhali* (carbon generated by kerosene lamp), the red ink with the juice of *pujokbiji* (seeds of *basillasubra*), the yellow ink with the juice of *holod* (turmeric) and the green ink with the juice of *sumi pada* (bean leaves). The juices are mixed with mustard oil²⁹.

Causes for disappearance of Chakma Manuscripts:

The Chakma manuscripts are rapidly declining. There are many causes responsible for the rapid disappearance of Chakma manuscripts. They are:

1. Change of Religious Sect: Before 1856, the Chakmas were the followers of Tantric Buddhism and its priests were known as *Loris* who lived in village monastery³⁰. The *Loris* possessed not only the religious manuscripts but also other manuscripts. After the death of a *Baidya* (traditional physician), all his manuscripts were donated to the village monastery in some cases³¹. Thus, the *Loris* and the village monastery were the custodians of all sorts of manuscripts. However, after 1856, the Chakmas embraced Theravada Buddhism and as a result, the *Loris* gradually waned off from the society. With the disappearance of *Loris* and its monastery, huge numbers of manuscripts were also lost.
2. Advancement of Modern Medical Facility and the Losing of Importance of Baidya: The *Baidyas* (traditional physician) are the real custodians of all sorts of manuscripts. Apart from prescribing medicines, they taught their students the scripts along with traditional medical practices. However, due to advancement and availability of modern medical facility, the *Baidyas* and its practices losing its importance and rapidly falling. Consequently, the manuscripts are also rapidly disappearing from the Chakma society.

3. Destruction of Manuscripts: It is believed that the *Baidyas* certainly have some manuscripts on black magic and witchcraft. Therefore, after his death, some manuscripts are either thrown into the river or burnt to ashes so that the black magic does not pass to the untrained people. According to Megulo Mohan Chakma, "I myself had thrown a manuscript in the river"³². In this way, a huge number of manuscripts were lost.
4. Carelessness and no knowledge on Scientific method of preservation: Still a huge number of manuscripts are available among the Chakmas. These manuscripts were either copied or inherited by the students from their teachers or both. These manuscripts are in the possession of individuals who do not have any knowledge on preservation and conservation scientifically. During an informal pre-survey conducted by the author in some villages, it was found that almost all the manuscripts are in bad shape and decaying condition. Surprisingly, a medicinal manuscript has been found covered with red cloth. According to Megulo Mohan Chakma, the owner of the manuscript, "all the manuscripts were decayed due to insects but this one is still in good condition and I do not know the reason"³³. It was also found that some manuscripts were covered with animal skin such as goat, deer and snake. This indicates that previously the Chakmas knew the traditional method of preservation but now a days, nobody knows.

Future Issues and Challenges:

It was already mentioned that the Chakma manuscripts are in the possession of individuals who do not have any idea on preservation and conservation. A huge number of manuscripts were already lost and whatever remained are mostly in the state of decay and brittle. They are required to be surveyed, documented, collected and preserved scientifically. In order to save the Chakma manuscripts, the following points need to be addressed:

1. Survey and Identification of Manuscripts: A proper survey and identification of Chakma manuscripts is ardently necessitated in order to locate and identify the types of manuscripts available. This includes exploration of the manuscripts available in personal possession.
2. Creating Public Awareness: A very small section of people known as *Baidyas* having the manuscripts. The majority people are unaware and even do not know the importance of these manuscripts and as a result paid interest in it. Further, the individual repositories lack the technical knowledge to handle and preserve the manuscripts. Therefore, creating public awareness through meeting, seminars, workshops, etc. will help to save the Chakma manuscripts from rapid disappearance.
3. Opening a Preservation and Conservation Centre: Opening a manuscript preservation and conservation centre whether in libraries or museum or other institutions is the need of the hour. The centre shall collect and preserve the important manuscripts available in the society. The centre shall function like the other institutions where manuscripts are preserved. Besides, the in-house staff of the centre and the individual repositories shall be given extensive training on

survey, documentation, preservation and conservation including digitization of the manuscripts.

Conclusion: It is true that the Chakma have a very rich literature of both written and oral. These literatures throw flood lights on political, socio-cultural, economic and religious life of the Chakmas in the past. Chakma scripts have been used in the composition of these literatures and in different languages viz. Pali, Chakma and Bengali. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of a particular topic appears in different manuscripts, one can notice the differences in writings like lost or addition of words and sentence and even the language. It may be due to copying from one person to another person has lost its originality to great extent. The impact of modernization upon the Chakma is enormous at present and as a result, all these manuscripts are gradually losing its importance and it is to note that they may no longer be available if initiatives are not taken for its collection, preservation and dissemination as early as possible by the authority. Further, these manuscripts are available at the possession of the individuals in a very pathetic condition. These individuals do not have any knowledge for its preservation and conservation. This resulted rapid disappearing of the Chakma manuscripts from the society. A large numbers of manuscripts were already lost due to many factors stated above. However, if no proper and adequate initiatives are not undertaken for preservation and conservation, the Chakma manuscripts will be no more within a short span of time.

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¹⁷ Tripur Chandra Sen, *Gijenalama*, Sen Printing Works, Agartala, 1366 B.E, p-6.

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²⁰*ChandobiBaromash*, nd.

²¹*JuddhapudiBaromash*, nd.

²²Interview with Durno Muni Baidya, 86 years, Kamalanagar on 28/01/2015.

²³Manuscripts on Magical formulae, nd.

²⁴Manuscripts on Medicine, nd.

²⁵ Interview with Durno Muni Chakma, a *Baidya*, 86 years, Kamalanagar on 28-01-2016.

²⁶*Agartara* is the oldest Buddhist scripture of the Chakmas written in Chakma script in distorted from of *Pali*. The custodian of this *Agartara* was the Lori (Mahayani Tantric Buddhist priest) who recites the *Taras* in religious and customary rites of the Chakmas.

²⁷ Interview with Durno Muni Chakma, a *Baidya*, 86 years, Kamalanagar on 28-01-2016.

²⁸ Interview with Durno Muni Chakma, a *Baidya*, 86 years, Kamalanagar on 28-01-2016.

²⁹ Interview with Gurka Dhan Chakma, 67 years, Kamalanagar on 27-01-2016.

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³¹ Interview with Durno Muni Chakma, a *Baidya*, 86 years, Kamalanagar on 28-01-2016.

³² Interview with Megulo Mohan Chakma, a *Baidya*, 73 years, Kamalanagar on 01-02-2016.

³³ Interview with Megulo Mohan Chakma, a *Baidya*, 73 years, Kamalanagar on 01-02-2016.

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