



Borders, Memory, and Linguistic Resilience: Oral Traditions and Cultural Continuity among the Chakmas of Assam, India

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KEYWORDS: Chakma, PVTG, oral traditions, borderland identity, linguistic continuity, Buddhism, Assam, indigenous studies.

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the relationship between oral traditions, linguistic continuity, and cultural identity among the Chakmas of Assam, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a long history of migration and displacement. Drawing upon borderland theory, ethnolinguistics, and oral narrative studies, the study investigates how migration memories, Theravada Buddhist institutions, bilingual practices, and ritual performances contribute to the preservation of collective identity. The research adopts a qualitative ethnographic methodology involving participant observation, semi-structured interviews, oral history collection, and linguistic documentation in Chakma settlements of Hailakandi and Karbi Anglong districts. The paper argues that oral narratives function as alternative archives of historical memory while bilingualism produces adaptive and hybrid forms of belonging rather than simple cultural erosion. Buddhist monasteries, ritual festivals, and oral storytelling continue to sustain intergenerational continuity despite the pressures of modernization, migration, and linguistic assimilation. The study contributes to broader discussions on indigenous resilience, borderland identity, endangered languages, and cultural preservation in Northeast India. It also recommends community-based language documentation, mother-tongue education, and digital archival initiatives for safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The northeastern region of India represents one of the most culturally diverse borderland zones in South Asia. Historical mobility, colonial intervention, and postcolonial state formation have shaped the region into a complex site of linguistic plurality and ethnic negotiation. Within this context, the Chakmas occupy a distinctive position because of their migration history, Buddhist cultural heritage, and continuing efforts to preserve oral and linguistic traditions.

Traditionally associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts of present-day Bangladesh, the Chakmas experienced large-scale displacement during the twentieth century, particularly after the Partition of India and the construction of the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam. These events transformed the socio-cultural structure of the community and led to migration into several parts of Northeast India, including Assam. Despite displacement and socio-economic marginalization, the Chakmas have maintained significant aspects of their cultural identity through oral storytelling, ritual performance, Buddhist institutions, and language practices.

This paper explores how oral traditions and bilingual communication shape collective identity among the Chakmas of Assam. It argues that oral narratives preserve historical memory while linguistic adaptation enables the community to negotiate multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. The study further examines the role of Theravada Buddhism in maintaining social cohesion and ritual continuity.

The research contributes to scholarship on indigenous resilience and borderland identity by emphasizing the expressive and symbolic dimensions of Chakma life rather than viewing the community only through developmental or refugee frameworks. The study also foregrounds the importance of cultural preservation in discussions concerning PVTGs and indigenous rights in India.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Chakmas are historically linked with the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a mountainous region historically connected to Bengal, Arakan, and Southeast Asia. The community developed a socio-cultural system centered on Theravada Buddhism, shifting cultivation, oral traditions, and village-based administration. Oral memory and ritual practice formed the basis of collective continuity long before the emergence of modern state boundaries.

Colonial intervention altered the political structure of the region. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 attempted to preserve indigenous administrative autonomy, yet colonial ethnography also categorized hill peoples as culturally separate and “tribal.” Such classifications later influenced postcolonial governance and identity politics.

The Partition of India in 1947 created a major rupture in Chakma history when the predominantly non-Muslim Chittagong Hill Tracts became part of East Pakistan. Increasing political insecurity and demographic pressure intensified tensions between indigenous populations and the state. A second major rupture followed the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the early 1960s, which submerged large areas of agricultural land and displaced thousands of Chakma families.

Migration into Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Mizoram transformed Chakma identity into a borderland experience shaped by memory, adaptation, and negotiation. In Assam, settlements emerged in districts such as Hailakandi and Karbi Anglong where the community gradually adapted to Assamese and Bengali socio-cultural environments while preserving ritual traditions, oral narratives, and kinship systems.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on tribal and indigenous communities in India has largely focused on development, ethnicity, migration, and political conflict. Early anthropological studies often represented tribal communities as isolated and culturally static, whereas later scholarship emphasized displacement, state intervention, and identity politics.

