



Ian Taylor



Location: With a population of 29,000 people, the Chakma inhabit three districts in northern Rakhine State in southwest Myanmar. The main concentration is found throughout Kyauktaw Township in the Mrauk-U District, with others living near the state capital Sittwe, and in Maungdaw District on the Bangladesh border. A few Chakma villages are also located in Chin State's Paletwa Township. Most Chakma people are found in neighboring countries, with nearly half a million in the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh,¹ and a quarter of a million scattered throughout northeast India.

Identity: The Chakma, who were traditionally known as the Sak or Daingnet in Myanmar, have always been on the list of 135 national ethnic groups that the British compiled. The term Daingnet was originally applied to them by the Rakhine and means “shield warriors,” stemming from their historical role as armored soldiers in the service of the Rakhine kings. The 1901 census of Burma returned 3,412 Daingnet (Chakma) people, which increased to 6,355 in 1931. There is confusion about how to classify the Chakma today due to the various ethnic names among them. One source noted that although their “appearance is indistinguishable from the Rakhine, the Daingnet people have a distinct language and culture.... Ethnically, they are closely related to the Chakma people of Bangladesh and India.”² Furthermore, the

Tanchangya tribe of Bangladesh is ethnically and linguistically related to the Chakma.³

Language: The Chakma language, which is part of the Bengali-Assamese branch of the Indo-European linguistic family, enjoys vigorous use among the Chakma in Myanmar. Their vernacular is understood by their cousins across the border in Bangladesh, but the Chakma in India have more difficulty understanding the variety of Chakma spoken in Myanmar and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh and India the Chakma have their own script, but it is not used in Myanmar.

History: Some Chakma say they have been in Myanmar 500 to 600 years after fleeing war in the region that is now Bangladesh, while others say they have been in Myanmar much longer and were the first ethnic group to settle in northern Rakhine State. In Bangladesh, where most Chakma people live, they have waged a guerilla war against the government since the 1960s, after the construction of the Kaptai Dam caused 18,000 Chakma people to lose their land and homes. A subsequent influx of Bengali settlers exacerbated the problem, as they seized land and tried to forcibly convert the Chakma to Islam, while the government stood idly by. In 1987, Amnesty International reported “arbitrary arrests, torture and unlawful killings” of Chakma people by Bangladesh security forces.⁴

Customs: Chakma culture has been tightly intertwined with their blended faith in Buddhism and animism, with each village believed to have a guardian *nat* (spirit) which must be placated. Most Chakma people lead simple lives engaged in growing crops and fishing. Chakma women are skilled at weaving bamboo baskets, and they prefer to wear “hand woven jackets and their *longyis* have horizontal stripes. They also wear amber and coral necklaces.”⁴

Religion: Buddhism flourished in parts of Bangladesh and southwest Myanmar from the 5th to the 12th centuries. The forefathers of the Chakma converted to Buddhism, and it has remained entrenched as part of their identity since. The strength of Buddhism among the Chakma was seen in the 1931 census of Burma, in which 6,354 Chakma people identified as Buddhists, one person said he was an animist, and there was not a single Christian among their population.

Christianity: Although the Chakma New Testament was published in 1926, almost a century passed until the full Bible was finally printed in 2021, although the Chakma in Myanmar are not able to read the script. In India and Bangladesh thousands of Chakma people now identify as Christians, but in Myanmar they remain a staunchly Buddhist group that has been left largely untouched by the Gospel. There are no known Christians among them.



Population
in Myanmar:
29,000 (2024)

Location:
Rakhine State, Chin State

Language Family:
Indo-European

Main Religion:
Buddhism (100.0%)

Christians:
None known (0.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
29,000 in Myanmar
(2024 Joshua Project)

Other Countries:
383,299 in Bangladesh
(2022 census)
236,000 in India

Other Names: Chakama, Changhma, Chawngma, Daignet, Dainet, Daingnet, Doingnak, Sak, Sakma, Sangma, Takam, Thaikham, Thet, Thetkama, Tsak

Location: Rakhine State: Kyauktaw Township in Mrauk-U District; Ponnagyun Township in Sittwe District; Maungdaw Township in Maungdaw District; Chin State: Paletwa Township in Paletwa District

Language: Chakma [ccp]

Dialects: 3

Scripture: Bible 2021
New Testament 1926
Portions 1924

Jesus film: Chakma

Global Recordings:
Chakma #4672

People ID: 11293

