

Ethno-Cultural Formation of Chittagong People

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Abstract Chittagong is an ancient city in the country of Bangladesh occupies a strategically significant position along the southeastern coast of Bengal. Owing to its geography, the region attracts waves of migration, trade, conquest and cultural exchange since olden times. Here I shall try to examine the anthropological origin of Chittagong people with a particular focus on identifying its indigenous inhabitants and tracing the process of ethnic mixing, cultural transformation and religious coexistence. Drawing on historical geography, classical sources, colonial ethnography and regional historiography, the study argues that the Kirata people were likely the earliest inhabitants of Chittagong prior to Aryanization and later Indo-Islamic influences. We identify Chittagong as a distinct anthropological region that was formed through pre-Aryan settlement, inter regional migration routes and sustained intercultural contact.

Keywords Chittagong, Kirata, Indigenous people, Migration, Bengal anthropology

1. Introduction

Chittagong emerged as a significant human settlement long before many region of the Bengal delta stabilized from marine and riverine transformations. Bordered by hills to the east, rivers to the north and west and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Chittagong developed as a naturally fortified and strategically valuable region. Its favorable geography made it a focal point for traders, pilgrims, ascetics, pirates and imperial powers across centuries. These historical processes produced a complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages and belief systems. This paper explores a key anthropological issue by examining the original inhabitants of Chittagong and the ways successive migrations shaped its present identity.

Historically Chittagong came under the influence or control of the Arakanese, Tripura kings, Portuguese, Burmese, Mughals and eventually the British. Despite frequent natural disasters and political upheavals, the region retained its importance as a port and cultural crossroads.

2. Historical Names and Geographical Identity

Chittagong has been known by numerous names across time, reflecting the perspectives of different linguistic and cultural groups. Greek geographer Ptolemy identified the region as *pentapolis* nearly two thousand years ago. In early Aryan sources, it appeared as part of *Sushma Desh*, while

Buddhist and Tantric texts referred to it as *Chattala* owing to the prevalence of Buddhist chaityas, the region also came to be known as *Chaitya-gram*.

The Chinese traveler Xuanzang, visiting in the seventh century CE, described the area as *Shri-Chattala*, Arab geographers referred to it as *Karnabul* and Ibn Battuta mentioned it as *Sadkawan* in his travel accounts. Portuguese traders later named the port *Porto Grande*, emphasizing its role as a major maritime hub. During the Sultanath period it was renamed *Fatehabad*, while the Mughals referred to it as *Islamabad*. Under British colonial administration, the name was anglicized as Chittagong. The shifting names reflect Chittagong's integration into global trade, religious networks and imperial system.

3. Indigenous Population and the Kirata Hypothesis

The identification of Chittagong's earliest inhabitants remains a subject of scholarly debate. Classical epics, such as, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* describe much of early Bengal as forested and sparsely populated. While ancient Janapadas, such as, Anga, Vanga, Pundra and Suhma are mentioned in literally and archeological sources [1]. Chittagong is often absent from these accounts. The British historian and Indologist Frederick Eden Pargiter argued that ancient Bengal considered largely of riverine islands accessible primarily by boats. He suggested that Chittagong was settled by some of the earliest human groups who arrived overland, predating organized Aryan expansion [2]. Greek historian Megasthenes referred to a powerful polity named *Gangaridai* near the Ganges delta, while Ptolemy's maps later confirmed the presence of *Pentapolis* south of this region.

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North of Chittagong lay the ancient Kirata kingdom, corresponding broadly to present-day Tripura. According to *Rajmala* of Tripura, the Kirata were an early indigenous group who were later displaced and pushed southward [3]. Many scholars argue that these Kirata populations migrated into the Chittagong region, where they established permanent settlements. On this basis, the Kiratas may be regarded as the earliest indigenous people of pre-Aryan Chittagong. Colonial ethnographer T. H. Lewin noted that the Kiratas differed significantly from other hill tribes of Burma and Arakan, particularly in the absence of Mongoloid or Tatar facial features [4]. Such observations support the view that Chittagong's indigenous population was distinct from later Tibeto-Burman group.

4. Aryanization and Cultural Transformation

Although direct Aryan settlement in Chittagong appears limited in the early period. Aryan cultural and linguistic influences gradually penetrated the region. Copper plate inscriptions from the ninth and thirteenth centuries reveal the growing presence of Sanskritized administration and religious institution. These inscriptions indicate the spread of Hindu and Buddhist traditions and the gradual process of Aryanization. Pargiter discussed as we see before, the ethnic history of eastern and Bengal while examining ancient traditions and patterns. In his interpretation of early Indian history, he suggested that eastern regions like Bengal-including the Chittagong area were not originally Aryan but gradually became Arynized through long historical process. He observed that region, such as, Anga, Vanga, Pundra and Suhma were not Aryan by origin but later became Arynized through sustained cultural interaction. Chittagong appears to have followed a similar trajectory, absorbing Aryan linguistic and religious elements while retaining distinctive local characteristics. He added, "The Angas, Vangas, Kalingas, Pundras and Suhmas are to have been the sons of Bali and their names were given to the countries which they founded in the eastern region." [2].

