

Foreword by Ramachandra Guha

SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

STATELESS IN SOUTH ASIA

The Chakmas between
Bangladesh and India

DEEPAK K. SINGH

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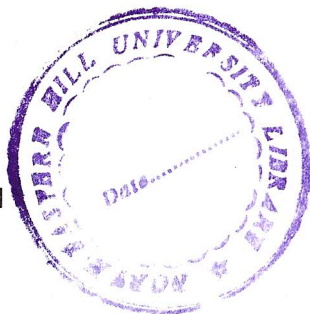


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For

Sunita,

*who perhaps would not be too disappointed with
the way Mridul is shaping up.*

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List of Abbreviations

AALCC	Asian–African Legal Consultative Committee
AAPSU	All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union
AASU	All Assam Students Union
ACHR	Asian Centre for Human Rights
APC	Asia/Pacific Consultations
APCSU	Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students Union
APST	Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe
ATTF	All Tripura Tiger Front
CCRCAP	Committee for the Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CJP	Chakma Jatiya Parishad
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECI	Election Commission of India
EPG	Eminent Persons' Group
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
I.F.A.S.	Indian Frontier Administrative Service
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MNF	Mizo National Front
MZP	Mizo Zirlai Pawl

NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
NLFT	National Liberation Front of Tripura
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
PCJSS	Parbattya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samiti
PPA	People's Party of Arunachal
SAHRDC	South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre
TRA	Tripura Resurrection Army
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United State Agency for International Development
WCIP	The World Council of Indigenous Peoples

Foreword

The literature on the Partition of India has tended to focus on the immediate aftermath of that momentous event— the riots between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; the exchange of populations; the plight of refugees; the rattling of sabres by India and Pakistan over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The years that this literature is chiefly concerned with are 1947 and 1948. In this regard, Deepak K. Singh's *Stateless in South Asia* greatly expands our understanding of Partition both *temporally*, by underscoring its impact in later decades, as well as *spatially*, by showcasing a region of the subcontinent, the Northeast, that has been greatly ignored by historians and social scientists.

The empirical core of Singh's study consists of a fine-grained analysis of Chakma refugees in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Originally from upland areas of what is now Bangladesh and what was previously East Pakistan, these Chakmas were displaced by a massive hydroelectric project which inundated their fields and submerged their villages. They were (as so often is the case with dam oustees) inadequately compensated, and came across the border into India in search of homes and livelihoods.

In East Pakistan, the Chakmas, who are Buddhists, were treated with contempt and condescension by Bengali-speaking Muslims. But they have not been granted full rights of citizenship in India, either. More than four decades of residence notwithstanding, a mere 5 per cent of them have been allowed to vote in Indian elections. All this while, they have faced hostility from the local, indigenous populations of Arunachal Pradesh.

As Singh points out, studies of refugees have tended to concentrate on refugees alone. His work, by contrast, closely examines the interactions between the displaced Chakmas and the tribes of Arunachal among whom they now reside. The relationship is marked more by discord than by harmony. The residents of this part of India have themselves been considered marginal by the mainstream. Arunachal Pradesh borders China, and indeed, that country has often laid claim to the territory. In the author's pithy formulation, in view of the threat from its even larger neighbour, the Indian state has been concerned with protecting the borderlands, but not with enhancing the rights of the borderlanders. The Arunachalis are scarcely represented in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, and not at all in the modern sectors of the economy. At the same time, the fact that they are not Hindus has led to them being considered somewhat foreign (not to say inferior) by mainland India. Their own precarious existence in the Republic of India means that they are unwilling to extend full hospitality to the tens of thousands of Chakmas who have been placed in their midst.

Singh provides a detailed and empathetic account of the conflicts between the Chakmas and the people of Arunachal. This is a struggle between two subaltern peoples who are each, in their own way, victims of rivalries between nation-states. He principally relies on oral testimonies, these supplemented by newspaper reports and court cases. The ecumenism of research methods is matched by a willingness to creatively trespass into adjacent disciplines. Although trained as a political scientist, Singh also draws innovatively upon the work of anthropologists and historians. These varied methods and approaches are synthesised in a lucid and most readable narrative.

