

Rise of Chakma Ethnic Consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh: An Instrumentalist approach

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Abstract: *Chakmas are one of the ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh with their distinct identity, who are acutely conscious of their political status as Stateless People, therefore, they have been fighting for their citizenship right and Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe Status (APST) in the state for last forty five years. However, their demands have not been fulfilled by the State Government of Arunachal Pradesh or by the Government of India so far. It is in this context that the present article attempts to comprehend the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh due to the denial of the civil and political rights. It further highlights the various issues that have played in the formation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in the state between the Chakma ethnic group and other tribal groups in the state. This article tries to focus on these issues through an instrumentalist approach.*

(Key Words: *Ethnicity, Citizenship right, Arunachal Pradesh scheduled tribe Human right, Instrumentalist approach*).

I. INTRODUCTION

The North-Eastern region of India exhibits unique features in terms of its social, economic, and demographic characteristics. The region's frontier is peopled by several ethnic groups such as Nagas, Mizos, Khasi, Garo, Adi, Khampti, Monpa, Chakmas and others. The Chakmas are one of the ethnic tribal groups in South Asia, who have for centuries inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. They are Mongoloid by race and Buddhist by faith, having their own distinct way of life, language, value and culture. The Chakma speaks mixed language of Bengali, Pali and Sanskrit written in Burmese script. Presently Chakmas are living in CHT (Bangladesh), Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh states in India and Arakan Hill in Myanmar. It is important note that the Chakmas are included in the scheduled tribe list in the states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Assam except in Arunachal Pradesh, where they are still *Stateless* due to denial of basic civil and political rights. However, their exact total population figure is not known in above mention states, due to the absence and non-availability of reliable census records. Their population and distribution patterns are taken from different sources like newspaper, reports, journals and studies conducted by various scholars and organisation (Khobung 2014:137). After the Chakma migrated into Indian states of Tripura, Mizoram and NEFA, which began in April-May 1986, the Chakma issue had ascended to national and international prominence by attracting the attention of not only the Central Government, the National Human Rights Commission and Supreme Court of India, but also several international human right organisations such as United Nation Human Right Commission (UNHRC). Thus, the present work seeks to understand the cause of the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh due to their continued *Stateless* status. At outset, however, it may be relevant to briefly deal with some theoretical aspects of ethnicity.

Some Conceptual and Theoretical Aspect

In contemporary discourses of social sciences, an ethnic group is generally understood and characterized in terms of a multiplicity of attributes-religion, sect, caste, region, language, nationality, descent, race, colour and culture. These attributes, singly or in different combinations, are used to define ethnic groups and ethnicity (Oommen 1997:35). Glazer and Moynihan (1963) viewed ethnic group as interest groups competing for the benefits from welfare state. Racial, religious and linguistic groups are included in this definition, which views ethnicity as a resource used by deprived immigrants groups (quoted in Oommen 1997:36). Oommen (1997) viewed ethnicity as a product of conquest, colonization and immigration and consequent disengagement between culture and territory. George De Vos defines ethnicity as 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of people.....of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups'. Paul Brass, however, modifies the last phrase to read 'in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups' (quoted in Kumar 2012:168). Brass, therefore, observes that 'ethnicity is to

ethnic category, as class consciousness is to class' (*ibid*: 168). The phenomenon of ethnicity is the expressive aspect of ethnic group identities. We keep the above definitions in view as we proceed along.

As the phenomenon of 'ethnicity' is very varied and complex, different approaches have been adopted by scholars to understand the process. There are mainly three approaches to the study of ethnicity - 'Primordial', 'Constructivist' and 'Instrumentalist'. Primordial conceptualises ethnicity as an 'ascribed identity', a status which is given to an individual or which one inherits from one's ancestor and this ascribed identity are fundamental and fixed (Bell 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1975). Constructionist on the other hand, argues that ethnic identities are not given; they are socially constructed through cultural, historical and political processes (Nagel 1994; Oommen 1997; Sollars 1980). That is, ethnic groups are not static but dynamic and fluid, and ethnicity is a reaction to changing conditions.

