

THE GREAT EXODUS OF THE CHAKMAS AND ITS AFTERMATH: AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of migration is experienced by the human race for ages. History has witnessed massive movements of people over great distances to establish a livelihood and to find a secure home. These uprootedness, exile and forced displacement be they due to conflict, persecution or even so-called „development“, are conditions which characterize the lives of millions of people across the. However, it became a cause of concern only since the beginning of the twentieth century when the economic development processes, political alignments, socio-cultural aspirations and environmental conditions worked together to erect political and territorial borders around ethno-cultural communities for which global population flows became a hindrance. India is considered as the most sought-after destination by immigrants from neighboring countries. According to a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs report, India was ranked ninth in terms of the number of international migrants (5,436,012) in 2010 and to account for 2.5 per cent of all international migrants. Numerous studies have been conducted on resettlement and rehabilitation of these displaced persons and focused on the social, political and economic factors which have acted as push factors in attracting migrants. But none of them has contented with the ground situation of their ultimate settlement process. Indeed, this is one of the stories that relates to the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh where certain questions on socio- economic and political status of these migrants even after their settlement in India still remain unanswered. Therefore, the present study has been carried out based on secondary sources of information to make an attempt to highlight and analyze the root cause that had sustained the massive displacement of [Chakmas](#) from their homeland to a new place of unknown.

THE CHAKMAS: AN IMPRESSION

The origin and history of the [Chakmas](#) varies on different views of different scholars. Due to the lack of written literature on the history of the [Chakmas](#), it is very difficult to trace the beginning of the [Chakmas](#). Therefore, the origin of the [Chakmas](#) is veiled in legends. But one popular view among the [Chakmas](#) is that they came from a place called Champaknagar in the Kingdom of Anga and descendants of one of the Princes of the kingdom – Bijoygiri. The Chakmas believe that they belong to the ancient Sakya clan, in which the Great Buddha was born. However, the modern [Chakmas](#) are the original inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), who are perhaps the least known people of Asia being the residents of a remote and backward area which is of little political or economic consequence. This place has been the homeland of the [Chakmas](#) particularly for centuries. It is argued that they had probably settled in the CHT at least as early as the sixteenth century. However, it is learnt that from 1052 A.D onwards the [Chakmas](#) started moving from Arakan into the bordering area of Bengal right down the plain areas of Chittagong and made it their home (Talukdar, 1994). . It is in this stratum, there is evidence of mentioning a place known as „Chacomas“ is found in central CHT, probably referring to the land inhabited by the [Chakmas](#) in the 1550s, where a Burmese king claims himself to be the highest and most powerful king of Arakan, Tippera (Tripura), of Chacomas and of Bengala. The [Chakmas](#) are one of the important tribes in the Indian subcontinent residing mostly in the CHT (Bangladesh) and in the North-Eastern Indian States like Tripura (North and South), Arunachal Pradesh (Tirap, Changlang, Subansuri and Lohit districts), Assam (Langsilet area of Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts), Mizoram (Western Belts) and also in West Bengal, where a few [Chakma](#) families are found. A commendable number is also found in the Chin Province and Arakan Province of Myanmar. [Chakmas](#) are known differently to different people. For example, Thek, Tsek, Chek or Kyoorchu by the Burmese; Tuithek (pronounced Tuichek) by the Kukis; Takam (pronounced Chakam) by the modern Mizos. Capt. T.H. Lewin in his book “The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein” called them [Chukma](#) (Hoque, 2013). Today, even though the word „Chakma“ has been framed as the name of the tribe, but they never called them as Chakma, instead they call themselves as, Changma” when they introduce each other. Similar to other indigenous peoples of the world, the Chakma people were also independent on their own before the British colonial period. They had powerful kings who had ruled the [Chakma](#) Kingdom for several centuries. It is believed that the Chakma Kingdom was founded in Chittagong in around 1550s. It was only in the year 1860 that the British annexed their kingdom and separated it into the two districts- Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Chittagong became a part of the Bengal Province and was rapidly settled by Bengali people, where the British made CHT an autonomous administrative district within the undivided British Bengal. In the CHT, the hill tribes benefited from British Administration as they were considered as „British tributaries“ and not subjects and retained authority in their internal affairs as the British role was mainly limited only to collection of annual tax in cotton or in cash. Subsequently they received protection under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual Regulation of 1900 (the CHT Manual). Throughout the British colonial period the 1900 Act functioned as a safeguard for the Jumma people, prohibited land ownership and migrations of non-indigenous peoples in the CHT. Subsequently, provision of the special status of the Chittagong Hill Tracts was further underlined with the

