

THE PEOPLES WITHOUT A STATE

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of External State & Non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security incl. Terrorism & illegal Migration

The often-violent Assam agitation from 1979 to 1985 had a domino effect on some of the other north-eastern States. The agitation, spearheaded by students, was aimed at expelling the “illegal immigrants” — by which they referred to “Bangladeshis” — who they claimed were outnumbering the indigenous communities.

The present-day hill States were fairly untouched by the riots in undivided Assam of the 1960s and early 1970s that targeted Bengalis through the politically-charged ‘Bongal kheda’ (chase out the Bengalis) campaign. In 1979, weeks after the Assam agitation started, the Bengalis of Shillong, Meghalaya, became the victims of the first major riot. Sporadic communal violence that continued till the 1990s did not spare the other non-tribal communities such as Biharis, Marwaris, Nepalis, Punjabis and Sindhis, viewed as “*dkhars*” (outsiders). The situation was the worst in 1987, which was marked by curfews throughout the year.

The Assam agitation also impacted Arunachal Pradesh and the politics of xenophobia was primarily directed at four communities — Chakmas, Hajongs, Tibetans and Yobins — who had settled there before Arunachal Pradesh was upgraded from the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1972. These four communities were largely settled in the present-day Changlang district when NEFA was under the Ministry of External Affairs up to 1965 and then under the Ministry of Home Affairs until 1972.

The Yobins, formerly called Lisus, came from northern Myanmar. The migration of the Tibetans started in 1959 with the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama from Lhasa and peaked during the 1962 war with China. The main concentrations of the Tibetans today are in West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Buddhist Chakmas and the Hindu Hajongs came from present-day Bangladesh. Communal violence in 1964 and the construction of the Kaptai dam on the Karnaphuli River displaced about 100,000 Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Around the same time, religious persecution made about 1,000 Hajongs cross over from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. Some Chakmas were settled in areas of Mizoram and Tripura contiguous to the CHT.

The flow of Chakmas to Arunachal Pradesh continued till 1969. Those who came later were mostly from Bihar’s Gaya, where former Union Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Mahavir Tyagi had tried to settle them in. Over time, the Chakma-Hajongs became more of a political issue than a humanitarian problem in the State with indigenous groups mobilising on a plank of pushing back refugees.

Amid growing opposition to the continued settlement of Chakmas in the State, the Arunachal government had planned a special census from December 11 to 31, 2021, leading to criticism that Chakmas and Hajongs were being subjected to “racial profiling. The census was put on hold after the Chakma Development Foundation of India (CDFI) approached the Prime Minister’s Office. But it remains a sensitive political issue in the State.

‘Refugees go back’

Documents with the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal

Pradesh (CCRCHAP) show that New Delhi had granted migration certificates to about 36,000 Chakmas and Hajongs settled in the erstwhile NEFA. These certificates indicated legal entry into India and the willingness of the Centre to accept the migrants as future citizens. But indigenous groups led by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) said the papers were inconsequential since neither the local people nor their representatives were consulted before settling the refugees in their backyard. They also pointed out that the prolonged stay of the refugees violated the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) of 1873 that requires outsiders to visit the State with a temporary travel document called Inner the Line Permit, also applicable in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.

The Chakma-Hajongs were at the core of the first bandh that Arunachal Pradesh experienced in April 1980. The AAPSU had imposed the shutdown to highlight a few demands, including resolution of the Assam-Arunachal boundary problem, detection and deportation of foreign nationals from the State and withdrawal of land allotment permit and trade licence from the non-Arunachalees. Inspired by the Assam agitation, the AAPSU organised a series of district-level bandhs in August 1982, primarily demanding the ouster of "outsiders". In 1985, the government-backed students' body adopted a resolution for asking the Centre to immediately remove the refugees settled permanently in the State and take steps against a possible influx of people displaced internally by the anti-foreigners agitation in adjoining Assam.

The 'refugees go back' slogans returned after a lull in 1994 when the AAPSU organised a march to Delhi, demanding action against "illegal foreign nationals", who, they claimed, were threatening to change the demography of the region. Pointing out that the Indian government violated the legal provisions prohibiting people from outside entering Arunachal Pradesh, the AAPSU organised a 'people's referendum rally' in September 1995 against making the State a "dumping ground" for "foreigners". December 31 that year was set as the deadline for the then Congress government to eject the refugees, compelling the Centre to form a high-level committee to look into the issue.

According to Chakma organisations, the State government had by then systematically denied the refugees access to social, economic and political rights they were entitled to under Indian and international laws. The employment of Chakmas and Hajongs was banned in 1980 and all trade licences issued to them in the 1960s were seized in 1994. There were reports of blockades and attacks on the refugee camps and Vijoypur, a village in the Changlang district, was reportedly destroyed thrice between 1989 and 1995. In September 1994, the State government allegedly began a campaign to close down schools in the refugee areas and to relocate the Chakma-Hajongs.

Deportation bid

The AAPSU flagged the increasing population of the Chakma-Hajongs to justify the perceived threat to the identity and culture of the indigenous people. It said the population of the refugees had by the new millennium swollen to 65,000 from the 57 families originally settled in the State after a temporary stay in Assam's Ledo in 1964. "Their population is more than 1 lakh today," AAPSU's general secretary Tobom Dai said. However, Santosh Chakma, general secretary of the CCRCHAP, said the figure was exaggerated. "A special census of the Chakma-Hajongs conducted in 2010-11 revealed the population was under 50,000. According to our estimate, it is about 60,000 now with 95% of them born in India to merit citizenship under Section 3 of the Citizenship Act," he said.

The State government's aborted move to hold the special census followed Chief Minister Pema Khandu's Independence Day speech in which he said "all illegal immigrant Chakmas will be moved and settled in some other places" as the Constitution does not allow them to live in a

tribal State. Following the controversies, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has asked the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State government to submit a report on the alleged racial profiling of the Chakmas and Hajongs.

The Chakma Development Foundation says there is no provision in the Constitution as a tribal State that stops the Chakmas from staying in Arunachal Pradesh. It also said the government has not processed their citizenship applications despite the Supreme Court's orders in 1996 and 2015 to do so. The solution, Chakma organisations said, lies in the State respecting the rule of law and the judgments of the Supreme Court and the politicians stopping using the Chakma-Hajong issue for political benefits.

In Focus

The Buddhist Chakmas and the Hindu Hajongs came to Arunachal Pradesh and other hill States from the present-day Bangladesh

Communal violence in 1964 and the construction of the Kaptai dam on the Karnaphuli River displaced about 100,000 Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh (Then East Pakistan)

Around the same time, religious persecution made about 1,000 Hajongs cross over from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh to India

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