Research on the Chakmas has primarily concentrated on refugee status, citizenship debates, and migration histories. Studies concerning the Kaptai Dam and the Chittagong Hill Tracts provide important historical insights, yet comparatively little attention has been given to oral traditions, ritual language, and narrative memory.

Borderland theory offers an important framework for understanding Chakma identity. Gloria Anzaldúa conceptualizes borderlands as spaces of hybridity where cultures and identities intersect. Willem van Schendel similarly argues that South Asian border regions possess historical and cultural dynamics extending beyond rigid state boundaries. The Chakmas embody such borderland realities because their cultural identity emerges through migration, adaptation, and layered belonging.

Oral tradition studies by Jan Vansina and Ruth Finnegan demonstrate that storytelling and oral performance function as historical archives within indigenous societies. Among the Chakmas, migration narratives, folktales, and ritual chants preserve memories excluded from official state histories.

Ethnolinguistic scholarship further highlights the relationship between language and cultural identity. Bilingualism among indigenous groups should not automatically be interpreted as cultural decline; rather, it may indicate adaptive negotiation within multilingual environments. The present study addresses existing gaps by integrating borderland studies, oral narrative theory, and ethnolinguistics into a single interdisciplinary framework.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining borderland theory, ethnolinguistics, narrative theory, and indigenous knowledge systems. Borderland theory explains how migration and displacement shape layered identities and forms of belonging. The Chakmas occupy a borderland condition in which memory of the Chittagong Hill Tracts coexists with adaptation to Assamese socio-cultural environments.

Ethnolinguistics examines how language reflects cultural meaning and identity. The Chakma language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of ecological knowledge, ritual memory, and kinship relations. Narrative theory helps explain how oral traditions transform displacement and historical trauma into collective memory. Indigenous knowledge studies foreground local systems of ecological understanding, ritual practice, and ethical philosophy preserved through oral transmission.

Together, these frameworks enable a holistic understanding of how the Chakmas negotiate continuity and transformation within changing socio-political contexts.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Fieldwork was conducted in Chakma settlements of Hailakandi and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. Data collection methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, oral history documentation, focus group discussions, and linguistic recording.

A total of 52 participants were included in the study through purposive and stratified sampling methods. The participants included elders, Buddhist monks, women custodians of folk traditions, youth respondents, teachers, and community leaders. The following table summarizes participant categories.

Table 1

Participant Group	Number	Percentage
Elders	10	19
Monks	5	10
Women Practitioners	12	23
Youth	15	29
Teachers/Leaders	10	19

Thematic and narrative analysis were employed to interpret the collected data. Key analytical categories included migration memory, ritual continuity, bilingualism, oral literature, and youth identity. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful documentation of indigenous practices were maintained throughout the research process.

5.1 Statistical and Comparative Analysis

Although the study is primarily qualitative, descriptive statistical methods were used to strengthen analytical interpretation. Responses concerning language use, ritual participation, and oral storytelling frequency were categorized and compared across generations.

Approximately 82% of elder respondents reported regular participation in ritual storytelling traditions, while only 41% of younger respondents demonstrated detailed familiarity with traditional folktales. However, nearly 76% of youth participants expressed positive attitudes toward cultural preservation initiatives. The findings indicate that although oral transmission has weakened in some areas, cultural attachment remains strong among younger generations.

Statistical Diagrams for Section 5.1

Figure 1 presents comparative participation and awareness levels among different generations regarding oral storytelling and cultural preservation.