As will be apparent, *Stateless in South Asia* is much more than a study of a neglected aspect of Partition. It breaks new ground in several respects. As the first study of refugee politics in Northeast India, the book greatly illuminates our understanding of a region ignored by politicians and intellectuals alike. It contributes in an original and constructive fashion to ongoing debates about the politics of citizenship and the sustainability of present models of economic development. A noteworthy aspect of the book is that the author is not himself a Chakma or an Arunachali. This is both uncharacteristic as well as (or perhaps hence) refreshing. Indian scholars

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have tended to work on their own linguistic or geographical regions—a Kannada-speaker on Karnataka, a Bengali on Bengal, a Maharashtrian on Maharashtra. Likewise, Dalit scholars are encouraged to study Dalit issues and Muslim scholars, Muslim problems. Originally from Bihar, domiciled in Punjab, Singh chose not to work on either of those two states but to instead, study a region of India far removed—in all senses—from his own. That he has accomplished this task so effectively may, one hopes, inspire more young scholars to likewise venture into areas and topics other than those defined by their personal background or experience.

Ramachandra Guha
Bangalore, India

Preface

The year 2004 is a year the Chakma refugees may relish revisiting over and over again. It was in this year that the Election Commission of India, in an order dated 3 March, scripted a new chapter in the history of these stateless people by including some 1,497 of them in the voters' list. Of the 65,000 Chakma refugees presently living in the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA), this number may be minuscule, but is nonetheless historic in terms of beginning the process of ending their statelessness. This allowed them to vote twice in quick succession, in May and October, the same year for the State Assembly and Parliamentary elections, respectively.

Chakmas are amongst the first victims of development-induced-displacement in modern South Asia. The completion of the Kaptai reservoir in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in early 1961 had turned some 100,000 people into 'environmental refugees'. The Buddhist Chakmas constituted the single largest ethnic block of affected people who became landless, with their prime cultivable land submerged under water. In the absence of adequate compensation and consistent subjection to political and religious persecution at the hands of the East Pakistani regime, whose singular interest in the region was the land and not its non-Muslim ethnic inhabitants, some 40,000 Chakmas took asylum in India in 1964. It took the Indian state 40 long years to recognise a meagre 1,497 of them as Indian citizens!

The euphoria and jubilation which followed the announcement of the declaration five years ago was instantaneously met with popular protest

and resistance from the actually hosting local indigenous peoples. The All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU), which has been spearheading a mass movement to oust them from Arunachal since the early 1980s, protested by giving a call to boycott the forthcoming elections. While the elections were held as scheduled, the Chakma voters found themselves in a bizarre situation of not knowing who to vote for, as each and every political party went to the elections with the promise of ousting them from the state if voted to power. As one of the Chakma leaders quipped: 'We are unable to make up our mind which party to vote for as all of them were speaking the same language of expelling us from the state if they were elected.'¹ This did not deter them, however, from going ahead and exercising their right to franchise they had long aspired for.

Even this partial grant of citizenship has emboldened the spirit and hopes of the community members by instilling in them a never-seen-before sense of optimism. As Subimal Chakma, the President of the Committee for the Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP), who has been at the forefront of a movement for citizenship rights, observed: 'after four decades of struggle, we are now hoping to lead a normal life, with the Indian government according us legal sanction to become Indian citizens.'² Such hopes may, however, not last for long, given the specificities of Arunachal where non-ethnic Indian citizens cannot lead a 'normal' life. Arunachal is one of the unique states in India which has been enjoying special statutory safeguards right from the colonial period. It is for this reason that conferment of citizenship in itself will not usher in their fuller integration into the social fabric of Arunachali society. At best, it would only bring them at par with the other non-ethnic Indian citizens in the state without any ownership rights over land and other resources. As this book shows, the Buddhist Chakmas do not want to be treated as second class citizens, and insist on being treated at par with the local indigenous peoples. This is, however, not acceptable to the indigenous peoples who fear such a move might eventually wipe them off the map in the long run.

Articulation of such fears and apprehensions by the indigenous peoples in whose midst the Chakmas are now settled, is rooted in a rather prolonged history of isolation and marginalisation of Arunachal Pradesh from what is euphemistically called the 'mainstream'. Arunachal, for all practical purposes remained until recently, if anything, a 'hidden land'.

