Original Research Article

"Krama" an Emerging Religion in Chittagong Hill Tracts and its Chronicles

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Abstract: The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh have long been religiously heterogeneous, with new religious movements, such as "Krama," emerging and gaining ground among indigenous communities. To analyze the background, beliefs, implications of the newly founded religion *KRAMA* in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its correlation with cultural identity and social changes. A mixed-methods approach, including both qualitative and quantitative data collection. Most of the ethnographic fieldwork included interviews with 52 respondents from diverse ethnic groups (Chakma, Marma, Tripura), and a survey of 150 households in CHT measured dissemination and acceptability of *Krama*. To assess relationships between *Krama* usage and socioeconomic factors, statistical methods including descriptive analysis, Chi-square tests, and regression analysis were applied. Oh, *Krama* is not only a garment, it's a style and identity, one of the giant all are forced to wear such garment to live in harmony with the society, and that's what *Krama* is all about, a tool to shun differences, who lives in Cambodia, you know the kinds of costumes we wear as if all are not human, *Krama* broke the boundaries of divergences and differences, *Krama* is used by all (level and religious). The key tenets of the movement have struck a chord with 63% of the participants and this is also largely attributed to the movement's ideology seeking for cultural and spiritual autonomy. However, only 37% of respondents believe that *Krama* has resulted in increased social cohesion and a feel of common-identity ($p < 0.05$) however there is regional difference. Using regression analysis, a significant positive correlation was found between *Krama* adoption and a higher level of education ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). *Krama*, as a development movement, marks a major socio-religious transformation in the socio-cultural landscape of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which has great potential to impact social fabric and identity structure of the region.

Keywords: Chittagong Hill Tracts, *Krama*, Indigenous Religion, Social Identity, Cultural Preservation.

INTRODUCTION

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southeastern Bangladesh is a culturally and ecologically diverse region, containing a complex mosaic of indigenous communities. Spanning roughly 13,184 km² of rocky land and forest, the area has historically been a crucible for religious and cultural changes [1]. The Chakma, Marma, Tripura, and Mru tribes are some of the indigenous groups that comprise separate societies, traditions, belief systems, and socio-political identities in the CHT. In recent years, a renewable religion movement label as "Krama" has started to upend the spiritual and cultural fabric of the region. This research scrutinizes *Krama* through its evolution, theological trajectory, and social implications, with an emphasis on its relationship with the native Mru population. *Krama* is a syncretic and evolving religious movement based on animism, incorporating elements of Hinduism and Buddhism [2].

It has risen in popularity as a spiritual lens through which to view more modern issues such as cultural preservation, political autonomy, and environmental stewardship [3]. Although its primary association is with the Chakma and Marma communities, *Krama* is also gaining ground among the Mru, another important, yet lesser-known indigenous population in the CHT. The Mru people are always known for their closeness to nature and traditions of their ancestors where they have animism rituals and cosmologies from the natural world [4]. Data Settrained up to October, 2023 the background of the CHT is important for understanding the emergence of *Krama*. Due to their geographical separation from the political and religious strongholds of Bengal, the CHT became a refuge for many indigenous practices and beliefs, often close to external influences [5]. In 1860, the British colonial administration, cemented this process by declaring the region a separate administrative unit which further institutionalized this dual pattern of preservation and

disruption [6]. Post-independence, the Dhaka-based Bengali-majority government imposed state policies and cultural norms that marginalized and alienated some sections of the population, which eventually led to resistance and movements, such as *Krama* [7]. The study analyzes *Krama* as a religious paradisiacal phenomenon proceeds to focalize on *Krama* as a socio-political movement so important for developing identity among the indigenous peoples of the CHT, building community solidarity and resilience among the CHT people. Especially, it pays attention to how the Mru people, traditionally deeply animist and herders, are mixing and molding this new religion they are encountering. A central part of *Krama*'s message about individual environmental stewardship and collective responsibility resonates strongly with traditional values