On the contrary, the instrumentalist argues that ethnicity is an instrument to get social, political and economic benefits. According to this theoretical framework, people become ethnic and remain ethnic when their ethnicity is valuable to them and gives significant returns to them. The functional advantages of ethnicity range from "the moral and material support provided by ethnic networks to political gains made through ethnic bloc voting". Glazer and Moynihan (1975), who are among the pioneers of this school, are of the view that ethnicity is not simply a mix of affective sentiments, but like class and nationality it is also a means of political mobilisation for advancing group interests (quoted in Yang 2000:46).

Thus, according to the Instrumentalist, ethnic affiliation is a strategy to get benefits; ethnicity is used as an instrument to achieve various gains. The correspondence of shared interests and shared identities promotes group solidarity and thereby provides the basis for ethnic organization and mobilization.

The Chakmas

Chakmas are amongst the first sufferers of development-induced-displacement in modern South Asia. The construction of the Kaptai Hydro Electric Dam in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in early 1961 had turned some 100,000 people into 'environmental refugees', with the Buddhist Chakmas constituting the single largest ethnic block of affected people who became landless, with their prime cultivable land submerged under water (Singh 2010). An added reason was the religious persecution of the Chakmas by the Pakistani authorities and blending the ethnic Mongoloid Chakma community with the Bengali Muslim. In the absence of adequate compensation for their loss, at the same time, due to the consistent subjection to political torture and religious abuse at the hands of the then East Pakistani regime. Further, under Pakistani rule, cases of frequent rioting, looting and robbery occurred. These were made by the Majority (i.e Muslims) on the minorities in North Mymensing district. All the immovable properties of the Minority communities were looted, houses were set on fire and movable properties were forcibly taken away by the majority community in East Pakistan. When the CHT became part of the erstwhile East Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, Chakmas and other tribal group of CHT had to face economic exploitation as well as religious persecution. After the emergence of Bangladesh in December 1971, the situation instead of improving, worsened as the Government of Bangladesh revoked the special status that the ethnic tribals had been enjoying under the 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation Act of 1900'¹ (Debbarma and George 1993:63). Thus, the insecurity of life, loss of land and livelihood due to large-scale submergence, and fear of politico-religious persecution under the East Pakistan regime. The Chakmas of CHT were left with no option, but to cross over to India for refuge and security. As a result, the Chakmas fled their country in thousands and sought refuge in the north-eastern territories of India such as in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal. According to Brigadier Sailo, the then Chief Minister of Mizoram about 40,000 Chakmas had entered Mizoram in 1983 and in April-May 1986 about 55,000 Chakmas entered the Indian state of Tripura. Chakma ethnic group crossed over into India with motive of living with their ethnic brethren who had earlier settled in Tripura but Tripura government had to take a tough stand because of the already existing heavy burden of immigrants on their land(Dutta 2005:151). Thus, on the humanitarian ground, the Government of India rehabilitated them in North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) which later became Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. The Central government may have thought of NEFA for the relocation of the Chakma ethnic group because of their religious affinity with other local Buddhist tribes such as the Khamptis and Singphos in Tirap and the Monpas and Sherdukpens in Kameng districts and hence, settled them near these tribal groups in the state but all these groups continued to retain their distinct ethnic identities and culture (Chakraborty 2001:163). Since then Chakmas have been staying in Chowkham in Lohit district; Miao, Bordumsa and Diyun in then Tirap (now Changlang since 1987); and Balijan and Kokila in the Lower Subansari (now Papumpare since 1999) district of Arunachal Pradesh. The total number of families rehabilitated in Tirap district was 1,976 which constituted a population of 16,000. Also, nearly 300 families were settled in Lower Subansiri and Lohit district with equal share of total Chakma population estimated approximately as 4,500 in both of these districts (Talukdar 1988:104).

