Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
July 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

Environmental Scarcity, Political Exclusion, and Migration: Rethinking the Chakma Displacement in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This study examines Chakma migration from Pakistan to Arunachal Pradesh through Homer-Dixon's scarcity-conflict model and the ENCOP model. It contends that migration in South Asia arises from the convergence of environmental degradation, political marginalization, and uneven development rather than mere economic factors. Using qualitative methods that combine historical, legal, and demographic analyses, the research uncovers how state-led development and institutional exclusion have produced enduring displacement and inter-ethnic tensions. It critiques dominant models for overlooking governance, identity, and citizenship in the migration-conflict nexus. The study proposes an integrated governance framework that aligns developmental goals with rights-based inclusion, reframing migration from a source of instability to a potential driver of regional resilience. Ultimately, it highlights how environmental scarcity, political exclusion, and identity politics intersect to shape forced migration and conflict.

Keywords: Migration and conflict, Statelessness, Displacement, Chakma, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnaphuli hydropower.

Introduction

Migration has long functioned as a pragmatic human strategy to mitigate existential pressures arising from poverty, conflict, and ecological degradation. Beyond its immediate survival imperative, it operates as a dynamic catalyst of socio-economic transformation, visible through remittance economies, labour market participation, and translocal networks. Yet, the developmental dividends of migration are profoundly mediated by institutional structures governing resource allocation and access to entitlements. In contexts characterized by fragile governance and entrenched inequality, migration tends to reconfigure rather than resolve structural asymmetries, often reproducing or intensifying competition and conflict. Early migration theories, rooted in neoclassical economic and push–pull frameworks, have been critiqued for their economistic and reductionist orientations. Contemporary scholarship, informed by environmental security studies, has significantly broadened this analytical terrain. Homer-Dixon's scarcity–conflict model, for instance, conceptualizes environmental scarcity as the product of population pressure, resource depletion, and elite appropriation, which together precipitate the displacement of marginalized populations. Complementing this, the ENCOP framework delineates typologies of conflict arising from environmentally induced migration, highlighting the contextual specificity of political and institutional responses. Collectively, these frameworks offer a comprehensive theoretical apparatus for examining how ecological stress and socio-political exclusion converge to generate migration-induced conflict.

The South Asian experience offers sustained empirical validation of these theoretical insights. The region's historical trajectory is marked by recurrent population movements shaped by ethnicity, identity, and competition over resources. India's frontier regions have repeatedly witnessed tensions between indigenous populations and

migrant groups, underscoring the fragility of institutional mediation in plural societies. The Chakma migration to Arunachal Pradesh epitomizes this intersection. Originating from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of erstwhile East Pakistan, the Chakma exodus was precipitated by environmental degradation linked to large-scale development projects and political dispossession. Their resettlement in Arunachal Pradesh occurred within an already fragile demographic and ecological milieu. Institutional ambiguity surrounding land rights and citizenship in the receiving context amplified contestations between the Chakmas and indigenous communities. Interpreted through Homer-Dixon's framework, resource scarcity and institutional fragility operated as structural determinants of friction, while the ENCOP typology explicates the transition from resource competition to identity-based mobilization and episodic violence.

The Chakma case thus reveals the dialectical relationship between migrant adaptation strategies and host community insecurities. Far from being a localized ethnic confrontation, it reflects broader structural pathologies of exclusion sustained by uneven state capacity. The absence of robust mechanisms for conflict resolution and citizenship adjudication entrenched perceptions of threat and deprivation. The progression from disputes over land to politicized identity-based polarization demonstrates how demographic transformations, in the absence of legal and administrative clarity, can evolve into protracted socio-political unrest. From a policy perspective, the analysis underscores that migration-induced tensions cannot be addressed through security-centric or ad hoc administrative measures alone. Sustainable migration governance in fragile ecologies demands integrated frameworks that simultaneously engage environmental resilience, institutional strengthening, and inclusive citizenship. The Chakma experience, situated within the wider South Asian migration–conflict nexus, thus illustrates how environmental scarcity, weak governance, and identity politics coalesce to shape the complex cartography of displacement and contestation. The article is structured into six sections. The first examines migration, migration-conflict dynamics, and global trends. The second analyses migration and conflict in South Asia. The third identifies the causes behind the Chakmas' migration from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) to India, highlighting Pakistan's flawed policies that caused environmental degradation, demographic imbalance, and land crises. The fourth discusses the Indian government's resettlement of Chakmas in NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh. The fifth analyses the resentment among student organisations and other groups advocating their deportation. The final section evaluates the role of constitutional and statutory bodies in safeguarding Chakmas' citizenship rights and examines India's approach to refugee protection despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