Government of India Act 1935 to designate the district as a „Totally Excluded Area“ for the safeguards of indigenous inhabitants and to restrict permanent settlement and acquisition of land by the outsiders (Sahni, 2009).

MASS DISPLACEMENT OF THE CHAKMAS

In the years after the Second World War, the world has witnessed a large number of political upheavals in many countries. Among these, the European and the Third World countries particularly the South Asian countries are the most affected. Reasons for such disturbances range from simple political rivalry, regional conflicts, ethnic issues and unequal distribution of natural resources and development projects to, simple persecution of people of minorities by one country to those of another, one region to another region due to racial discrimination (Kharat, 2003). Such disturbances has led massive displacements of masses that have left bitter memories in the minds of people as they led millions of people homeless, disconnecting them with their own homelands, families, properties etc. One of such massive flows of people in South Asia that took place during this period is the flight of thousands of [Chakmas](#) from their homeland to the places of unknown. Here, in this section an attempt has been made to highlight some of the causes that led the catastrophic displacement of the Chakmas that changed their destinies. In the years after the Second World War, the world has witnessed a large number of political upheavals in many countries. Among these, the European and the Third World countries particularly the South Asian countries are the most affected. Reasons for such disturbances range from simple political rivalry, regional conflicts, ethnic issues and unequal distribution of natural resources and development projects to, simple persecution of people of minorities by one country to those of another, one region to another region due to racial discrimination (Kharat, 2003). Such disturbances have led massive displacements of masses that have left bitter memories in the minds of people as they led millions of people homeless, disconnecting them with their own homelands, families, properties etc. One of such massive flows of people in South Asia that took place during this period is the flight of thousands of [Chakmas](#) from their homeland to the places of unknown. Here, in this section an attempt has been made to highlight some of the causes that led the catastrophic displacement of the Chakmas that changed their destinies.

(a) Partition of India: The pathetic lives of the Chakma people were shattered during the Partition of India in 1947 as the sub-continent was divided on the basis of religion. In the beginning it was assured to the Chakma people by Indian officials that the CHT would remain within India after the partition due to the Chakmas“ preference on religious and ethnic grounds. But Sir Cyril Radcliffe, Chairman of Bengal Boundary Commission didn’t pay attention to the voices of the ethnic tribes (98.5% Buddhist) and was in the cruellest manner ceded the CHT district to Pakistan (Prasad, 2012). Following that the Chakma and new Indian leaders attempted to renegotiate the CHT annexation with the Prime Minister of Pakistan but did not meet with success. Hence, the movement of the Chakmas started just days after the Partition of India as the partition had not justified their demand for the inclusion of their homeland with the Indian Union.

(b) Violation of CHT Manual: During British rule, ownership of land of the indigenous people was protected under the 1900 Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual, which prohibited the

permanent settlement and transfer of land to people from outside the hill tracts. But, after the partition the Pakistani government looked at the ethnic people with an eye of suspicion for being anti-Pakistani during the partition. Therefore, the indigenous people were discriminated in jobs, business and education. Dissatisfying with these moves, the Pakistani government deliberately amended the CHT Manual of 1900 several times during the 1950"s resulting in the systemic abuse and misappropriation of the land and resources, which the outcome has proved to cruelly crush on the identity, culture, religion and aspirations of the hill people (Singh, 1996b). This budge was undertaken by the Pakistani government against the wishes of the ethnic people in order to find a legal excuse for migration of non-indigenous people into the CHT.

