



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

PARTITION EXPERIENCES AMONG CHAKMAS: WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Parama Chakma

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Tripura University

Abstract: Partition as an idea is used to solve diverse kinds of conflicts such as ethnic, national, religious etc. In the context of India, partition has led to formation of postcolonial states of India and Pakistan. It is a historical event that we study in our textbooks but often within the nationalist framework of Hindu and Muslim majority thereby overlooking the accounts of diverse marginalized groups, communities. Chakmas are one such community whose lived experiences due to partition have been overlooked and must be taken into account. This paper shall discuss the historical trajectory that led to migration and statelessness among Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and attempt to understand how various categorizations and labels such as ‘refugees’, ‘foreigners’, ‘illegal migrants’, ‘statelessness’ etc have altered and shaped the lives of Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh over the time.

Keywords: forced migration, Chakma, CHT, partition, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

Partition is often understood as a separation of territory of groups accompanied with forceful expulsion that led to large-scale migration of people (Jassal & Ari, 2007, pp. 21) and accompanied by transfer of power and political authority into the local population (Dubnov & Robinson 2019).

Dubnov and Robinson (2019) also look at partition as a transnational phenomenon rather than a local one. Partition is an event, therefore, that separates territories and it must at the same time be understood beyond local context. It involves migration mostly involuntary that impacts people around the world as migration occurs from one territory to another.

In the context of India, partition has led to formation of postcolonial states of India and Pakistan. It is a historical event that we study in our textbooks but often within the nationalist framework of Hindu and Muslim majority thereby overlooking the accounts of diverse marginalized groups, communities.

Chakmas were one such minority whose role in history and their partition experiences have also been marginalized. Jassal and Ari (2006) also argue whether it is the war of 1948 or partition of 1947, the perspectives of the minority groups have often been suppressed amidst the mainstream national narrative.

In “the Partition and the Chakmas”, Chakma (2013) gathers a collection of writings of the Chakma Leader Sneha Kumar Chakma who fought for inclusion of CHT into Union of India to bring out the experiences and trauma of the Chakmas during Partition.

The statelessness that Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh experience cannot be seen as an isolated event but must be examined within a historical context. Therefore, this paper shall delve into the historical trajectory of turn of events that led to the present situation among chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh. Secondly, it shall also examine the impact of the labels and categorizations that accompany partition and how it creates a perception of the 'other'.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Partition must be seen as an ongoing process where the idea of return has become part of the existence for the Jews and Palestinians which they see it as their survival and the basis of sense of nationhood but the new generation do not necessarily share the idea of return as they have been born and brought up outside of Palestine (Jassal & Ari 2006:2219). Similarly, even though the Chakma diaspora reveals the error in the geographical division of India, partition is only partially responsible for the exclusion and fragmentation of the Chakmas because a large number of Chakmas moved into India much before 1947 (Singh, 2010:110). Even though Chakmas are called 'Palestinians of South Asia' (Gupta 1995 cited in 2010, 111), they attained a separate status in their different region in which they settled and unlike the Palestinians, they do not long for their homeland or share the idea of return (ibid:110-111). This paper doesn't consider Chakmas as a homogenous group since the experiences of partition have been different even within the community. So, for the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and East Pakistan, partition cannot be seen as a solution but it further aggravated their situation as a minority when nation was already imagined on behalf of them by the British rulers (Singh 2010:2-3) and they experienced forceful migration accompanied by displacement and fear of persecution as a result of that.

