
**Migration and Ethnic Issues in North East India:
An Analysis of the Arunachal Pradesh Situation**

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In the multi-ethnic states of South Asia, ethnicity seems to constitute a major component of the socio-political realities and as such, ethnic tension has been one of the most deep-rooted causes of political conflict in South Asia. In India, too, ethnic issues have generated tension as the Sikhs, the Nagas, the Bodos, the Chakmas and other ethnic groups have been asserting their identity either by adopting a militant posture against the Indian State or by launching a struggle against the dominant ethnic group in a particular region. It is interesting to note here that migration of people from one country to another may create a situation where ethnic issues are likely to play a vital role in the society and polity of the receiving state.¹ In view of the above, we propose to examine ethnic issues in Arunachal Pradesh in the context of migration that has taken place in this remote State of North East India.

At the very outset, it is necessary to clarify basic concepts like 'ethnicity', 'ethnic conflict' and 'migration' before we proceed to analyse the ethnic situation in Arunachal. 'Ethnicity' is a sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined by George de Vos as consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of people . . . of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups'.² The movement from ethnic category to community is a process that may involve such changes as the creation of a self-conscious language community out of a group of related speakers,³ the formation of a caste association from a caste category, or a community of believers from the followers of a particular religious leader. In so far as an ethnic community succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political action and po-

litical mobilization, it goes beyond ethnicity and community to establish itself as a nationality.⁴ In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, it may be argued that the tribes inhabiting the State are so numerous and are culturally so distinct from one another that each of them can at best be termed as a distinct ethnic group. These tribes are yet to become self-conscious and cohesive entities like communities. Nor can they claim to establish themselves as a nationality since a distinct Arunachalee identity has not emerged because of the cultural diversities of the tribal societies of Arunachal.⁵ Now, 'ethnic conflict' may arise when different ethnic groups compete for valued resources and opportunities in societies undergoing social mobilization, industrialization and bureaucratization. In a system of ethnic stratification in which one ethnic group is dominant over the other, some members from one ethnic group may attempt to move into the economic niches occupied by the rival ethnic groups and if they fail to do so, they are likely to protest against the system of ethnic stratification as a whole and attempt to mobilize the ethnic group. On the other hand, the privileged group may mobilize to defend its interests and may also use ethnic sentiments in doing so.⁶ Such mobilization and counter-mobilization may lead to ethnic conflicts. Paul Brass argues that the principal dangers to violent conflict arises when all routes to power in an existing system seem closed to an organized force and when the possibility of changing the political arena is a real one. According to him, the existence of one of these conditions is often sufficient to be conducive to ethnic conflict.⁷ In this paper, we view the conflict between the native Arunachalese and the migrant Chakmas in terms of a competition for resources and opportunities culminating in ethnic mobilization by the privileged Arunachalese to defend their interests from being threatened by the desperate struggle for existence launched by the Chakma refugees.

Another term which needs to be clarified in the context of our paper is 'migration'. By 'migration', we mean the movement of people from one place in order to settle permanently in another. Although each prominent migration in the annals of mankind has its own peculiar characteristics, it is possible to classify them into some broad categories, viz., internal and international migration or free and forced migration, depending on whether people decide to move of their own free will or whether they are expelled by governments.⁸ Migration in the context of Arunachal Pradesh can be classified as international migration, with migrants originating from a foreign country. Such migration should also be considered a forced migration in view of the fact that the migrants were displaced from the land of their origin and were forced to take refuge in the neighbouring country, i.e. India.

Thus, the phenomenon of migration in Arunachal Pradesh refers mainly to the settlement of Chakma and Hajong refugees who were displaced by the construction of US financed Kaptai hydel project in Chitragong Hill Tracts and by their persistent socio-religious persecution by the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) Government. They were rehabilitated by the Government of India in the then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh. Since then, the Chakmas and Hajongs are living in demarcated areas of Diyum and Bordumsa in Changlang, Chowkham area in Lohit and Kokila area in Papum Pare Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The present population of Chakmas and Hajongs stands at 66,000 approximately.⁹ Miao sub-division has the largest concentration of Chakmas in Arunachal. Miao is also host to the largest Tibetan settlement colony which was established in 1975 and has about 2,500 residents.

It may be noted that migration in Arunachal Pradesh has brought ethnic issues to the forefront of the political debate and the educated elite in Arunachal, under the banner of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), seem to have exercised their hegemony for mass mobilization by not simply raising the ethnic issues, but also by arousing popular sentiment against the migrants. In the perception of the APPSU, the migrants constitute a sizable non-local population vis-à-vis the small indigenous population and hence the AAPSU seems to have articulated the concern of the indigenous tribal society about protection of its rights to land and resources and its natural aversion to share these with non-locals.¹⁰ Viewed in this context, the ethnic issue taken up by the AAPSU acquires the dimensions of a nativist movement because it highlights the conflicts between the sons of the soil or natives and the migrants.