(c) Religious Persecution: After the partition of British India in 1947, one of the worst motives of the Pakistan government towards the indigenous people of CHT was to create them the fear of religious persecution. The Government favoured the mass influx of Bengali Muslim settlers into the CHT where hundreds of thousands tribal population were inhabited. Therefore, it was a tough time for the Chakmas and other ethnic tribes of CHT to fiddle with the Muslim infiltrators in the region since there was a quite variation existed between them and the latter in terms of living, livelihood, beliefs and faith. Hence, the mass influx of Muslim settlers into the CHT where people mostly practised Buddhism sustained mass displacement of Chakmas into India.

(d) Construction of Kaptai Dam: Another very havocking event during the Pakistani regime is the construction of Kaptai Hydro-electric Dam in 1960"s across the Borgang River (Kharnaphuli) located in the scenic landscape of Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Dam was supposed to provide benefits in terms of hydropower, flood control, irrigation and drainage, navigation and enhanced forest resource harvesting. However, it has become a different story in the history of the Chakmas. During construction, the dam flooded an area of some 655 km² which included about 40% of best arable land (most of which belonged to the Chakma) disappeared. The lake took away the homes of 18,000 families and displaced 100,000 tribal people, of which 70% were Chakma. The dam also submerged the original Rangamati town, the palace of the Chakma Raja. A rather casual attempt was made to rehabilitate this large group of people on the upper reaches of the rivers Kasalong and Chengi and in the low-lying areas of Langadu, Barkal and Bhaghaichari. However, much of this resettlement area had gone underwater by 1962 as the reservoir gradually filled up, causing many to be displaced for the second time (Parveen and Faisal, 2002). Non-governmental sources said that project rehabilitation and compensation measures were inadequate and in fact many did not receive any compensation at all. Thus, in the absence of any compensation most of the evicted families had left the country. Though the exact number is not officially identified some estimates say that around 1,00,000 Chakmas were displaced from their homeland. Amongst the displaced Chakmas, a good number of them decided to migrate to India. Most of them finally rehabilitated in NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) by the Government of India where they are still fighting for official recognition of their status in India and are still languishing as stateless people in Arunachal Pradesh. The entire chapter of this huge displacement of human still resonates deeply in collective psyche of the CHT indigenous peoples, which the Chakmas came to call ***Bar Parang*** or ***The Great Exodus***.

SETTLEMENT PROCESS IN INDIA

The Chakmas are amongst the first victims of development-induced displacement in modern South Asia. Due to the religious persecution and the malevolence led by the construction of Kaptai Dam by the East Pakistan, they have no choice left behind them but to flee from their native homeland to a new place of unknown. Some estimates say that around a hundred thousand of Chakmas who were the victims of these worse consequences fled into India in the 1960"s. The Indian government had nothing to do but to accept them as refugees on humanitarian grounds, as the government was well aware that they were betrayed during the Partition of India too. A large number of these displaced Chakmas were then settled in Arunachal Pradesh (the then NEFA) after due consultation with the local leaders. The Government of India relocated them in the districts of Lohit, Changlang, and Papumpare under a „Definite Plan of Rehabilitation“ with five acres of land per family. For proper establishment of their shattered life the Government of India extended all possible kind of helps including financial aids, employment, trade, license, migration certificates etc.

Finally, it was under the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972, which determined that it would be the responsible of India and not Bangladesh for all migrants who entered India before 25 March 1971. Hence, in the Agreement it was decided that the refugees who came to India from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) before 25 March 1971 will be considered for grant of Indian Citizenship (SAHRDC, 1997). The total population of the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh stood at 65,000 according to the 2001 census (Dutta, 2002). Thus, there can be no question that the Chakmas are of Indian origin and have been residing in Arunachal Pradesh for around fifty years. In fact, one cannot also dispute the contention that it was the Government of India who deliberately settled the Chakmas in the then NEFA in 1960"s. 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.

POLITICS OF IDENTIY

The Chakmas have been sheltered by the Government of India and are residing in the state of Arunachal Pradesh since the calamitous Great Exodus (Bar Parang) that took place in the 1960"s. The Government"s policy on these refugees was to grant citizenship as they are originated from areas that were part of Undivided India. However, the story of the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh is still different even after fifty years as they are not yet granted Indian Citizenship despite the fact that they were issued valid migration certificates at the time of their arrival in India and repeated assurances from the central government to grant them citizenship. Further, a very large proportion of these refugees would have been born in India and therefore would be automatically entitled to the grant of citizenship, but they are compelled to continue as stateless people.