Chakmas as any other tribe in CHT enjoyed autonomy until the British rule but after the advent of British rule, Chittagong Hill District which was coined by the British administration became a separate district of its own in 1860 (Ahsan & Chakma, 1989: 961-962). It was earlier known as Jum bungoo or Karpas Mahal (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2003, pp. 250). Chittagong Hill Tracts was administered by the representative of Governor General in Council of India and the tribal affairs were handled by the tribal chiefs in tribal courts. During the British colonial rule, the people started resisting by refusing to pay in 1776 as this resistance was led by the Chakma chief Sher Daulat Khan and his son Jan Bux Khan and Deputy Rono Khan but the resistance failed and CHT further fell into the hands of the company as the Chakma Raja Jan Baksh Khan signed a truce with the company's Governor General in 1787. Through this truce, the chief not only accepted British sovereignty but also concurred to maintain peace and company and stationed its army to continue the revenue flow from CHT (Shahbuddin, 2022, pp.124). In 1760s, CHT came under the authority of the British East India Company and became important for 2 significant reasons: firstly, CHT had port and it acted as a frontier district and buffer district during the colonial period as the Arakanese also had claim over that area and secondly, to check the invasion of Lushai's to the plains of Chittagong respectively (Mohsin, 1995, pp.26)

The contact between the company and the hill people was limited to cotton payments from the Chiefs through the Bengali commission agents of the company. According to Mohsin this policy created a relationship of superiority and inferiority among the hill people and the Bengalis as the movement of bengalis to the hills as agents, traders and fortune sellers increased. Such kind of actions were seen as a threat and were resisted. War was declared in 1777 by Rono Khan who was the deputy of the chief and it came to an end in 1787 after the chakmas chief Jan Baksh Khan had to surrender because of economic blockade imposed by the British. After this war, the chief agreed to pay cotton taxes and British agreed to preserve the autonomy of the Hill people which was preserved till 1860 (Mohsin, 1995, pp.27).

In 1890-1976 Kamini Mohan Dewan founded The Chittagong Hill Tract Jana Samiti and was the president of the organization. It was joined by Sneha Kumar Chakma who became the general secretary of the organization and Jamini Ranjan Dewan in 1939. They brought about political consciousness and saw the shadow of Indian national congress in The Chittagong Hill Tract Jana Samiti (Chakma, 2021, pp.152). And their role became more prominent during the partition in inclusion of CHT in the Indian Union but not without differences in their vision for CHT. After the partition of India was declared, it was significant that CHT remained part of India because the hill region consisted of Buddhist minority with indogenous tribal inhabitants. therefore efforts were made for inclusion of CHT in Indian Union (Chakma, 2021, pp.163).

In 1900 British introduced Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 or Hill Tracts Manual which provided with rules and restrictions in terms of settlement of outsiders in CHT and prior permission was required from both deputy commissioner with recommendations from local tribal chief and local headman. In 1920 Hill Tracts Manual was amended and the district became an excluded area and in 1935 the government of India act declared CHT as totally excluded area (Ahsan & Chakma,1989, pp.962). Until 1930, non-indigenous people were prohibited from entry and residence and Rule 52 gave protection to the indigenous population by not allowing hill tribes to enter or reside in CHT unless a permit from Deputy Commissioner which was later revoked in 1930 and no permit was required later (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2003, pp.252).

In 1945 ,Sneha kumar Chakma travelled to Shimla on behalf of his organization and raised the issue of CHT and presented a memorandum. On the other hand, Kamini Mohan dewan also travelled to Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay to present the views with congress leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, President Acharya Kripalini, Home Minister Rajendra Prasad Bahadur, Sardar Vallabhai Patel and Sarojini Naidu for inclusion of CHT in the Union of India (Chakma,2021,pp.163).

Since CHT comprised of a non-Muslim majority the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress demanded that it should be part of the Indian union (Partition Proceedings 1949, 1: 56 cited in Ghoshal 2020:50) but the Muslim league wanted inclusion of CHT in East Pakistan as it aimed for a possible plan of a hydroelectric plant for Pakistan. Though the Hindu representatives raised the issue but they strongly demanded for Malda, Murshidabad and also large parts of district of Nadia, Faridpur, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Rajshahi whereas the Muslim league demanded for the inclusion of CHT along with Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri in east Pakistan despite the fact that they were only 2.8% were Muslims. The CHT was considered significant for security and maintenance of Chittagong port and the potential hydroelectric project of the Karnaphuli river (Shahabuddin,2021,pp.127).

