

## Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Arunachal Pradesh

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INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS have generated tension in many parts of the contemporary world as different ethnic groups<sup>1</sup> have sought to protect and assert their identity and at times have done so through violent means.<sup>2</sup> Such inter-ethnic violence seems to have posed a serious threat to democratic politics. It may be noted that one of the causes of such inter-ethnic conflict has been migration which generates tension between an indigenous ethnic community and a migrant community. This paper intends to examine some of the issues related to the inter-ethnic conflict in Arunachal Pradesh with particular reference to the ethnic violence unleashed during the movement for deportation of Chakma and Hajong refugees during 1994-95. The theme assumes importance in view of the fact that this conflict has evaded a solution even at the end of the decade and also in view of the Supreme Court judgement in favour of granting citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees.

Before we take up an empirical analysis of inter-ethnic conflict in Arunachal, it seems necessary to begin with a conceptual analysis of 'inter-ethnic conflict'. Such 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. The privileged group, on the other hand, may mobilize to defend its interests

and may also use ethnic sentiments in doing so.<sup>3</sup> Such mobilization and counter-mobilization may lead to inter-ethnic conflicts. Paul Brass argues that the principal dangers of violent conflict arise 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. Here we view the inter-ethnic conflict between the Arunachalese and the 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.

Having outlined the framework for analysis, we may note that the Chakma foreigners' issue assumed the dimension of a violent conflict between the ethnic Arunachalese and the Chakama migrants during 1994-95. The problem actually dates back to 1964 when about 30,000 Chakmas and Hajong Tribals had migrated to India in the wake of their displacement caused by the construction of Kaptai hydel project in Chittagong Hill Tracts and by their persistent socio-religious persecution by the erstwhile East Pakistan Government. They were rehabilitated by the Government of India in the then North Eastern 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 District of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>4</sup> After about three decades of peaceful co-existence, things suddenly threatened to reach a flashpoint when on August 1, 1994, the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) issued "Quit Arunachal" notices to the Chakmas, Hajongs, Tibetans, Nepalis and Bangladeshis to leave the state peacefully by September 30, 1994. As a follow-up of their notice, AAPSU organized rallies in different parts of the State, including Kokila and Miao, where the refugee settlements are concentrated.<sup>5</sup> That the situation was taking a violent turn was evident when sporadic violence and clashes were reported from Changlang district and the State Government had to rush additional paramilitary companies to contain the situation. The trouble began on September 15, 1994, when hundreds of Chakmas ransacked the daily market of Bordumsa and assaulted the indigenous people. Retaliation came between September 20 and 22 when the local tribals burnt down about 50 houses in Borkhati village. Mr Neelam Tarom, the Home Minister, stated that the tension was running high because of reports that the Chakmas were preparing to fight the indigenous people to stay on in Arunachal. According to information available with the State Government, the Chakmas had made bunkers and other fortifications and accumulated arms to protect their settlements in the Vijaynagar, Miao and Diyum

revenue circles of Changlang. Senior government officials also confirmed that some Chakma youths had taken arms training in Myanmar and had acquired sophisticated weapons like AK-47 rifles. It was felt by political observers that an explosive situation was building up in Arunachal as the September 30 deadline approached.<sup>6</sup> While AAPSU was determined to enforce its "Quit Arunachal" order to the refugees, the Chakmas were determined to stay. It may be noted in this connection that the AAPSU, representing the educated elite in Arunachal, has emerged as a major player in this politics of ethnic mobilization in the absence of any significant social force capable of articulating ethnic issues vigorously and effectively.<sup>7</sup>

It appears that the inter-ethnic conflict in Arunachal has had important ramifications on Centre-State relations. Indeed a lot of bitterness was generated between the Union Government and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh due to the Centre's decision to grant citizenship to the Chakmas. As much was evident when the State Chief Minister, Gegong Apang, pointed out during the eleventh Session of the Arunachal Pradesh State Assembly on September 9, 1994, that the Central Government had been provoking the innocent, peace-loving people of the state. He criticized the Centre's step motherly attitude on the foreigners' issue.<sup>8</sup> It may also be noted that the inter-ethnic conflict led to a sort of propaganda war unleashed by the State Government against the Centre. This was reflected in the statement of the Home Minister, Neelam Tarom, that the State Government should not be put to blame if the youth of the State went against the anti-national activities of the foreigners.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the Centre's decision to confer citizenship rights and Schedule tribe status on Chakmas and Hajong refugees in Arunachal seemed to have been prompted by the suggestion of a parliamentary committee that the 1972 Indira-Mujib pact should be the basis for an amicable solution as regards those who migrated before 1966 and that the State must decide the fate of those who came after March 1971.<sup>10</sup>