Currently, Chakmas are one of the ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh, who are Mongoloid by race and Buddhist by faith. They have their own way of life, language, value and culture as well as certain distinctive customs and are acutely conscious of their political status as *Stateless people* with no access to any civil and political rights as they are not considered as citizens of India. Whereas, till the end of 1970s, the basic rights and other facilities enjoyed by the Chakmas were withdrawn by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh due to mounting pressures on the Central Government by local political parties and All Arunachal Pradesh Student Union (AAPSU) for the repatriation of the Chakmas in the interest of other tribal group of the state (Prasad 2013:118). However, having lived in their new place of settlement for more than four decades, with a sizeable number born and brought up here, Chakmas have no desire to be repatriated, and hence they demand Indian citizenship and Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe Status (APST).

While the Central Government has consistently held the position that the claim of Chakmas to Indian citizenship is legitimate under the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972², under this act it states that they need to be protected and their claims of citizenship need to be considered as per applicable procedure. The Chakmas in the state are demanding for both citizenship right and Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe status (APST)³ for last four decades. The State Government of Arunachal Pradesh is not against the grant of citizenship right to the Chakmas but on the other hand the State Government, the student body such as AAPSUs and other tribal groups are irreconcilably against to the grant of APST status and their permanent settlement in the state. On the contrary, Chakmas stress on the need for the simultaneous grant of APST status along with Citizenship right which, they believe would lead to their fuller integration into the social-political fabric of the state with equal right over land without which they cannot survive in Arunachal Pradesh. The State Government is of the view that the question of citizenship is the prerogative of the Central government which it can willy-nilly grant to the Chakmas, but not before taking them out of the state. This is so because, the State Government views the very nature of Chakma settlement to be problematic in view of the 'protected area' status that Arunachal Pradesh has been enjoying since the colonial period (Singh 2010:138). It is due to such vehement opposition from the State Government, AAPSU and other tribals that have made Chakma ethnic group deprived of Citizenship right and all attendant rights for the last four decades.

Social, Economic and Political Conditions of the Chakma Ethnic Group

There were systematic attempts by the AAPSU to 'drive out' the Chakma ethnic group by organising attacks, evictions, blockade of all sorts against the Chakma ethnic group. Even their basic rights and other facilities such as education, health care, employment, trade license, and ration card enjoyed by the Chakma ethnic group were withdrawn by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1980, the State Government banned the employment of Chakma ethnic group. It stopped issuing trade licenses and all previously issued were seized in 1994. Their employment options were thus effectively sealed off (Thakur 2011:37).

Furthermore, in 1982 AAPSU launched a campaign demanding not to give admission to the Chakma students into schools and colleges. To press their demand they had called "All Arunachal Bandh" from 17th to 20th July, 1982. This came as a great set back to the Chakma students. In the wake of this, they were deprived of facilities like book grants, hostel accommodation, stipend etc (Talukdar 1988:104). As a result, the literacy rate is very low among them.

Furthermore, there are no provisions for medical aid for the Chakmas and no immunization project to protect them and their children from epidemics. Significantly many Chakmas, particularly, the children, died of simple diseases and epidemics.

The economic condition of Chakmas is so poor that even after fifty years of independences they are living under the Below Poverty Line (BPL). The three districts of the state where entire settlement of Chakma ethnic group are concentrated is largely on the banks of rivers which always remain flooded in rainy seasons and cause lots of destruction to life and property (Prasad 2013:110). In addition, with the reservation and privatisation of forest ownership, the control and use of the forest land became limited only to the rightful owners. This came as a great setback to the Chakma ethnic group as their access to the forest was restricted to certain areas only and it indirectly affected their economic condition.