Even though Radcliffe had also recommended CHT should join India which is why the inhabitants of CHT hoisted a flag of India but eventually it was transferred to Pakistan as Pakistani army took down the Indian flag from CHT on the 18th August 1947(Schendel 2005: 48–49 ;cited in Ghoshal, 2020,pp.50). During the partition the tribal chiefs firstly wanted to be recognised as a native state by British, Congress and Muslim league but failing to achieve that secondly the proposed for union with states such as Tripura, Kochbihar and Khasia. This too failed which led to CHT becoming a part of Pakistan. Under the new regime, the Chittagong hill tracts Frontier police regulation of 1881 was withdrawn and the indigenous tribal police force was demobilized in 1948. In 1955 the attempt to terminate the special status of CHT failed due to opposition from tribal people. But CHT remained still remained an Excluded area until the Constitutional amendment of 1963 that gradually led to loss of autonomy of the tribal people. This was accompanied by the construction of development project of Kaptai hydroelectric dam (Ahsan & Chakma,1989,pp.963). This furthered the sense of loss of autonomy followed by sense of marginalization and alienation among the tribal population.

There was further amendment in Rule 34, 51 and 54 of the CHT Manual by the Pakistan government that imposed restrictions on possession of lands and property by outsiders in the CHT and allowed CHT to exercise the right to expel any non-hill people from CHT who entered in it without valid permission from the deputy commissioner of the Chittagong division and restricted the entry of non-hill people in then CHT without prior permission from the deputy commissioner of the Chittagong division respectively resulting in removal of special status of CHT in 1963(Mohsin, 1995, pp. 33).

Later the Kaptai dam construction in the 1960s forced many to leave their homes as it were submerged under water. The government wasn't able to allocate lands of same quality. It could only provide 20000 acres of flat cultivable land and some families barely got average of two acres of land after they were displaced. Only 2.6 million dollars were provided instead of estimated compensation amount of 59 million dollars. Such development projects further increased the feeling of deprivation among the tribals as it was mostly outsiders who benefitted out of such industrial businesses. The scenario of CHT changed as there is hardly any tribal shop in the markets of CHT (Ahsan & Chakma,1989, pp.964).

The tribals constituted 98 percent and Bengalis less than 2 percent in CHT in 1947 but the Bengali population increased from 9 percent in 1951 to 12 percent in 1961 to 40 percent in 1981 and in the post Sheikh Mujibur Rahman period, full-fledged troops and military garrisons were deployed and established in the CHT and new

settlements were initiated in the region. This gradually led to clashes over land with continued injustice and discrimination that gave birth to Shanti Bahini, an armed rebellion post 1971 in Bangladesh (ibid:964-967).

After the partition of India, Chakmas under the Pakistani regime experienced statelessness in various ways. The political autonomy enjoyed by the Chakmas during the colonial period was lost and they faced discrimination under the state policies of the government that made their claim to the national protection difficult. These policies also converted them to 'rejected people' which further resulted in internal displacement and forceful migration. With the construction of Kaptai dam, many Chakma families had to migrate in the 1960s and the rejected people became unwanted migrants in Arunachal Pradesh (Chakma, 2014, pp.36).

The constitution of Pakistan did not give any provision to acknowledge the distinct cultural identity of the Chakmas and it was reflected in the clause 15(1) 1956 constitution stating that only Muslims can become the head of the state in Pakistan (Choudhury 1959:89-90 cited in Mohsin, 1959, pp.45) and Urdu became recognized as a state language.

This showcased a nationalist outlook with discriminatory bias against the minorities such as Hindus, Buddhist and Christians belonging to different ethnic groups. Once again, this new nation state failed to account for the interests of the other minorities who belonged to non-Bengali and non-Muslim communities.

