

MEMORIES OF LIVES FROM VILLAGES UNDER WATER

Kaptai Baadh: Bor Porong - Duburider Attokothon

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Speaking from his home in Agartala, the capital of the Northeast Indian state of Tripura, Mohendro Chakma recalls his role as the leader of the 19th group that was preparing to trek to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Mohendro's family home was permanently flooded by the waters of the Kamaphuli River following the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s. Mohendro recalls his long trek from Demagiri (now in South Mizoram) to Aizawl (the capital of Mizoram) to Anipur in Assam and finally back to Agartala (Tripura) that spanned over several years with stays at several refugee camps. Mohendro Chakma's journey from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of the then East Pakistan through India is one of the many untold stories of displacement and disenfranchisement that Samari Chakma, the author of *Kaptai Baadh: Bor Porong - Duburider Attokothon* (Kaptai Dam: The Great Exodus - Autobiography of the Drowned)(1) brings together in her collection of oral history.

Stories are an important way of learning about historical events. This is even more true of historical events that involve state-led oppression that never quite became part of the nation's official history. Given the nationalistic nature

of these people whose lives have been uprooted and changed forever by the construction of the Kaptai Dam. In academic work, the story of the Kaptai Dam has become a necessary background story that needs to be acknowledged and referenced to understand the present political situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While there are references to the construction of the dam in these works, the event is reported in a clinical manner of numbers and dates. As important as these numbers are, they say little about how the event impacted the lives of the people for whom this place was home and all that they had known from birth. Samari's work brings to light the stories behind the numbers and the dates and talks about how the lives of the people living there were irreversibly changed - families split apart forever, siblings growing up as citizens of different countries and people being forced to depart from their homes and their ancestral roots. This is a critical work of decolonising Bangladesh's history from the perspective of the indigenous peoples who live under constant surveillance and are still treated as the nation's Other. In the introduction to the book, Samari writes about how she has grown up listening to the stories around the Kaptai Dam from her mother and her



Chakma Raja Home. Courtesy: Chakma Raja collection

powerful aspect of oral history is the telling of history from the perspectives and experiences of the people who are not recognised or written about in official history.

While the Kaptai Dam was envisioned during the British colonial period, it was finally implemented during Pakistan rule. The state fully disregarded the anguish that such a decision would cause the people of that land. In his book, *The Departed Melody*, the former Chakma Raja Tridiv Roy writes that he believes that an important political motivation behind building the dam was to target and disperse the "influential" Chakma families. This is, of course, correlated by the fact that the main source of political influence in the CHT, the Chakma Raja's palace, went under the waters of the Kamaphuli River. The purpose, according to him, was to weaken the politically and economically strong Chakmas. He writes that "the biggest single calamity for the Chakmas up to 1960, has been the [Kaptai] dam".(5)

Many of the conversations in Samari's book also revealed that the communities there did not know about poverty before being displaced by the dam. For the hundred thousand people who lost their homes, the promised compensation in the form of land never materialised; the land that was offered to some was a fraction of what they used to own. The Bangladesh state also never offered any reparations and, following independence, unleashed its own violent rule over the indigenous peoples that continues to this day. The political is also deeply personal for Samari, as she writes in the introduction to the book. Samari's mother, Nibedita Chakma, was only 10 years old when her family was uprooted from their place of birth in Boradam village, which went under water following the construction of the dam. Samari writes about how she grew up hearing stories from her mother about

woman with her head submerged under water. The forward is written by Meghna Guhathakurta, an important activist and intellectual writing about the Hill Tracts for many decades.

The book carries the stories of 10 survivors of *Bor Porong* - Priobala Chakma, Shushoma Bala Chakma, Korunamoy Chakma, Buddhodhon Chakma, Poncho Chakma, Mohendro Chakma, Arun Kumar Dewan, Omio Chakma, Anondo Mukhi Chakma and Protima Dewan. The stories were first published by the feminist blog *Thotkata.com* of which Samari and I are both members. (7) Some of the conversations were carried out in Bangladesh, while others took place in the Indian Northeast. A number of the cross-border journeys consisted of days and weeks of travelling on foot which many did not survive. There are stories of pregnant women suffering miscarriages during these long and painful journeys. Priobala Chakma recalls elders talking about the dam in hushed voices about how everyone's homes would disappear. She recalls feeling confused about where all this water would come from that would engulf their entire home so the whole family would have to go and live somewhere else. Shushoma Bala, Samari's maternal grandmother, recalls the *Bor Porong* as only the beginning of her struggles. Others describe the feelings of confusion and skepticism about how and why such a catastrophe would take place in their lives.