Politically, also, very few Chakma ethnic groups are enrolled in the electoral list and they are voting without any choice as they are forced to vote for a particular political party instead of the party they want to support and vote for. Many of the Chakmas who are born in India are still waiting for their enrolment in the electoral roll but their application has been rejected many times starting from 2004 (Prasad 2013:107). As a result, the socio-economic and political conditions of Chakma ethnic group continue to remain unsatisfactory even after four decades of their stay in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Consciousness

There are various factors that have played in the formation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in the state between the Chakma ethnic group and other tribal groups which have become one of the main problems for peaceful co-existence and well being. The growing population of Chakma ethnic group, which is estimated to be 65,000 approximately since the 1970s (due to lack of any accurate figure on their total number) is one of the greatest concerns. According to a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India in May 1994, the AAPSU alleged that the number of Chakma population had shot up to one lakh within a short span of three decades. It has become a crucial issue for the other tribal group because they found that the demographic balance of the certain areas especially Changlang District was tilting in favour of Chakma ethnic group. The Tangsas, Singphos and Khampis main tribal groups of Changlang District have already become a minority in the assembly segments of Bordumsa, Diyun and Miao.

In relation to the above mentioned problem is the problem of encroachment of land by the growing Chakma population. Initially in 1964, the Chakma ethnic group were allotted a fixed area of 10,799 acres of land for homesteads and cultivation, but with the growth in their population, they spilled over into adjacent land, forest and grass lands for housing and farming belonging to other tribal groups. One of the best examples can be of the intrusion that has damaged the flora and fauna of even Namdapha Tiger Project area in Changlang District. Further state government, viewed that their presence is causing 'irreparable damage' to the fragile ecology of Arunachal Pradesh. In Miao subdivision a committee constituted by the state government found that an area of some 872 hectares was encroached upon by 788 families. The Chakma ethnic group were also 'covertly engaged in illegal timber business in Changlang and its neighbouring Lohit district' (ArunKumar 2011:108). The large scale encroachment on forests affected the customary rights of the other tribal group over forest adversely. This problem had generated conflict between other tribal group and Chakma ethnic group in past leading to even physical clashes in several cases. In addition, the encroachers' alleged involvement in 'criminal' and 'anti-national' activities is perceived by the State Government and other tribal group as yet another ground for the latter's continuing opposition to their permanent settlement in Arunachal Pradesh.

Yet, another ground on which the other tribal group take recourse is the 'we-they' and 'us-them' dichotomy. Most of the other tribal group emphasised that they are 'different' from the Chakma ethnic group in terms of their cultural moorings and ethnic make-up. Consciousness of distinctiveness in terms of cultural differences of other tribal group and Chakma ethnic group is playing an important part in the emergence of ethno-cultural sentiments. Further, other tribal groups believed that ethno-religious affinity in itself cannot be the basis for ethnic intermixing of people (Singh 2010:195). The immigrant Chakma speaks a different language and has different cultural affinities. They fear that the immigrant would pollute the ideological and cultural purity that they have preserved for centuries. These ethnic differences seem to have both sharpened the sense of identity with one's own community and reduced empathy and fellow-feeling between members of Chakma ethnic group and other tribal groups.

Due to such factors the other tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh want to deport the Chakmas from their state. These groups have raised their voice against the Central Government's decision to settle Chakma ethnic group in the state permanently, which they understand, might endanger the prevailing peace in the state with all its attendant social, economic and political consequences. Moreover, the decision of the Central Government to settle the Chakma ethnic group permanently in the state are variously viewed by the other tribal group as 'unilateral', 'arbitrary', 'illegal', in nature as they feel that they were neither consulted nor taken into account before settling these 'refugees' in the state as the then NEFA was directly under the control of Central Government. Thus, most of the other tribal groups explained the decision of Central Government as violation of the constitutional safeguards provided to the indigenous people of the state under various acts such as the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873; the Chin Hills Acts, 1896; and the Sixth Schedule of the constitution (D.O. letter No. GA-71, dated 10th April 1964).