Some of the allegations of the AAPSU against the migrants are that they are creating serious law and order problems, threatening the demographic balance, peaceful co-existence and the very identity of the indigenous people of the State.¹¹ Assuming that migration may have led to certain demographic changes in the state, we propose to take a glance at the density of population in North East India as well as a look at the percentage of Scheduled Tribe population in Arunachal Pradesh in Tables 1 and 2.

A glance at Table 1 shows that of all the States in the North East, Arunachal Pradesh is the largest in terms of area, but the density of population in the State is only 10 persons per square kilometre which not only ranks lowest in the North East, but in India as well. This may be interpreted to mean that the overall impact of influx of migrants may not have been as devastating as perceived by the native population in Arunachal. Alleged

exploitation of natives by migrants also necessitates a glance at the percentage of tribals out of the total population of Arunachal Pradesh.

Table 1. Density of Population in the North East, 1991.

State	Area (sq km)	Population (Persons)	Density
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	864,558	10
Assam	78,438	22,414,322	286
Manipur	22,327	1,837,149	82
Meghalaya	22,429	1,774,778	79
Mizoram	22,081	689,756	33
Nagaland	16,579	1209,546	73
Tripura	10,486	2,757,205	263
Total	255,083	31,547,314	123
All India	3,287,263	846,302,688	273

Source: Census of India 1991, Series 1, Paper 2 of 1992.

Table 2 indicates that in 1981, indigenous tribals constituted the majority of the population of Arunachal in all the districts except in Lohit and Dibang Valley. In 1991, however, scheduled Tribes were not in a majority in Lohit, Dibang Valley and Changlang districts. Some changes may, thus be noted in the population structure during 1981-1991. There was a slight but steady decline in the tribal population in all the districts. The most spectacular development, however, was the sharp fall in the percentage of tribal population in Changlang district. This seems to indicate that the presence of migrants has brought about a change in the demographic structure in Changlang district only, not in the State as a whole. While there is some confusion about the exact number of Chakmas and Hajongs settled in Arunachal, it appears that the threat posed by these migrants on the demographic balance has been exaggerated to some extent.

But the fact remains that a threat, whether perceived or actual, on the demographic structure in Arunachal has generated ethnic sentiments and is being considered to have grave consequences for the indigenous culture and identity. This was highlighted by speakers in a workshop on right of self-determination and self-government of indigenous peoples held in Itanagar in 1995. It was observed that indigenous peoples who have their own distinct identity, culture, ethos, own way of life and self-governing system were suffering from political, economic and social discrimination and were being systematically marginalized and pushed to non-dominant

entity in the present political system of India which is alien to them. It was also felt that the unabated influx of foreigners and also internal migration from other parts of the country and settlement of refugees, ex-servicemen, etc. in traditional homelands of indigenous population were reducing them into a minority in their own homelands.

Table 2. Scheduled Tribe Population in Arunachal Pradesh (1981 and 1991).

Sl.No	Districts	Total population		Total population of S/Ts		Percentage of S/T to total population	
		1981	1991	1981	1991	1981	1991
1.	Tawang*	63,302	28,287	41,963	22,238	66.29	78.61
2.	West Kameng		56,421		29,900		52.99
3	East Kameng	42,736	50,395	37,286	43,116	87.25	85.55
4	Lower Subansiri	112,650	155,978	87,605	110,609	77.77	70.91
5	Upper Subansiri	39,410	50,086	36,131	43,034	91.68	85.92
6	West Siang	74,164	89,936	62,323	70,571	84.03	78.46
7	East Siang	70,451	99,643	50,728	68,330	72.00	68.57
8	Dibang Valley	30,978	43,068	15,044	19,572	48.56	45.44
9	Lohit	69,498	109,706	30,130	40,933	43.35	37.31
0	Tirap/Changlang**	128,650	95,530	79,957	33,278	62.15	34.83

Source: Statistical Pocket Book Arunachal Pradesh, 1985: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong, 1985.

Final Population Table 3 in Census of India 1991, Final Population Totals: Brief Analysis of Primary Census Abstract Paper – 2 of 1992, pp. 206-222.

* During the Census of 1981, Tawang and West Kameng were parts of the same district.

** Before the Census of 1991, there was some reorganization of districts and Tirap was renamed as Changlang.

The speakers emphasized that a situation was arising where the so-called mainstream ruling elites were treating the homelands of indigenous people as their internal colony and adopting colonial behaviour towards

genuine movements of indigenous people.¹² These arguments seem to have been reiterated by the People's Referendum Rally for Deportation of Chakma and Hajong Refugees from Arunachal Pradesh which insisted that the refugees were diluting the indigenous character of natives to the great danger of extinction. It was, therefore, recommended that in order to save the natives and their identity, all illegal migrants must be deported from Arunachal Pradesh.¹³ On the other hand, one cannot dispute the contention that it was the Government of India which settled these refugees in the then NEFA in 1964-65. Hence, three decades of continuous stay have led the Chakmas to claim what they call an "occupational right". It appears, therefore, that even if the nationality of the Chakmas is questioned, their right to sustain themselves cannot be disputed, at least on humanitarian grounds. But the problem arises when this right comes in conflict with the rights of the indigenous tribes who have a distinct way of life. Since the Chakmas can neither be driven out nor be retained against the will of the people in Arunachal Pradesh, some analysts of the political scene in Arunachal have observed that a middle path may be evolved by the Centre, leading to a phased programme of partial withdrawal of Chakmas from Arunachal Pradesh for their resettlement elsewhere.¹⁴