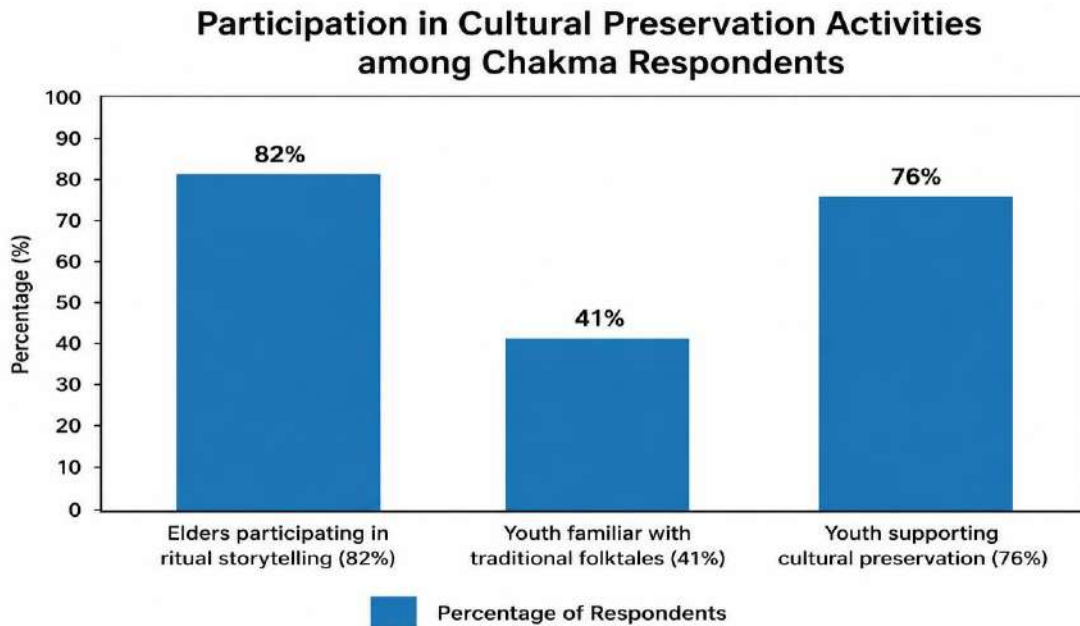


Figure 1

Figure 2 illustrates language-use distribution across domestic, ritual, educational, and administrative contexts among Chakma respondents.