Chakmas migrated post partition in various phases in the 1940s to 1960s and in the 1960s, the government of Tripura did not settle the displaced despite requests from the Chakma leaders. These people were moved to Andaman Nicobar Islands, Bihar but later got settled in NEFA presently known as Arunachal Pradesh (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2003, pp.254).

It is also argued that the settlement of the Chakmas in NEFA was to serve the purpose of a human wall in consideration of the Chinese threat post Sino-Indian war of 1962 (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2003, pp.257).

It's been more than 50 years now but till now the Chakmas and Hajong refugees that came to India from East Pakistan are not given citizenship despite the declaration by the Indian government to grant Indian citizenship to those who came to India from east Pakistan before 25th March 1971. In fact, after their migration to NEFA, there have been reports of violence and the emergence of "Refugee Go Back" movement by AAPSU (All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union) arguing that Arunachal Pradesh cannot be turned into a dumping ground for 'foreigners' (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2003, pp.259).

In the book "The Partition and the Chakmas" which is a biography based on the writings of Sneha Kumar Chakma who led an armed struggle to merge CHT with India in the 1940s has carried out parallel nationalist movements in CHT against the British colonial rule (Chakma 2013). But Sir Cyril Radcliffe who did not have any knowledge on the cultural practices of the communities was assigned the task of demarcating the boundary between India and Pakistan which resulted in suffering of many communities including the Chakmas who were now not only stateless but are considered foreigners to their own country (Singh, 2010, pp.13). Many Chakma Nationalist leaders in Rangamati hoisted the Indian Flag in the headquarters of the Chakma Raja on the 25th August 1947 until the Baluch Regiment of Pakistan came in CHT on the 20th August 1947 and brought it down (ibid: pp.215-216). The Pakistan government looked at the jummas as anti Pakistani and anti Islamic and after CHT became a part of Pakistan in August 1947, the Pakistan government violated the CHT Regulation of 1900 and started the settlement of Bengali Muslims at Longadu and Nanjarchar in CHT which continued till 1966 ignoring the fact that the regulation cannot be changed without a mutual agreement. So instead of understanding the CHT Regulation as a safeguard for jumma people, the government saw it as a remnant of colonialism that only separated CHT from the Islamic mainstream society.¹

¹ <https://www.pcjss.org/cht-history-struggle/>

PARTITION ACCOMPANIED IDENTITIES

Partition gave birth to a new identity called the refugees which means diversified groups who are uprooted from a country and are found struggling in an alien environment where they have resettled. The term was first legally found in the Partition proceedings in 1947 (*Partition Proceedings* 1949, 1: 188;cited in Ghoshal, 2020,pp.55).

The UN Convention of 1951 defined refugees as those who are outside of their country of origin, secondly, who are unwilling to avail protection of the country or to return back. Thirdly, such unwillingness is from the fear of being persecuted and Fourth, the fear of persecution is based on whether race, religion, nationality or being a member of a particular social group or having a political opinion (*Goodwin-Gill 2007: 13*;cited in Ghoshal, 2020,pp.50).

There is another category of forced displacement called statelessness that poses threat to national and regional stability (Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2005,pp.26–28). A stateless person is someone who is not considered national by any state under operation of its law and they are of different categories like internally displaced person in South Asia (Ghoshal, 2020,pp.55).

The term illegal infiltrator came to be officially used after the Indira Mujib Pact of 1971 (ibid,pp.58). The terms such as udbastu (uprooted from home) or bastuhara (one who has lost his homeland) came to be used with deeper connotations of uprootedness and strong sense of attachment with one's homeland. Such terms clearly created a sense of otherness and brought with it a derogatory status for the refugee community as they struggled to stand on their own feet to improve their social status. Refugees such as Bulbul Osman realized a change in identity as he recollected that when his father chose to go to Pakistan, they were termed as refugees by the East Bengal govt but again when they crossed the border in search for shelter during the 1971 liberation war, they were termed as sharanarathi by the Govt of West Bengal. Partition further led another category to emerge called the 'without' who did not have any legal documents to prove their country of origin (Biswas 2014: 9;cited in Ghoshal, 2020,pp.60). In contrast to Bengal refugees in Assam were seen not in terms of religion but in linguistic terms just as Bengalis (ibid,pp.60).