Till well into the late 1950s, Arunachal remained 'as much *terra incognita* in Lhasa as it was in Delhi or Shillong, let alone Peking which was never remotely interested in the area except during the campaigns of Chao Erh-feng' (Woodman 1969: 197).³ The dearth of information about the various ethnic communities inhabiting the then NEFA is evident from the fact that even their names were in doubt. 'There were vast areas, which had never in their history been visited by outsiders, and there was not even the barest knowledge of their inhabitants, languages or customs' (Rustomji 1983: 114). However, the picture is not very different today. It continues to be viewed by the rest of India as a homogenous cultural monolith or an undifferentiated mass of people, underplaying its diverse ethnic make-up and distinct cultural practices. Significantly, Arunachal is home to some 26 major ethnic groups and over 100 sub-ethnic groups with virtually no commonality between them.

This book is, then, a historical and analytical exploration into the human predicament of one of the earliest episodes of mass displacements in the history of modern South Asia. It deals with two specific categories of marginalised peoples—the Chakma refugees and the indigenous peoples of Arunachal—who do not fit into the conventional framework of hierarchised structures of dominant–subordinate relationships. Privileging the vantage points of the two communities, it shows how the Chakma issue has become a classic case of political apathy on the part of the modern postcolonial states in South Asia whereby both the refugees and the indigenous peoples, marginalised in their own peculiar ways, find themselves intricately intertwined in a conflict over control of resources for which neither is responsible. By locating the current issue in its historical context, it highlights the nature and extent of social and political exclusion of Chakma refugees as well as some of the important aspects of the periphery complex that the indigenous peoples find themselves trapped in. It thus makes a holistic study of what has turned out to be one of the most intractable refugee issues in the history of modern South Asia.

The uniqueness of this study lies in showing how the current Chakma refugee issue is illustrative of a contest at three important levels: citizenship, ethnicity and history. It addresses the issue of denial of citizenship rights to the Chakmas by the Indian government and their consequent statelessness, and the linkage between a policy of 'ethnic cleansing' and Chakmas' flight from their home. These questions are then counterposed to the

dominant theory, which singularly privileges the 'developmental' aspects of Chakmas' displacement. Also, the disconnect between the dominant official representation of history and popular reconstruction of history in the context of inclusion of CHT in East Pakistan forms an important part of the book. Equally important questions from the perspective of the actually hosting indigenous Arunachalis relating to their growing fears of 'cultural annihilation' in the wake of Chakmas' fuller integration into their society, and their consequent political response in the form of growing ethnic nationalism are analysed within the broader context of fear and resistance to outsiders widely prevalent in Northeast India.

Following the framework of oral history, it seeks to unravel the trials and tribulations of the uprooted indigenous Chakma ethnic community both during and after their displacement. The distinctiveness of the study lies in its comparative perspective, wherein the developments on both sides of the international border between Bangladesh and India as well as the centrality of the perceptions of the Chakma refugee population and the hosts in Arunachal Pradesh (who are members of indigenous communities) are examined.

Using the Chakma issue as a case in point, this study seeks to unravel the trajectory of statelessness and refugeehood in South Asia by delving deep into the lived experiences of refugees without losing its focus on the equally significant self-perceptions of the community hosting them. In order to ensure equanimity of its approach, this study privileges the self-perceptions of both the refugees and the indigenous host communities over the official discourses of the issue. Juxtaposed against the popular perceptions, the official discourses appear far removed from the real issues confronting the two principal parties embroiled in a conflict over control of resources. Moreover, unlike the dominant trend in refugee studies which tends to focus the spotlight exclusively on the displaced peoples, bypassing the actually hosting community in the process, this study seeks to remove this anomaly by trying to ensure that the hosting community too remains at the centre of attention. This is important simply because it is they who are actually made to bear the brunt of such state-sponsored displacement in the name of some supposedly mythical 'national interests' of the hosting state.