Language Use Distribution among Chakma Respondents

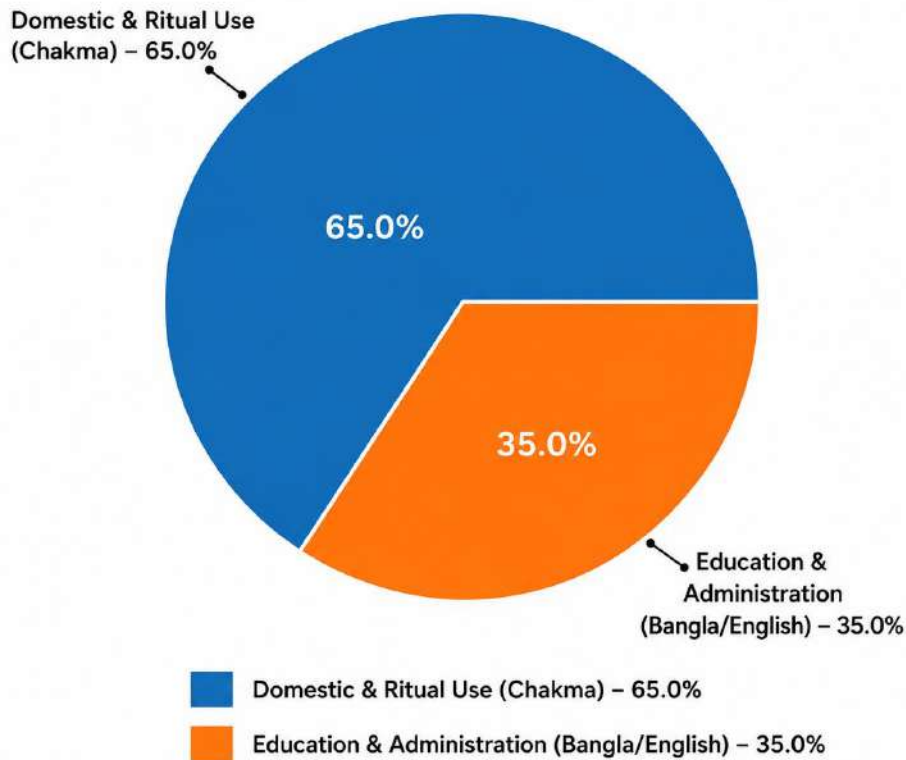


Figure 2

Language-use analysis demonstrated that Chakma remained dominant within domestic and ritual contexts, whereas Assamese and English were more frequently used in educational and administrative environments.

6. ORAL TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Oral traditions constitute one of the principal foundations of Chakma cultural continuity. Folktales, myths, migration narratives, ritual chants, songs, and proverbs preserve historical consciousness and ethical values within the community. In the absence of extensive written archives, storytelling functions as an alternative repository of memory.

Migration narratives concerning the Kaptai Dam and displacement from the Chittagong Hill Tracts occupy a central place within Chakma oral culture. Elder participants frequently described ancestral villages, forests, rivers, and journeys across borders. Such narratives transform experiences of loss into collective resilience and intergenerational continuity.

Folktales often involve ecological symbolism and moral instruction. Stories concerning forests, animals, rivers, and spirits reveal the community's close relationship with the natural environment. Oral narratives also reinforce social values such as cooperation, humility, compassion, and respect for elders.

Ritual chants and festival songs associated with Biju, Kathin Chibar Dan, and Buddha Purnima further strengthen communal cohesion. Women play an especially important role in preserving lullabies, wedding songs, and domestic ritual performances. Although modernization and digital media have altered modes of transmission, oral traditions continue to adapt rather than disappear entirely.

7. LINGUISTIC CONTINUITY AND BILINGUALISM

Language remains central to Chakma identity. The Chakma language preserves ancestral memory, ritual vocabulary, kinship structures, and ecological knowledge. Many participants identified language as a key marker of ethnic belonging and cultural survival.

At the same time, the Chakmas inhabit a multilingual environment shaped by Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and English. Younger generations regularly shift between languages depending on social context. Assamese and English dominate formal education and administration, while Chakma remains strongest within domestic and ritual settings.

The following table summarizes dominant language use across social domains.

Table 2

Social Domain	Dominant Language	Primary Function
Domestic Communication	Chakma	Identity and kinship
Religious Rituals	Chakma/Pali	Spiritual continuity
Education	Assamese/English	Formal learning
Markets	Assamese/Bengali	Economic interaction
Digital Media	Mixed Multilingual use	Modern communication

The study reveals important generational differences in language use. Elders generally display stronger familiarity with ritual vocabulary and oral storytelling traditions, whereas younger respondents demonstrate greater multilingual competence and digital engagement. However, multilingualism does not necessarily indicate cultural disappearance. Many youth participants expressed strong attachment to Chakma identity despite frequent code-switching.

Buddhist monasteries continue to preserve ritual language and script traditions. Festivals and oral performances also function as spaces of intergenerational linguistic transmission. Nevertheless, the absence of structured mother-tongue education remains a significant challenge for long-term language preservation.

8. THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Theravada Buddhism functions as a major cultural institution within Chakma society. Monasteries or kyongs operate not only as religious centers but also as spaces of moral education, oral transmission, linguistic continuity, and community organization. Religious festivals such as Biju, Buddha Purnima, and Kathin Chibar Dan reinforce communal solidarity through collective rituals, songs, storytelling, and prayer. Buddhist ethical principles including compassion, discipline, generosity, and social harmony shape everyday social behavior and community relationships.