While examining traditions about eastern Indian Pargiter cites a narrative preserved in the *Mahabharata* and several Purans. The tradition describes the origin of eastern tribes or kingdom. Now we see that Pargiter treated eastern Bengal as a late frontier of Aryan civilization. regions near the Bay of Bengal and the eastern hills-including Chittagong remain outside the early Vedic cultural zone for a long time. The Aryan process meant the spread of language, religion and social institutions, not the complete replacement of earlier inhabitants. Local tribal populations gradually adopted Indo-Aryan language and Brahmanical cultural elements while retain many indigenous feature.

4.1. Modern Criticisms of Pargiter's Interpretation

Pargiter used Puranic genealogies to argue that eastern tribes such as, Anga, Vanga, Pundra, Suhma and Kalinga

represented distinct societies that later became integrated into Aryan civilization. His reconstruction placed Bengal on the eastern frontier of the Aryan cultural world. Modern historians, however, have revised his interpretation. They emphasize that Pargiter relied heavily on mythological traditions and outdated racial assumptions. Contemporary scholarship shows that Bengal and the Chittagong region developed through complex interaction among multiple cultural and linguistic groups rather than through a straightforward process of Aryan expansion. Romila Thapar believes, "The genealogies in the Puranas are often symbolic constructions rather than historical records." [5]. Thus story of Bali's five sons likely represents symbolic regional classifications rather than historical ethnic descent.

Moreover, Upinder Singh claims, "The spread of Indo-Aryan language and culture across the subcontinent cannot be understood in simple racial terms." [6] Historian Nihar Ranjan Ray believe that the region had independent cultural development before Aryanization. He says, "The formation of Bengal culture was the result of interaction among Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Bueman elements." [7].

5. Migration Routes and Ethnic Mixing

Anthropological evidence suggests that Austric, Proto-Australoid and Mongoloid groups entered Chittagong through Assam, Cachar, Sylhet, Tripura and Arakan hill tracts. L. A. Waddell described a broad migration corridor extending between the Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy rivers, facilitating population movement across northeastern South Asia [8]. Subsequent migrations included Tibeto-Burman, Kuki-Chin and Bhot-chiness groups, whose linguistic influence remains evident in the phonology of the Chittagong dialect, [9] further identified similar migration routes during the prehistoric period. Reinforcing the view that Chittagong functioned as a contact zone between south and southeast Asia.

6. Religious Expansion and Social Formation

Between approximately 2200 BCE and 200 CE, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain missionaries traveled through Bengal and Arakan, establishing religious centers and monastic institutions [10]. Buddhism flourished in Chittagong, particularly under Arakanese rule and the region remained under Magh dominance for nearly two centuries. Arab traders arrived in Chittagong prior to the Islamic conquests, integrating the port into Indian Ocean trade networks. With the spread of Islam, Sufi saints and missionaries settled in the region, promoting religious conversion through social integration rather than coercion. Inter-marriage between local populations and Arakanese or Arab settlers contributed to the emergence of hybrid communities, locally identified as *Jerbadis*.

Later, Hindu migration increased under the Mughal administration, driven by revenue settlement, land reclamation and bureaucratic expansion. Portuguese involvement produced

the *Firingi* community, further diversifying Chittagong's social composition. Over time, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians coexisted with in a relatively stable pluralistic framework.

7. Discussion

Now we are tempted to claim that the region did not develop as a single, uniform culture but as a frontier shaped by different waves of migration, interaction and cultural change. This evidence presented in the study suggests that Chittagong functioned historically as a transitional zone between the Bengal delta and the hill regions of Northeast India and Southeast Asia.

The evidence presented in the study suggests that Chittagong functioned historically as a transitional zone between the Bengal delta and the hill regions of Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Because Chittagong lies near the Bay of Bengal and close to hill routes linking Assam, Tripura, and Arakan, it attracted many waves of migrants and cultural contact. As a result, local inhabitants regularly interacted with new groups, creating a diverse social environment.

The Kirata hypothesis suggests an important framework for understanding the earliest anthropological layer of Chittagong. If the Kiratas indeed constituted the primary inhabitants of the region, their settlement likely predates the spread of Aryan culture and later Indo-Islamic influences. Over time, however, these early populations became integrated into broader cultural networks through trade routes, religious missions and political transformations. Rather than replacing earlier communities, new arrivals often interacted with and absorbed local populations, resulting in a gradual process of ethnic mixing and cultural transformation.

This historical interaction is particularly visible in language and social organization. Although Bengali later became the main language, the Chittagonian dialect still keeps some sound patterns and structures linked to Tibeto-Burman and Southeast Asian languages. Such kind of features indicate long-term contact between different ethnolinguistic communities.

Furthermore, the region's religious history demonstrates a pattern of accommodation rather than exclusion. The coexistence of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and later Christian

communities illustrates how Chittagong evolved into a pluralistic society. In anthropological terms, therefore, Chittagong should be understood as a cultural crossroads where indigenous traditions, migration flows and religious networks collectively shaped a distinctive regional identity.

8. Conclusions

The Kiratas were likely the earliest indigenous inhabitants of Chittagong, predating Aryan, Buddhist, Islamic and European influence. Over centuries, Chittagong evolved through continuous interaction among diverse ethnic and cultural groups, producing a unique regional identity. Understanding this layered anthropological history is essential for appreciating Chittagong's social complexity and its enduring role as a cultural bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

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