Chakravarty (Ghoshal, 2022,pp.77-78) argues that the definition of refugees is Eurocentric and is specific to the refugees who were displaced due to the Second World War. In the Indian scenario, two nations were created out of one and the people had to either migrate or stay in their home which caused a large-scale migration that created a class of 'Partition Refugees'. Chakmas can be seen in a similar light as they felt forced to migrate to the new boundary of India after partition and post partition events like Kaptai dam construction followed by religious persecution.

The Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh had to migrate because of fear of religious persecution as well as Kaptai Dam construction that submerged houses of innumerable families and took away their ancestral lands under water. These men and women indicated through their narratives that they had no other option than to migrate (Chakma woman in her 80s, personal communication, 9 February, 2022).

The term refugee connotes a state of helplessness and is derogatory and the believed they were victims of political game and uprooted from their homeland therefore the Bengal refugees preferred to use the term udbastu or bastuhara which means uprooted from the home/ homeland and it became a popular slogan of refugee movement in West Bengal 'Amra Kara Bastu Hara(who are we, the ones who lost their homes).These migrants made a strong demand for their rights by using their identity(Ghoshal, 2022,pp.92).

Similarly, as Singh (2010,pp.153) says that Chakmas have been termed in Arunachal Pradesh as refugees, environmental or developmental refugees, foreigners, aliens, stateless people. But the Chakmas viewed themselves as Indians or legal migrants. The first generation that sought asylum see their entry to India as a legal process as they were issued valid migration certificates at the time but the younger generation who are born in India identify themselves with being Indian (Singh, 2010,pp.153). These Partition refugees do not want to be seen as objects of charity for people and they viewed themselves as having made sacrifices for the independence of the country but instead they are seen as strangers who were dependent on Indian people for shelter.

Singh (2010) who looks into the self-perceptions of both Chakmas and the local tribes of Arunachal Pradesh notes an intense 'we' and 'they' divide that has created perception of oneself in relation to the 'other'. This perception of the 'other' has affected the way Chakmas and their settlement has been determined i.e Chakmas as perceived as refugees and their stay as temporary.

This perception of 'other' further came to forefront with the beginning of Assam movement between 1979-1985 which demanded identification and deportation of illegal foreigners from Assam.

As one of the respondents recalls that when NEFA administration was under Assam, we got all facilities like free scholarships for studying, agricultural loans from bank, trading license, subsidy etc but gradually these facilities stopped. Schools were closed down so some had to leave their families to go outside and study in places like Assam, Delhi and other places (Chakma man in his 70s, personal communication, 13 February 2022).

Chakma and Hajongs on the other hand do not agree with the term refugee, especially new generation of chakmas who were born in India. Efforts have been made to fight against such labels and categorizations through for instance protests on the streets of Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. One young chakma male says that during his graduation days in Guwahati, he was skeptical to reveal he is Chakma as he was afraid that he would be labeled as a refugee by people around him so all his friends were chakmas. His plight further worsened when all residential proof certificate's or RPC's were canceled and new RPC's were not issued any more as this prohibited him from getting into paramilitary forces after he cleared his exams due to lack of residential proof.²

Quite contrary to the conventional notion of refugee, Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh showcase a more established social, economic and cultural setup. Chakmas have formed their own social and economic institutions for example, Chakma Panchayat, markets etc (Chakma, 2022, pp 34).

In 1972, Chakma students' association was formed with one of its aims to revive the tradition and culture of Chakmas. They also organized the first Buddhist conference where they highlighted the culture and also invited cultural teams of Chakmas from other states (Chakma man in his 70s, personal communication, 13 February 2022).