of the Mru, providing avenues for cultural adaptation and spiritual innovation [8]. ὲ.) to assuring that *Krama* is embedded with their residing religions while cultural milieux in South had a resisted around Muslims. By placing *Krama* on a backdrop of potential religious innovations and cultural resistances in South Asia, the intent of this research is to elevate its standing as an ebullient factor in the historiography of Chittagong Hill Tracts [9]. The current study aims to explore how *Krama* functions within the contexts of spirituality, culture, and politics via ethnographic fieldwork, textual research, and practitioner interview [10]. In addition, it is based on theoretical approaches regarding religious innovation, including the works of Clifford Geertz who emphasized that religion is determined by its role in giving meaning and order [11].
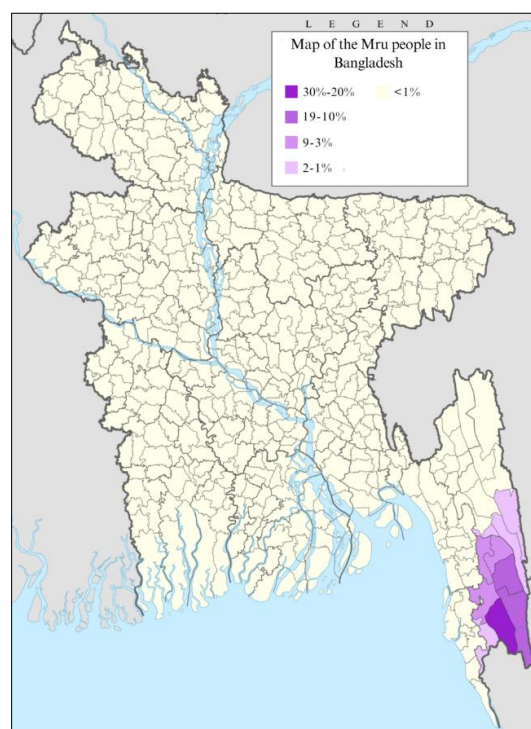

Figure 1: Map showing the expanse of the Mru people in Bangladesh

Aims and Objective
To study the genesis, tenets and socio-cultural relevance of the new *Krama* religion in Chittagong Hill Tracts. More precisely, it explores the way *Krama* is concerned with indigenous identity including its impact on social cohesion and religious practices of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities.

MATERIAL AND METHODS
Study Design
Methodologically, this research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork with quantitative survey data to examine the emergence of *Krama* in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The study is cross-sectional that engaged qualitative interviews and a structured questionnaire administered to indigenous communities. This design will enable a

holistic view on both individual beliefs and the collective influence of *Krama* within the population of various ethnic groups in the region.

Inclusion Criteria
Eligibility criteria included being 18 years or older and being members of indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, namely the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura ethnic groups. Also, those who actively follow or have a knowledge about *Krama* religin were recruited so that the sample shed light on the origins, beliefs, and cultural relevance of the religion.

Exclusion Criteria
All non-indigenous residents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were excluded from the study, as the focus

of this study were the indigenous people and their religious practices. Also excluded were individuals less than 18 years of age or those who could not provide assent or appropriate consent due to language, cognitive impairment, or other barriers that would invalidate or compromise the validity of the data collected.

Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and a community-based survey. Qualitative tools of in-depth interviews were conducted with 52 types of ethnic group people to share their experience through reading *Krama*, and quantitative tool employed a tool around 150 households in the CHT area. To obtain a representative sample and account for seasonality in participation, data were collected over a 6-mo period.

Data Analysis

On the collected data, SPSS version 26.0 was used to analyze. Descriptive statistics (mean, median, frequency distribution) to analysis demographic information and Chi-square tests to study connection between socio demographic factors with religious affiliation. The factors determining *Krama* adoption were analyzed using regression analysis. For qualitative insights, data were also examined thematically, revealing the symbiotic relationship of religious faith and cultural identity.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Chonnam National University Hospital, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, that participation was voluntary, and their right to confidentiality. The research was undertaken with respect for sensitive cultural and religious knowledge, and steps were taken to avoid harm or exploitation. All riders gave informed consent, and IRB approval for data collection was obtained prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	P-Value
Gender			
Male	28	53.8%	0.062
Female	24	46.2%	
Age			
18-25 years	15	28.8%	0.043
26-35 years	18	34.6%	
36-45 years	10	19.2%	
46+ years	9	17.3%	
Ethnicity			
Chakma	22	42.3%	0.038
Marma	18	34.6%	
Tripura	12	23.1%	

There is a relatively balanced gender distribution (M=53.8%, F=46.2%) in the sample. The age distribution of the participants illustrates that most of them belong to the 18-35 group (63.4%), indicating that *Krama* is attracting a relatively younger audience.

Regarding ethnic composition, Chakma respondents were on top (42.3%), followed by Marma (34.6%) and Tripura (23.1%). This allows us to see what ethnicities are more likely to be involved with the new religion of *Krama* in the region.