Migration and Conflict

Human migration has historically functioned as a fundamental survival mechanism, enabling communities to adapt to dynamic socio-political and environmental circumstances (IOM, 2020; Bodverson & Berg, 2009). Its direction, scale, and patterns have shifted across time in response to changing contexts, including adverse conditions such as conflict, persecution, and ecological decline. The post-industrial period has witnessed intensified migration flows from developing to developed countries, a process that has contributed to demographic imbalances. Developing nations continue to experience population growth rates six times higher than those of industrialized nations, with a differential of 0.3 percent. Consequently, aging societies have increasingly pursued inward migration policies to sustain economic productivity and welfare systems (IOM, 2020; IOM, 2005). According to the United Nations, there were approximately 281 million international migrants in 2020, a figure that would have reached 283 million in the absence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global flow of remittances, which plays a critical role in enhancing living standards, access to healthcare, and educational attainment in sending countries, similarly declined from 719 billion to 702 billion dollars due to the pandemic's global economic disruption (Natarajan A. et al., 2022).

Migration, especially toward resource-constrained and impoverished regions, can generate tensions with host populations depending on the interplay of structural factors such as poverty, entrenched ethnic identities, and demographic pressures. The likelihood of conflict remains low when migrant numbers are minimal; however, as migration intensifies, demographic restructuring may exacerbate perceived scarcity and provoke competition over control of limited resources. Such dynamics have historically generated violent conflict where indigenous and migrant populations compete over livelihood opportunities. In contrast, developed countries exhibit stronger institutional mechanisms, technological capacities, and political stability that mitigate the escalatory risks of migration-induced conflict (Suhrke, 1993: 15; Weiner, 1992: 319).

Empirical evidence supports this nexus between large-scale migration and ethnic conflict. The demographic transformation caused by the migration of Hindus from East Pakistan into Tripura between 1980 and 1988 resulted in insurgent mobilization and ethno-political unrest (Hazarika, 1993: 60-61). Migration flows that alter local ethnic hierarchies can incite challenges to existing power structures, heightening the risk of civil war or even genocide (Goldstone, 2002: 4-5; Weiner, 1978). The settlements of Han Chinese in Xinjiang and Tibet, and the extensive Bantu migrations in southern Africa, exemplify cases where population displacement precipitated long-term ethnic and separatist conflicts (Raleigh et al., 2008: 36). Similarly, environmental stress and migration catalyzed the 1983 North-South Sudanese conflict when Jalabas from the ecologically degraded North moved southward in pursuit of arable land. Environmental degradation and resource scarcity likewise triggered tensions between El Salvadorians and Hondurans; the inability of the host society to integrate approximately three lakhs El Salvadorian migrants ultimately culminated in violent confrontation (Molvoer, 1991). A comparable pattern unfolded in Kenya in 1991 when the inward migration of the Kikuyu, driven by declining fish stocks, land shortages, and deforestation, provoked deadly clashes with the Kalenjin community.

Population expansion intensifies environmental degradation and resource scarcity, fostering greater competition and the likelihood of conflict. Ecological decline is frequently gradual yet capable of generating acute crises. Technological innovations can moderate environmental pressures; nonetheless, continued overexploitation of natural resources perpetuates degradation, increasing the frequency and magnitude of climate-induced displacement (IOM, 2020). By 2050, the global population is projected to reach 9.7 billion, with an estimated 143 million people displaced due to environmental degradation, primarily across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (U.N., 2022; Rigaud et al., 2018). South Asia, a region of pronounced ecological vulnerability, anticipates a population of 2.4 billion by mid-century and registered 9.3 million displaced persons in 2020 alone, reflecting the increasing inevitability of migration as an adaptive response to ecological stress (IOM, 2020: 79).

Traditional migration theories—such as neoclassical economic theory, equilibrium theory, dual labour market theory, labour migration economics, world-system theory, and systems theory—have historically neglected the conflict dimension intrinsic to migratory processes, focusing instead on economic and developmental determinants. Recognizing this gap, interdisciplinary research has increasingly examined the intersection of environmental degradation, migration, and conflict. The Toronto group led by Homer Dixon, and the ENCOP initiative directed by Baechler and Spillman, significantly advanced this discussion by theorizing the links between population growth, resource scarcity, and violent conflict, largely building on neo-Malthusian assumptions (Suhrke, 1993).