This attempt to create a cultural consciousness and to reinstate one's culture and tradition can be associated with the attempt of reconnecting oneself with the cultural roots and traditions left behind and to recreate it to reinstate one's existence rather than just achieving mere survival in new place.

Similar instances can be seen as women too become active agents in their community and to preserve their tradition and thereby creating and recreating their identity as not only women but as a community. In 2005, women put an effort to form a Chakma Women Welfare Society where these group of women act as medium for women facing harassment, rape or any general illness. They also look after the postpartum issues of women by not only providing guidance but also financial support to women and men suffering from poverty. Secondly, they also believed to have played a role in conserving their identity by ensuring women wear the traditional Finon Haadi (Female Chakma Traditional attire) in special occasions such as marriage or religious events because the dress according to them is a symbol of identity for the community. Thirdly, these women also engage in demanding restoration of rights such as the citizenship rights etc (Chakma woman in her 70s, personal communication, 13 February, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Partition provides a historical context that helps us to understand the causes behind the large migration that took place from CHT to NEFA. Apart from being a historical event we have read in our history books, this brought diverse experiences for people and communities that still continues to impact them in many ways. One of the ways which it impacts communities like Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh is by imposing identities or categorizations and labels that affect their livelihood and their practical way of life. The situation of statelessness experienced by them has prohibited them from having access to employment opportunities or aspire higher education etc.

² Anand, Hrishi Raj. 2023." Arunachal: Chakma and Hajong Tribes Protest to get rid of the 'Refugee' Tag" Newslick, Retrieved on May 20, 2023 (<https://www.newslick.in/arunachal-chakma-and-hajong-tribes-protest-get-rid-refugee-tag>)

But as Lawler (2014) says, identity making must be seen as an ongoing process and an active one where the actors are constantly trying to create and recreate their lives and make sense of who they are rather than only how they are identified. Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh therefore carry many perceptions of others towards them as well as they act as active agents in creating an identity quite different from the one imposed upon them.

REFERENCES

1. Ahsan, S. A. A., & Chakma, B. (1989). Problems of national integration in Bangladesh: the Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Asian Survey*, 29(10), 959-970.
2. Basu, S. P. (Ed.). (2009). *The Fleeing People of South Asia: Selections from Refugee Watch*. Anthem Press.
3. Chakma, D.K. (Eds.)(2013). *The Partition and The Chakmas and the other writings of Sneha Kumar Chakma*. D .K Chakma through Pothi.com
4. Chakma, B. R.(2014). *Stateless People in the New Global Order: The Experience of the Chakmas*. Lakshi Publishers and Distributors
5. Chaudhury, S. B. R. (2003). Uprooted Twice: Refugees From the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In R. Samaddar(Eds.), *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947-2000*.(pp.249-280. Sage Publications
6. Chakma, A.B.(2021). Karpas Mahal Theke Shanti Chukti: Parbatya Chottogramey Rashtriya Nitir Itihash, The University Press Limited(UPL). Bangladesh.
7. Dubnov, A. M., & Robson, L. (Eds.). (2019). *Partitions: a transnational history of twentieth-century territorial separatism*. Stanford University Press.
8. Ghoshal, A. (2020). *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*. Taylor & Francis.
9. Jassal, S. T., & Ben-Ari, E. (2006). Listening for Echoes: Partition in Three Contexts. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2213-2220.
10. Jassal, S. T., & Ben-Ari, E. (Eds.). (2007). *The partition motif in contemporary conflicts*. SAGE Publications India.
11. Lawler, S. (2014). *Identity: sociological perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.
12. Mohsin, A. (1995). *The politics of nationalism: the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge)
13. Shahabuddin, M. (2021). *Minorities and the Making of Postcolonial States in International Law* (Vol. 154). Cambridge University Press
14. Singh, D. K. (2010). *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India*. SAGE Publications India.

WEBSITES

<https://www.pcjss.org/cht-history-struggle/>

<https://www.newsclick.in/arunachal-chakma-and-hajong-tribes-protest-get-rid-refugee-tag>