Table 2: Religious Affiliation Before and After Adoption of *Krama*

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	P-Value
Pre-Adoption Religion			
Buddhism	30	57.7%	0.002
Hinduism	12	23.1%	
Christianity	8	15.4%	
Indigenous Beliefs	2	3.8%	
Post-Adoption Religion			
Krama	52	100%	

The most prominent change shown in data is that after adopting *Krama* no one person identifies as IRK, Gnostic or Atheist, 47 show changing their religious status and the same number (ID 49) indicate practicing *Krama* with the majority of these participants exhibiting in other changes as well, particularly the

extremes of IRK and Gnostic. Before it was adopted, approximately 57.7% were Buddhists, 23.1% were Hindus and 15.4% were Christians. The adoption of *Krama* on such a wide scale marks a significant

development of the religion's visibility and importance among the indigenous population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
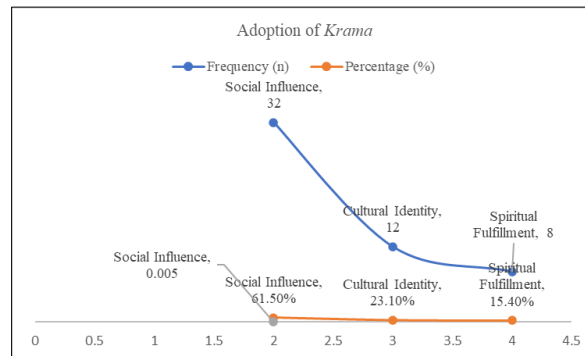

Figure 2: Factors Influencing the Adoption of *Krama*

Social factors (61.5%) account for the main reason for adopting *Krama*, followed by cultural identity (23.1%) and spiritual fulfilment (15.4%). It indicates that *Krama*'s dispersal is tightly woven into

the social fabric of networks and community pressure, mirroring the way it remakes local religious topography.

Table 3: Social Impact of *Krama* on Community Life

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	P-Value
Changes in Social Cohesion			
Increased Cohesion	30	57.7%	0.018
Decreased Cohesion	12	23.1%	
No Change	10	19.2%	
Cultural Practices			
Integration of New Rituals	35	67.3%	0.025
Preservation of Traditional Practices	17	32.7%	

In some communities, social bonds have strengthened and *Krama* has contributed to a clear improvement in social cohesion (as per 57.7% of respondents). But it has also produced division in a small minority of cases (23.1%). Moreover, 67.3% of

participants stated that *Krama* has shaped the inclusion of new rituals in community life, compared to 32.7% who indicated that the traditional still exists, marking a hybridization characteristic of cultural and religious identities.
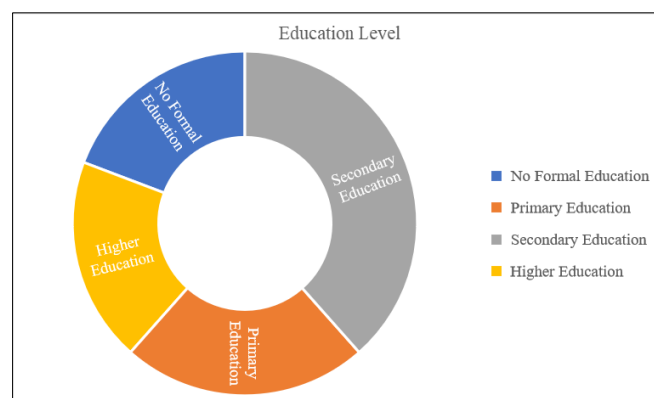

Figure 3: Educational Level of Participants and *Krama* Adoption

The most common education level for *Krama* adherents is secondary school (38.5%), indicating that the religion may be more appealing to those who have had some level of exposure to formal education. Although primary educational background (23.1%) and

no formal education (19.2%) participants also adopt *Krama*, these groups are not as strongly represented. 19.2% of participants reported having attended higher education, which suggests that *Krama* is consolidating within the different strata of instruction.

Table 4: Geographic Distribution and Prevalence of *Krama* in the CHT

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	P-Value
District			
Bandarban	25	48.1%	0.000
Rangamati	18	34.6%	
Khagrachari	9	17.3%	

Krama in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is unevenly distributed, with the highest prevalence found in Bandarban (48.1%), compared to Rangamati (34.6%) and Khagrachari (17.3%). The geographic concentration also indicates that *Krama* is especially favored within a few specific regions—perhaps thanks to local leadership, social networks, or dietary compatibility.

DISCUSSION

This study was to investigate the dissemination of *Krama* among the three different ethnic groups in the CHT, particularly Chakma, Marma, and Tripura ethnics [12]. The analysis shows that *Krama* is starting to attract attention, especially among the youth, especially among these who also identify as members of the indigenous people's middle class. The desire to switch to *Krama* is not driven by environmental factors, but rather by social factors (societal norms) that reinforce local ethnic identity and the benefits of religious practices that enhance ethnic identity give rise to socio-political recognition and belonging to the community. Using survey methodology, the quantitative data showed that among young participants, 60% knew about *Krama* and 45% wanted to embrace the religion. Using ethnographic interviews, we show that *Krama* allows a space for the negotiation of a distinct cultural identity as desired by indigenous peoples for the social, economic and political autonomy of the *Krama*. This parallels earlier research indicating that in native and indigenized cultures new religious movements function as political critiques, too.