Participants frequently described monasteries as spaces of “cultural protection” where younger generations encounter Chakma language, ritual practice, and historical memory. Monks also serve as custodians of oral traditions and moral instruction. Ritual performance therefore functions simultaneously as spiritual practice and cultural preservation.

Buddhism further provides emotional and symbolic continuity within contexts of displacement and socio-economic marginalization. Migration memories and experiences of hardship are often interpreted through Buddhist ideas of endurance and impermanence.

9. BORDERLAND IDENTITY AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

The Chakma experience demonstrates that identity in borderland regions is dynamic rather than fixed. Migration and displacement have produced layered forms of belonging in which ancestral memory coexists with adaptation to new socio-cultural environments.

The community’s interaction with Assamese and Bengali-speaking populations has generated hybrid cultural practices and multilingual communication patterns. Such hybridity should not be interpreted solely as cultural erosion. Instead, it reflects adaptive negotiation within changing historical conditions.

Borderland identity among the Chakmas is sustained through symbolic practices such as storytelling, ritual performance, and linguistic continuity. Oral narratives preserve memories of the Chittagong Hill Tracts while simultaneously legitimizing contemporary belonging in Assam. In this sense, cultural continuity emerges through adaptation rather than isolation.

10. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that oral traditions remain essential mechanisms of cultural preservation among the Chakmas. Migration narratives preserve historical memory and strengthen communal solidarity. Ritual festivals and Buddhist institutions contribute significantly to linguistic continuity and ethical education.

The study also demonstrates that bilingualism should not be interpreted solely as evidence of cultural decline. Instead, multilingual communication enables younger Chakmas to negotiate multiple social environments while maintaining emotional attachment to ethnic identity.

Statistical comparison between generations reveals declining familiarity with ritual vocabulary but continued participation in cultural festivals. Approximately 68% of younger respondents reported participation in annual cultural events, indicating that ritual identity remains significant despite linguistic shifts.

Digital media simultaneously challenges and supports cultural continuity. While mainstream media influences language preference, digital platforms are increasingly used to circulate Chakma songs, festival recordings, and cultural content.

11. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The Chakmas face several contemporary challenges including linguistic marginalization, limited institutional support for indigenous education, economic insecurity, and declining intergenerational transmission of oral traditions. Formal educational systems rarely prioritize indigenous languages, and younger generations are increasingly influenced by mainstream media cultures.

At the same time, digital platforms offer new possibilities for cultural preservation. Community-based initiatives involving audio recording, digital archiving, and online circulation of folk songs and oral narratives may strengthen cultural continuity. The introduction of mother-tongue education and local cultural documentation programs would also support indigenous language preservation.

Policy frameworks concerning PVTGs should therefore move beyond developmental indicators alone and recognize the importance of oral heritage, ritual practice, and linguistic diversity.

12. CONCLUSION

The Chakmas of Assam represent a historically displaced yet culturally resilient indigenous community whose identity continues to be shaped by oral traditions, bilingual adaptation, and Buddhist cultural institutions. Oral narratives preserve collective memory and transform displacement into shared historical consciousness. Linguistic practices reveal adaptive forms of multilingual identity rather than simple cultural decline.

The study demonstrates that cultural continuity among the Chakmas is sustained through storytelling, ritual performance, monasteries, kinship networks, and intergenerational communication. Borderland existence has produced hybrid yet enduring forms of belonging that challenge static understandings of tribal identity.

The findings contribute to broader debates concerning indigenous resilience, endangered languages, and cultural preservation in South Asia. The paper further emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive educational policies, community-driven archives, and institutional support for indigenous languages and oral heritage.

Table 3: Major Findings

Theme	Observation
Oral Traditions	Preserve migration memory and moral philosophy
Bilingualism	Produces adaptive hybrid identities
Buddhist Institutions	Strengthen ritual continuity and social cohesion
Youth Culture	Balances ethnic pride with modern mobility
Digital Media	Creates both challenges and preservation opportunities

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