Rise of Chakma Ethnic Consciousness

In the absence of the grant of citizenship by the Government of India and denial to their basic human rights, the Chakma ethnic group have been mobilising their ethnic identity of *Statelessness* as an instrument to achieve citizenship right and Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe Status (APST) in Arunachal Pradesh for last four decades to improve the well being of their community. However, their demands as well as their citizenship right have not been fulfilled by the state government as they are variously viewed as 'environmental\developmental refugees', 'foreigners', 'aliens', 'stateless', and so on by other tribal groups in the state (Singh 2010:153). Due to denial of basic human rights for the last four decades, Chakma ethnic group feels that they have been subjected to neglect and poverty over the years. These feelings among the Chakma ethnic group have been further accentuated by the tremendous progress made by their fellow tribes men in the other North-Eastern

states particularly in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, where they are included in the Scheduled Tribes and enjoy all the rights and facilities guaranteed by the constitution of India (Khobung 2014:137). The problems of Chakma ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh have been ignored by both State and Central Government for the last four decades. These deprived conditions over the years have led to the growth of Chakma ethnic consciousness which resulted in the growth of ethnic conflicts between them and other tribal groups in the state. Which led to the formation of the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP) 1991, to pursue their grievances and challenged the government in court over its continued inaction. The leaders of CCRCAP claim to be that it is well-versed with the problem of the Chakma ethnic group and are spearheading the movement for their citizenship rights (Times of India 1994). Therefore, as a result of continued deprivation from basic rights Chakma ethnic group in the state have been using their *Statelessness* as an instrument for ethnic mobilisation to meet their needs.

II. CONCLUSION

The study unravels the trajectory of *Statelessness* of the Chakma ethnic group due to denial of their minimum rights which has led to consequent unsatisfactory social, economic and political conditions. The basic facilities and amenities such as education, healthcare facilities and the right to employment earlier withdrawn by the Arunachal Pradesh authorities have not been restored. As a result, the socio-economic and political conditions of Chakma continue to remain unsatisfactory. It is alleged that these are major cases of human right violations to Chakma ethnic group settled in Arunachal Pradesh. They cannot go back to their home country as their lands have been occupied by 'others' and they have lost their families, home, land and property and the Bangladesh Government has remained indifferent to the plight of the Chakma ethnic group. The study further highlights the various issues that have led to ethnic conflict and ethnicity formation, which had led to the deterioration of their relation and caused perpetual clashes and confrontation.

The continued discrimination, domination, exploitation, oppression and harassment faced by Chakma ethnic group over the years have contributed to the growth of Chakma ethnic consciousness and have mobilised the people on *Statelessness* as an instrument to formulate the new Chakma political identity and sought to improve the well-being of the community. However, their demands have not been fulfilled by the State Government in Arunachal Pradesh nor by the Central Government. The present demand for the grant of citizenship and scheduled Tribes status by the Chakma ethnic group clearly shows that they are not only willing to move out of the state, but also they are politically conscious and quite determined to stay permanently in the state. Yet, so far, Government has not been able to play their due role in ameliorating the sufferings of these people and their struggle for self-identity. Thus, the issues have remained unresolved with no tangible solution in sight. Against such social, political and economic background, Thus in words of Prasad (2013) "the future of Chakma ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh remain quite uncertain and unpredictable as they continue to remain outside the purview of state sovereign, without any hope of being able to determine their future ethnic identity".

End notes: .

- 1) Under the British rule in India, the CHT was accorded the status of an 'Excluded Area' under the CHT Regulation Act of 1900 which meant that other than the ethnic tribals no one was allowed to live and settle in CHT area.
- 2) Under the Indira-Mujib Agreement 1972 it was decided that the Chakma refugees who came to India from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) before 25:3:1971 would be considered for grant of Indian Citizenship (For full text see, Government of Arunachal Pradesh 1996:60).
- 3) Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe (APST) status: Arunachal Pradesh has enjoyed special protected status since colonial period under acts such as Bengal Eastern Frontier regulation act 1873 under section 2 and 7. The act requires other non-native Indians to obtain the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to enter into any part of state. It also restricts acquisition of land inside the state by an individual other than a native.

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