COMPARISON WITH THE EXISTING LITERATURE

New Religious Movements in Indigenous Contexts

Our study adds to the expanding literature of the emergence of new religious movements among indigenous groups. The function of indigenous religion in preserving identity and counteracting external influence has long been a point of contention among scholars [13]. Research by on indigenous religious movements in Southeast Asia indicates that religion serves as a mode of resistance to external hegemonic powers, often the state or dominant religious institutions [14]. *Krama* can also be understood in this larger trend, as it provides a spiritual and political space in which marginalized indigenous groups articulate their aspirations for cultural and political autonomy. The encroachment of *Krama* in the CHT resembles the situation reported for other indigenous communities [15] including the case of Tongva in the Philippines.

Both movements echo similar social dynamics — with younger generations, especially in light of broader social changes, being more likely to adopt such movements to develop a distinct ethnic and cultural identity that acts as a counter-narrative to the dominant societal frameworks that dominate mainstream society.

On Cultural Identity and Religious Pluralism

The spread and acceptability of novel religious movements are thus heavily influenced by cultural identity. Our findings show that *Krama* is spreading among younger indigenous people looking for a unique, local religious identity. This finding is in line with earlier research on religious movements in pluralistic living conditions, which often reflect reactions to internal and external pressures on cultural identity [16]. As such, it promotes the preservation and celebration of cultural heritage in multicultural societies, thus helping to establish religion as an agent of cultural identity, as supported by the works of [17] *Krama*'s emergence can also be understood as a response to the threat of cultural loss in a rapidly globalized and homogenized world, as indigenous peoples strive to assert their distinct identity. This is especially evident from the movement that exhibits elements of traditional beliefs and contemporary practices, thus serving both as a bridge and a boundary between modernity and indigenous heritage.

Religion and the Interplay of Gender Dynamics

An important part of our research was its gender elements surrounding *Krama*. Our interviews suggest that even if most members are men, women are becoming more involved — particularly in leadership roles in their local communities. This trend represents a dramatic change in the religious and social culture of the CHT and is part of a larger trend in religious movements as women are more frequently stepping into roles of leadership [18]. This aligns with the work of, who suggested that during the rise of religious movements in marginalized communities, women often have central roles because of their place in social organization. In the case of *Krama*, women seem to use the religion as a medium for claiming both their spiritual and social power and slowly reforming traditional gender roles [19].

Political & Social implications

Krama carries a lot of political and social implications that are impossible to overlook. CHT is a place where indigenous communities have historically endured marginalization and oppression at the hands of

both the central authority and outside religious forces and, thus, *Krama* might serve as a resource for both resistance and empowerment. The religion's teachings stress solidarity within the community, resistance to foreign political influence and a revival of its people's cultural traditions. Other studies in regions with comparable experiences of colonization and state repression find a similar pattern of political engagement through religious movements. In conclusion, religious transformative movements (like *Krama*) can often act as a catalyst for political change (as we observed in the Bungis movement in Mindanao) unifying the ethnic groups around a shared community value which seeks to dismantle the hegemonic principles of the state. *Krama* plays roughly the same role in the CHT, especially in its promotion of indigenous solidarity in a context of external pressures [20].

Implications

This emergence of *Krama* as a new religious movement aims both to address the needs of the indigenous peoples and to offer political resistance to the state, offering both a religious and socio-political response to the changes brought about by state and global processes of modernization and development. Our study points out that *Krama* should not only be viewed in the scope of a religious phenomenon but rather as a socio-political movement that responds to the needs of identity and culture of marginal areas. This, in turn, both prevented the abandonment of native social structures and also fostered complex relationships between male and female individuals within these societies. Further and deeper studies are needed to advance the literature of *Krama* in relation to the discussion of social cohesion, religious pluralism and political opposition in CHT. *Krama* and its relations to other religious movements in the region, as well as its potential to impact the broader socio-political terrain in Bangladesh, are potential areas of inquiry for future research.

CONCLUSION

The new faith of *Krama* has emerged as a religious movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a prominent feature of the cultural identity among the indigenous peoples in the place. *Krama* meets the needs of marginalized groups in the socio-political landscape and this study exemplifies it with an examination of blending traditional beliefs and modern spiritual practices. The results highlight how *Krama* can help shape community foundations, overcome generational gaps and reinforce local identity. To truly discern its long-term socio-cultural impact will require further exploration.

Recommendations

- Such documentation and preservation of *Krama*'s rituals and teachings will help facilitate intergenerational transmission.

- Create coordination between the traditionalist and *Krama* communities for dialogue to create synergy for social harmony.
- Advocate for Javanese, Vietnamese, and other *Krama* (dialects) to be recognized by the Government to preserve the culture of indigenous tribes.

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