As for the application of the internal colonial thesis to the situation in Arunachal Pradesh, it appears that the Arunachalese led by their articulate intelligentsia perceive the Indian State and the ruling elite as potential exploiters, primarily because of the sympathetic stance of the Union Government towards the Chakma migrants as reflected in its decision to grant them citizenship rights.¹⁵ Viewed from this angle, the 'internal colonial model' seems to have been cited by the educated elite in Arunachal as a propaganda weapon, rather than as an intellectual tool for the understanding of the situation arising out of migration. It may also be interesting to note here that the AAPSU which was articulating the ethnic sentiments of the Arunachalese could win support from the State Government.¹⁶ It appears, therefore, that political intervention by the Union and State Governments in the ethnic conflict in Arunachal and their perceived identification as sympathizers on both sides of the ethnic divide has completed the process of ethnic polarization in the state.

Migration in Arunachal Pradesh also seems to have highlighted an important dimension of the ethnic conflict between the natives and the migrants by generating in the native psyche a fear of alienation of their land and resources. The indigenous tribal society which is extremely sensitive about protection of its rights to land and resources is averse to sharing these with non-locals, particularly the migrants. A feeling has gained

nario is also expected to be most vociferous in its campaign against the migrant community who may perform better than the natives in the field of employment.

It appears from the above discussion that the ethnic issues emanating from migration in Arunachal Pradesh are sustained by several factors that vary from an actual threat to indigenous identity to a perception of fear that the AAPSU seems to have injected in the native psyche. The actual threat lies in the fact that the Chakmas by their better literacy rate vis-à-vis that of indigenous tribals and by their entrepreneurship seem to have earned a place for themselves in Arunachal. As things stand at present, the natives are facing a stiff competition from Chakmas in the field of education, employment and productive activities, particularly in agriculture. Viewed in this context, apprehensions articulated by the AAPSU have a genuine basis. But on the other hand, Census figures about the population structure and the density of population in Arunachal suggest that the demographic balance in the State has not been disturbed to an alarming extent due to the settlement of Chakmas and other migrants in Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, it appears that a militant posture adopted by the AAPSU on the ethnic issue may prove to be convenient for it in the long run in the sense that by projecting the migrants as a rival community vis-a-vis indigenous Arunachalese, the AAPSU may hope to gain considerable political mileage over political parties in Arunachal, particularly the Congress. Ethnic issues have thus become an important component of the politics of Arunachal Pradesh and the AAPSU seems to have emerged as a major player in this politics in the absence of any significant agent capable of articulating demands of the society on such issues vigorously and effectively.

Notes

1. See Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism – Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi, 1991), pp.307-308. This is particularly true in the case of India which, after partition, became a destination for migrants from neighbouring East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, resulting in ethnic tension in all the states of North East India.
2. George de Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism" in George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross (eds.), *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change* (California, 1975), p.16.
3. For discussion see Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge, 1966), pp.41-44.
4. Paul R. Brass, op. cit., pp.22-23.
5. For discussion, see Susmita Sen Gupta, "Ethnic Issues and All Arun-

- achal Pradesh Students' Union" in *Proceedings of the North east India Political Science Association*, Seventh Annual Conference, December, 1997, p.40.
6. See Paul R. Brass, op. cit., p.47.
 7. Ibid., p.344.
 8. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, 1973, p.421.
 9. Cited in an appeal made by the President, Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh, to the members of Parliament on August 8, 1995.
 10. Ultimatum submitted by the AAPSU to the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1st August 1986. Also see K.K. Jhunjhunwala's comments in *Eastern Panorama*, October 1994.
 11. *An Appeal* published by Organizing Committee Peoples' Referendum rally (AAPSU was in the forefront of the Committee).
 12. Cited in the *Summary of Workshop on Indigenous/Tribal Peoples' Right of Self-Determination and Self-Government*. Organized by North East Indigenous/Tribal Peoples' Forum (NEITPF) on 1 and 2 April 1995 at Itanagar, under the auspices of AAPSU, p.2.
 13. See the leaflet titled *Chakma and Hajong Refugees Problems in Arunachal Pradesh – Why We Demand Deportation?* Published by the Peoples' Referendum Rally for Deportation of Chakma and Hajong Refugees from Arunachal Pradesh, September 1995.
 14. See, for instance, Rabijit Choudhury, "Arunachal Chakmas Struggle for Their Rights", *The Statesman*, 29 September 1994.
 15. See the report titled "Arunachal Assembly Expresses Resentment on Grant of Citizenship to Chakmas", *Eastern Panorama*, October 1994.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Cited in the *Summary of Workshop*, etc., op.cit., p.3.
 18. See the cover story titled "Arunachal Heading for Bloodbath", *Eastern Panorama*, October 1994, p.32.
 19. Cited by Tado Karlo, "Plight of the Natives", *Times of India*, New Delhi, 2 December 1994.