From the ongoing discussion, it may be inferred that the AAPSU which was articulating the ethnic sentiments of the Arunachalese could win support from the State Government. On the other hand, the Union Government was perceived to be sympathetic to the aspirations of the non-natives, i.e. the Chakmas, primarily because of its decision to grant citizenship to the Chakmas. Thus, political intervention by the Union and State Governments in the inter-ethnic conflict and their perceived identification as sympathizers on both sides of the ethnic divide seems to have completed the process of ethnic polarization in Arunachal. This has led to further escalation of tension and deepening of the ethnic divide. In such a volatile atmosphere, both the Chakmas and the natives hurled allegations and counter-allegations at one another. The Chakmas, on the

one hand, complained bitterly of discrimination and injustice by the State Government and its administration. They highlighted the cancellation of ration cards, withdrawal of trade licences, closing down of hostels meant for Chakma students, termination of stipends and withdrawal of basic facilities like health, education and the public distribution system as evidence of the Government's antagonistic attitude towards the Chakmas. The local tribesmen and Government officials, on the other hand, accused the Chakmas of all sorts of crimes like destroying the environment by mercilessly felling trees, poaching elephants for ivory, smuggling, armed robbery and murder. According to a Sub-divisional Magistrate of Changlang district, at least fifteen cases of murder and dacoity were pending against the Chakmas.<sup>11</sup> It appears from these statements that the State Administration perceived the life-style and the activities of the Chakmas as posing a serious threat to the State Government might have conditioned the Government's response in tackling the ethnic crisis as basically a law and order problem in total disregard of the humanitarian dimension of the conflict.

It may also be noted that the tough posture taken by the AAPSU on the foreigners' issue which was reflected in the ultimatum given to the Chakmas to leave Arunchal by September 30, 1994, had grave implications on democratic politics in the state. In a veiled threat issued to the Union and State Governments, the AAPSU President Takon Sanjay declared,

... this is our last democratic move. We will go in for direct action once the last day of September is over . . . We do not crave violence. But we will fight to death to protect our land. Let us prepare for the worst . . .<sup>12</sup>

As observed earlier, the State Government was widely perceived to be supportive of the AAPSU's stand on the ethnic issue and it appears that the AAPSU was initiating and implementing the State's policies in this regard. This led an observer of the political science in Arunachal to comment that the entire atmosphere had been vitiated by state-sponsored terrorism against a backward ill-organized tribal group.<sup>13</sup> This would imply that the State Government itself became a party to persecution against the Chakmas, thereby jeopardizing its own role of protecting a section of residents in the state and thus abdicating its democratic obligations as an elected representative body.

Meanwhile, the inter-ethnic conflict in Arunachal has taken a new turn in view of the recent Supreme Court order to grant citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees. The State Government has now decided to press the Centre to shift thousands of Chakma and Hajong refugees even

in the event of their being granted citizenship as per the Supreme Court's order on the ground that the apex court, while ordering the granting of citizenship to the refugees, had not stated that they should be settled in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the inter-ethnic conflict has also unleashed a propaganda war between the BJP-led State Government and the Congress Opposition. This became evident when the Government spokesman referred to Congress criticism of Union Home Minister L.K. Advani, for his reported statement favouring granting of citizenship to the refugees in the State and stated that the Congress was using the situation as a weapon to mislead the people of the state.<sup>15</sup>

Another key player in the inter-ethnic conflict, viz. the AAPSU, is of the view that a meeting of the core committee formed earlier with representatives of political parties and NGOs to solve the issue, should be convened immediately to chalk out future course of action.<sup>16</sup> The AAPSU categorically stated that "we do not want packages, but we want clear stand of the Centre on the refugee imbroglio."<sup>17</sup> The statement was made in the context of the then Union Home Minister Advani's visit to Arunachal in November 2003. A nine-point memorandum was submitted by the former Arunachal Chief Minister Mukut Mithi to the visiting Deputy Prime Minister. Mithi contended that the issue had reached a climax following the directive of the Election Commission to enrol the refugees in the voter list. Highlighting the Congress stand on the issue, Mithi asserted that his party's stand has always remained unchanged as various political parties, students' organizations and NGOs had unanimously opposed the residency of the refugees, but not their citizenship. He added that the resettlement of the refugees outside the State should be considered to end the impasse.<sup>18</sup> However, an element of uncertainty continues to plague the political atmosphere of Arunachal because Home Ministry of Government of India maintained a studied silence on the contentious issue.