Most of the studies on refugees rarely, if at all, go beyond the concerns of the displaced people who are doubtless in need of genuine care and

understanding. However, the sheer nature and extent of their crisis situations eclipse the concerns of the community hosting the refugees, leading to, at best, only a partial or, at worst, a skewed understanding of the real issues. The need to know the self-perceptions of the members of the hosting community, particularly if it itself happens to be living on the edge, becomes all the more urgent, as they happen to be no less marginalised in their own peculiar ways. However, this fact is rarely acknowledged, let alone emphasised, in refugee studies. It is always the host state and not the actually hosting community which assumes centrestage in all dialogues and negotiations with the state from where the refugees arrive. Much as we would like to know, we do not know in the absence of any study, as to what the Pakistanis feel about Afghan refugees, the Himachalis about the Tibetans or for that matter the Indian Tamils about the Sri Lankan Tamils. The near-total absence of efforts to find out the self-perceptions of the hosting community thus poses serious problems in terms of addressing such issues either at the official level or at the level of scholarship. It is in this respect that this study seeks to break new grounds by recovering the voices of not only the refugees, but also equally of the actually hosting community.

Some of the key issues raised by this study thus relate to the status of stateless peoples and refugees in South Asia, with the concomitant question of what it takes to qualify as citizens of the 'modern' postcolonial states in the region. Ironically, the study shows that while the states are solely responsible for the making of refugees and stateless peoples in the region, there is absolutely no legal-institutional or legislative framework in place to unmake such a status once they are ejected out of the territorial boundary of a state. Such a state of affairs has only worsened the woes of those people who have never known in their lifetime, what it feels like to be citizens of some state or the other. It is only they, however, who know what it feels not to belong to any state! States, abstract entities that they are, remain too preoccupied in their own obsessions with maintaining themselves irrespective of what happens to those who do not belong. Given the peculiarities of the making of 'modern' nation-states in South Asia, such concerns and issues rarely attract the kind of attention they deserve. The uniqueness of this study then perhaps lies in showing how the fault lines of partition and nationhood in South Asia accompanied

by the callous and apathetic attitudes of the 'modern' nation-states have proved unbridgeable, leading to the unending saga of despair and dejection among the displaced populace.

NOTES

1. This information has been taken from an article titled 'Chakma Refugees in a Fix Over Whom to Vote', available at <http://www.sneha.org.in/sneha/paperclips.html> (accessed on 6 July 2007).
2. This information has been taken from an online article titled 'Enthusiastic Refugees Vote after 40 Years', available at <http://www.newindiaexpress.com/election/2004/News.asp?> (accessed on 12 March 2005).
3. Chao Erh-feng was a Chinese General whose campaigns in the early 1890s had brought a large part of the Tibetan territory under Chinese administration.

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About the Author

Deepak K. Singh is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh. His research interests include migration and refugee studies, politics and ethnicity in Northeast India and postcolonial politics in South Asia. He has contributed several research papers in reputed journals and edited volumes.

What does it mean to be 'stateless' in the modern postcolonial context? This fascinating study addresses this complex question through the case of the Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh. The largely neglected social history of the ethnic Buddhist Chakmas, whose homeland is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (in the present day Bangladesh), carries the multiple imprints of partition, dominant development paradigm and religious persecution. As refugees in the strategically sensitive and disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Northeast, they are locked in an intractable conflict over land and resources with the indigenous Arunachalis, themselves marginalized and alienated from the rest of the country.

Setting a new dimension in refugee studies, the arguments in this book are developed on the framework of oral narratives, incorporating the self perceptions of both the Chakmas as well as the Arunachalis who host them. The book critically analyses national and international official documents and policy statements and demonstrates the absence of legal-institutional and legislative structures to address the concerns of refugees. It throws into relief the sharp contestations over nationalism, citizenship and ethnicity in South Asia, both at the level of political movements and academic discourse. It sheds new light on the outcomes of partition, boundary making and state formation, as well as dominant development models by examining the everyday experiences of these communities.

This book will be a useful resource for scholars and students of politics, international relations, sociology, anthropology and history. It will also help policy makers and lawyers.

Deepak K. Singh is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh. His research interests include migration and refugee studies, politics and ethnicity in Northeast India, and postcolonial politics in South Asia. He has contributed several research papers in reputed journals and edited volumes.

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