Status of Chakmas in the Northeast and Eastern States of India States of India

Status	Scheduled	Status	Total Population
Arunachal Pradesh	Refugees	Refugees	60,000
Assam	Citizens	ST	5,000
Meghalaya	Citizens	ST	610
Mizoram	Citizens	ST	71,283
Tripura	Citizens	ST	64,293
West Bengal	Citizens	ST	3,000

Source: Office of the Registrar General, Government of India, 2001 on Population

Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh who came to India before fifty years have been fighting for their basic fundamental rights, i.e., right to life to survive and their waiting for the grant of citizenship and scheduled tribe status, even though their brethren on the other side in Mizoram, Tripura, West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya and some other migrants (tribes) were granted citizenship along with other rights as accorded under Article 342 of the Constitution (Karat, 2003). Hence, the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh had to form a committee known as the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP) in 1991. Nevertheless, in response to that the State Government of Arunachal Pradesh became more hostile and started inciting sectarian violence against the Chakmas. Hence, the Supreme Court of India had to intervene in the internal affairs of Arunachal Pradesh and in its interim order on 2 November 1995 directed the State Government to “ensure that the Chakmas situated in its territory are not ousted by any coercive action, not in accordance with law” (SAHRDC, 1997). Further, the National Human Rights Commission had moved the Supreme Court in 1996 pleading for protection of lives and properties of the Chakma refugees in view of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students’ Union (AAPSU) movement. The Supreme Court in its judgment on 9 January 1996 on this petition directed the Arunachal Pradesh government to ensure life and personal liberty of every Chakma residing within the state. The Apex Court also directed the state government to enter the applications for Indian citizenships submitted by the Chakmas under Section 5 of the Citizenship Act in the register maintained for the purpose. In this regard, M.M. Jacob, Governor of Arunachal Pradesh for a while in 1996 and former Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, while expressing the view of the Central Government stated that,

“The presence of these Chakmas in the area has also not resulted so far in any major law and order problems though some isolated instances of friction between locals and these Chakmas have come to our notice.... That the Central Team which visited Arunachal Pradesh to study the problems of these refugees expressed the view that the grant of citizenship would introduce an element of responsible social behavior in these refugees” (Singh, 1996a). He further added, “Refugees from Bangladesh who came to India between 1964 and March 25, 1971 are eligible to the grant of citizenship according to the policy of the Government, as most of the migrants have already been granted citizenship”. Therefore, “Keeping the above in view there is no question of deporting these refugees from the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The general public in the state will have to be convinced that the burden of rehabilitation of the refugees will have to be shared by the country as a whole including Arunachal Pradesh” (Singh, 2001).

Notwithstanding the clear and unambiguous order of the Supreme Court, the

State Government of Arunachal Pradesh has not taken any measure to implement the court's directions. Rather, the State Government has undertaken various measures to undermine and violate the Supreme Court judgment. The government is yet to take a decision on 4,677 applications for grant of citizenship, submitted by the Chakma and other refugees (such as Hajongs) through CCRCAP. However, with the intervention of the Election Commission of India, names of 1,497 Chakma and Hajong youths born in Arunachal Pradesh between 1964 and 1987 were included in the electoral roll for the first time and allowed to exercise their franchise during the 2004 Lok Sabha polls (Talukdar, 2008).

Today, Chakmas are the largest refugee group and second largest population group in the Arunachal Pradesh. The fact is that the Chakmas is a majority group and if granted citizenship and concurrent political rights, the Arunachalees fear that the political equation can easily change in favour of the refugees (Goswami, 2007). In view of countering the citizenship drive of the Chakmas the State Government has been making the conditions of the Chakmas untenable by denying them fundamental rights such as right to education and other basic facilities such as health care, employment facilities. Other measures included a complete halt to any development activities, refusal to provide trade licenses, refusal to deploy teachers in the schools located in the Chakma areas³. During all these years, the Chakmas are facing hostility from the natives of Arunachal Pradesh too. While the central government has expressed its firm determination to grant citizenship to the Chakmas, the state government does not view citizenship to be an issue at all⁴. However, time has changed, the world is changing; now time has come for the people of Arunachal Pradesh has to understand that the legal part of the Constitution which provide certain rights to the Chakma refugees to settle in the state.