In the context of the above discussion, it may be noted that the inter-ethnic crisis in Arunachal had grave implications for the civil administration and its law and order machinery, prompted a propaganda war between the Union and the State Government and hastened the process of ethnic polarization. The question, therefore, arises – how to *resolve the ethnic conflict in Arunachal*? The answer probably lies in an understanding of the factors that sustained the inter-ethnic conflict, varying from an actual threat to indigenous identity to a perception of fear that the AAPSU seems to have injected in the popular psyche. The actual threat emanates from the fact that the natives are facing a stiff competition from the Chakmas in the field of education, employment and productive activities, particularly in agriculture. But on the other hand, the census figures about the population structure and the density of

population in Arunachal suggest that the demographic balance in the State has not been affected to an alarming extent due to the settlement of Chakma and other migrants in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>19</sup> In view of the above, a three-pronged strategy may be formulated for the reconciliation of the inter-ethnic tangle. First, the State Government may bring out a White Paper on Chakma refugees supported by authentic facts and figures to allay apprehensions of the Arunachalese about a threat to the State's delicate demography. At the same time, the Union Government needs to take a clear cut stand on the Chakma issue in order to avoid any confusion in this matter. Secondly, the basic human rights of both the Chakmas and the indigenous tribals need to be protected and both the State Government and the Union Government should fulfil their democratic obligations in this regard. Finally, the inter-ethnic crisis should not be dismissed as a mere law and order problem. Keeping in view the complexities of the situation, the Union and the State Governments may seek an amicable solution to the inter-ethnic conflict within a framework of mutual trust and understanding, fully acknowledging the sensitivities of the local tribals about protection of their rights to land resources on the one hand and evolving measures for the rehabilitation of the Chakma settlers on the other.

### NOTES

1. By 'ethnic groups', we refer to any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labour and for reproduction. This definition emanating from Paul R. Brass emphasized the cultural basis of ethnicity and distinguishes ethnic categories from other social categories based on class, gender, etc. For details, see Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism – Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi, 1991), pp.18-19.
2. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, for example, has turned violent as different Tamil groups have been waging a prolonged war against the Sri Lankan Government for a separate Tamil Eelam. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the struggle for supremacy among different ethnic groups like Serbs, Croats and Muslims has unleashed violence in the Balkan region.
3. See Paul R. Brass, *op.cit.*, p.47.
4. 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.
5. See the Report titled "Arunachal Assembly Expresses Resentment on Grant of Citizenship to Chakmas", in *Eastern Panorama*, October 1994, p.14.

6. See the cover story titled "Arunachal Heading for Bloodbath", *ibid.*, p.14.
7. For discussion, see Susmita Sengupta, "Ethnic Issues and All Arunachal Pradesh Student's Union" in *Proceedings of the North East India Political Science Association, Seventh Annual Conference* (Tura), December 1997, p.16.
8. See "Arunachal Assembly Expresses Resentment, etc.", *Eastern Panorama*, *op.cit.*, p.14.
9. *Loc. cit.*
10. See the editorial "Portents in Arunachal", *The Statesman*, September 11, 1997.
11. See "Arunachal Heading for Bloodbath, etc.", *op.cit.*, p.31.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Hindustan Times correspondent, "Chakma Issue Reaches Climax", *Hindustan Times*, September 30, 1994.
14. See "Arunachal to Press Centre for Shifting of Chakma, Hajong Refugees", *The Shillong Times*, October 29, 2003, p.3.
15. *Loc. cit.*
16. See, "Chakma Issue to be Raised during Advani's Arunachal Trip", *The Shillong Times*, October 31, 2003, p.3.
17. As cited in "Advani Keeps Mum on Chakma Imbroglio", *The Shillong Times*, November 16, 2003, p.1.
18. *Loc. cit.*
19. For discussion, see Susmita Sengupta, *op.cit.*, p.45. Some changes occurred in the population structure during 1981-1991, with a sharp fall in the percentage of tribal population in Changlang district. This shows that the presence of migrants brought about a change in the demographic structure in Changlang district only, not in the State as a whole.