Samari Chakma was born in Khagrachari in June 1975 and has been a vocal activist against state repression ever since she was a student. She finished her bachelor's degree in Khagrachari College and master's degrees from Eden College and has served as the President and Editor for the Hill Women's Federation. Later she went to law school and earned a law degree after realising that the fight for indigenous women's rights needed to

take place in the courtroom. She worked pro bono to represent rape victims and wrongly incarcerated indigenous people in a district where most rapes and harassment of indigenous women go unpunished as perpetrators wiggle their way out of the justice system. She became the first woman Chakma lawyer to be enrolled in the Bangladesh High Court. While the Kaptai Dam was constructed by the government of Pakistan, Bangladesh has unceremoniously shrugged off the responsibility that the state has towards the indigenous peoples of the country. While the construction of the Kaptai Dam forced the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh to leave the country, it did not stop there. Indigenous peoples of the Hills have been leaving the country to take refuge in India and other countries over the five decades that Bangladesh has been an independent country. Ironically, Samari Chakma herself has been living in Australia since 2018 since she started receiving threats to her life for her work. Her departure has left a hollow in the important legal work that she was doing to ensure indigenous women had a strong voice in the justice system of Bangladesh. While her work in the courts remain suspended, she continues to write the stories of the displaced survivors of the Kaptai Dam. Samari is currently working on her second book of oral history that will give Bangladeshi readers a further understanding of the impact of the construction of Kaptai Dam on the lives of indigenous peoples - an important and tragic event in the history of Bangladesh.

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Note:

1. The English translation of part of the title of the book, "Autobiography of the Drowned" is by Naem Mohaiemen for the Chobi Mela 2021 project by Samari Chakma and Naem Mohaiemen. You can read about the video project here: <https://chobimela.org/participants/samari-naem/>
2. See the chapter in her book, Roy, R.C.K. (2000). Policies and Programmes: Land Disposition. Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. IWGIA Document No. 99, Copenhagen.
3. Please see the book about the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, Singh, D. (2010). Stateless in India: Chakmas in the Arunachal Pradesh. Sage Publications.
4. See the chapter in her book, Kovach, M. (2010). Story as Indigenous Methodology: Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts. University of Toronto Press.
5. See the chapter in his book, Roy, R.T. (2003). The Disastrous Kaptai Dam. The Departed Melody. PPA Publications, Islamabad.
6. Comrade Rupak Chakma Memorial Trust was established in 2013 in memory of Rupak Chakma, an indigenous activist, who was gunned down in 2001, a few days before the national elections. It is an independent and grant-giving trust which was set up by his friends and family members and is committed to the education of indigenous people from primary to post-secondary education as a form of empowerment against state domination.
7. Please see the Thotkata webpage: <https://thotkata.com/>



Cover of the book.

of official history written to serve the purpose of the dominant population it is not surprising that little to nothing is known about the 100,000 indigenous peoples, mostly Chakmas, who lost their lives, possessions, and property to the waters of the Kamaphuli River, and after more than five decades, are on the verge of being forgotten. The Kaptai Dam was completed in 1963 with financial support from the US development agency, USAID. The power plant supplied electricity mainly to the port city of Chittagong and there was never any

grandmother, realising that these stories and such an important historical event of the Hills would forever disappear if not recorded.

Oral traditions in the form of life histories and oral stories are very important in indigenous cultural inquiries around the world. Canadian First Nations scholar Margaret Kovach (4) has argued that stories help us understand the relational world. She points out that stories explain how a person is related to an event; they are a means of passing knowledge from



Chakma Raja Home. 1962. Photographer: Lily Smith.

intention to provide either electricity from the dam or any other kind of benefit to the indigenous peoples of the Hill Tracts. Upon losing their ancestral lands, around 40,000 Chakmas migrated to Arunachal Pradesh. (2) Many migrated to other parts of India; others sought refuge in other parts of the CHT. Most of the Chakmas living in Arunachal Pradesh struggled for decades to be recognized as citizens of the country, with many still stateless. (3) Samari Chakma collected the stories

one generation to another; stories contextualise knowledge and are both method and meaning and a culturally nuanced way of knowing. Chakma's work does just that. It lets us hear the voices of the individuals who lived through those moments when the construction of the dam was an obscure rumour that would not go away to when it became a reality as the waters engulfed their households and finally to when their homes and lives became memories, where one could only visit as *duburis* (divers). The most



Pakistani President Ayub Khan visiting Kaptai Dam. 1962.

not just *Bor Porong*, but how difficult her life became after the exodus - growing up in a village in a deep forest where *shurjer road matite porto na* (the rays of the sun would not touch the ground).

The book *Bor Porong* was edited by Aloran Khisa and published by Comrade Rupak Chakma Memorial Trust (6) in Narankhaya, Khagrachari in February 2018. The book was published with the financial support of Nibedita Chakma and is priced at 250 takas. The cover art is done by Joyta Chakma and shows the upside-down body of a Chakma

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