SOCIO- ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Chakmas are classically divided into three main groups: Anokya Chakma, Tongchangya Chakma and Doinakya Chakma. However, there is another group of Chakmas found in Arakan in the Roang province who are less known even to the common Chakmas. They are known as Roangya Chakmas according to the name of their dwelling place (Jahirul Hoque, 2013). Traditionally, Chakmas are Buddhist and officially follow Theravada form of the Buddhism. Chakmas are divided into clans (gojas), which are further subdivided into sub-clans (guttis). The social condition of the Chakmas is very rich. They do not have caste system or any type of division we see in other religions. Socially, they live and eat together, and participate in all the occasions without any differences. They marry freely without any restriction based on rich, poor etc. The Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh are economically poor and it is difficult to believe that even after sixty years of Independence vast sections of the society are living under such abject poverty. The government does not have any plan for these marginalized sections of the society. Not a single scheme of Government of India is being attempted by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh as well as any civil society to bring some necessary economic changes to improve the conditions of the poor Chakmas in all the three districts of the state (Prasad, 2010). At present, nearly 50,000 Chakma are living under difficult economic conditions in Arunachal Pradesh without any public infrastructure and supply. About 55% of the Chakma are illiterate; they enjoy only little or no medical care at all. Roads do not exist and there are only very few schools, most of them provide up to 4 or 5 class-level educations only. The majority of

the Chakma are farmers who earn the livelihood for their families from rice cultivation under difficult conditions. The educational opportunities in the region are totally inadequate. 50% of the Chakma never went to school. If children are enrolled at a school parents have to pay roughly 70% of their total household income. Health care services are a tremendous problem in many remote villages, not even mentioning the lack of clean drinking water.

CONCLUSION

The world has witnessed a number of massive displacements of various groups of people throughout centuries. Such major flows of people that took place in India in the 20th century were the Indo-Pak refugee flows in 1947-48, involving nearly 15 million Hindus and Muslims; the exodus of Burmese Indians numbering about 1 million during 1948-65; the exodus of Sri Lankan Indians and Tamils to the tune of about 1 million since 1954 onwards; the flight of almost 10 million from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to India during 1971 Indo-Pak War (Samaddar, 1999). But, among all the refugee groups in India, Chakmas are probably one of the worst offs. They were disconnected with their families, friends, relatives, properties etc. with whom once they had a golden life in their own homeland. They were forcibly displaced from the place they call home losing their own strip of choice, freedom and identity. They were ruthlessly ill-treated in their homeland and facing the consequence in the place where they are now refuged and sought protection. Conversely, it is very sad that each refugee group in the country is treated differently, depending on its strategic value or political clout. While Sri Lankan Tamils camping in southern India can count on fellow Tamils to plead their cause with New Delhi and the Tibetans have their own Dalai Lama along with Hollywood stars pitching for them, the Chakmas, holed up in a remote, neglected part of India, have nobody. Nevertheless, though the Chakmas are living in miserable conditions, entrenched by acute poverty, illiteracy and backwardness they have strong and deep feeling that one day definitely things will change.

The Chakma problem is nothing but the political and policy related problem in Arunachal Pradesh in particular and northeast in general. This can only be solved once both the state and centre sit together and think over it deeply in a sense to solve the problem without doing any politics over it. The Chakmas are the legal migrants, particularly those of second and third generations, and fall on the ambit of the citizenship rights acts of the constitution of India. They should be given citizenship rights as well as Scheduled Tribes status so that they live with dignity (Prasad, 2012), while the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972 also allows them to settle in the land of India with all the fundamental rights and other rights which an Indian can avail. To conclude, until and unless the quick-witted people of the community such as politicians, educated persons, NGOs, Scholars etc., don't take part in active involvement to solve the crisis and problems of the modern-day Chakmas the future seems to remain the same.

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