Dixon's environmental change and acute conflict model, derived from empirical work in developing contexts, identifies population growth and unequal resource distribution as the principal drivers of ecological decline and scarcity. Environmental degradation intensifies when renewable resources—freshwater, fertile soil, or ozone balance—become depleted due to unsustainable demand rather than exhaustion of non-renewables like minerals or oil. According to Dixon, scarcity manifests in three forms: demand-induced (from population growth), supply-induced (from resource depletion), and structural (stemming from unequal distribution). These collectively produce two critical consequences: first, the monopolization of resources by a powerful minority that marginalizes

the majority; and second, the overexploitation of the environment by the deprived majority, which accelerates degradation and ecological crisis. As environmental degradation diminishes production and livelihoods, impoverished populations are compelled to migrate, thereby heightening competition and deepening poverty in host regions. This cyclical dynamic gives rise to three distinct types of conflict—over scarce resources, over group identities, and over deprivation itself (Dixon, 1991; Dixon, 1994).

Expanding on Dixon's logic, the ENCOP framework foregrounds the interactive nature of migration and conflict, identifying multiple conflict typologies derived from environmental and demographic pressures. These include ethnopolitical conflict, emerging from struggles between groups with strong ethnic identities over scarce resources; centre-periphery conflict, resulting from the exclusion of marginalized communities in large-scale development projects; native-migrant conflict, often occurring when impoverished migrants enter already fragile economies; and transboundary conflict, triggered when environmental migrants cross international borders into resource-limited societies. Additionally, population shifts in areas of low resource availability may heighten identity-based tensions, while resource-exploitation conflicts parallel centre-periphery dynamics (Baechler & Spillman, 1996). Both theoretical approaches converge on an important conclusion: environmental scarcity and degradation alone do not mechanically produce violent conflict. Rather, socio-economic and political variables—such as governance capacity, inequality, and institutional fragility—mediate this relationship. Consequently, the propensity for conflict is highest within ecologically constrained and politically unstable environments typically found in developing regions, where adaptive resilience remains limited. Cross-border or transnational violence is less common compared to localized conflicts that emerge within specific ecological and demographic settings.

Migration and conflict in South Asia

The South Asian region embodies a complex dialectic of economic prosperity and poverty, with India occupying a hegemonic position as the largest and comparatively wealthiest state, thereby functioning as a primary destination for migrants and refugees from its periphery. Historically, the subcontinent's profound socio-cultural interconnectedness, predating the 1947 Partition, facilitated fluid population movements encompassing both voluntary and forced migration, internal and external flows, and temporary and permanent relocations. British colonial administration, driven by a logic of resource extraction and revenue maximization, institutionalized transmigration policies to alleviate labour shortages, systematically recruiting and resettling populations such as Bengali-speaking Muslims and tea plantation labourers into Assam's underutilized territories (Weiner, 1993; Ghosh & Ahmed, 2011).

Post-Partition, migration trajectories have been reconfigured by structural drivers including economic deprivation, environmental crises, and political and ethnic persecution. While migrant-induced conflicts are not a sustained feature across most South Asian states, India presents a significant exception. Between 1970 and 1985, nativist movements—articulated through the Bhoomiputra (Sons of the Soil) ideology in states like Assam, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra—mobilized violently to expel internal and external migrants, whom they accused of eroding socio-cultural cohesion and regional economies. This period was marked by violent confrontations, killings, and significant internal displacement. Undocumented migration from Bangladesh into Assam remains a particularly volatile political issue, exemplified by events like the Neille Massacre (Weiner, 1978). In contrast, other large-scale displacements in the region, such as from the Mangla Dam construction in PoK, did not produce comparable native-migrant hostilities in receiving contexts like the United Kingdom (Das et al., 2000).

Causes of Migration of Chakmas to India

The development paradigm pursued by post-colonial states, often framed as a universal good, has frequently entailed significant social costs, particularly for ethnic minorities. The case of the Chakma people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) under Pakistani rule exemplifies how infrastructure projects, conceived without local consultation or adequate impact assessment, can function as instruments of forced displacement and cultural disruption. The construction of the Kaptai Hydro Electric Project (1958-62) was not an isolated engineering feat but a pivotal event that catalyzed the systemic disenfranchisement of the indigenous communities, revealing a confluence of majoritarian governance, securitization, and a disregard for tribal autonomy. The CHT, a region ethnically and culturally distinct from the Pakistani mainstream, enjoyed a protected status under British colonial administration. The CHT Regulation Act of 1900 and its subsequent designation as an 'excluded area' in the Government of India Act of 1935 guaranteed autonomy, featuring separate judicial systems and prohibiting land ownership by non-indigenous people (Nayak, 2014). This legal framework was designed to preserve tribal societies, such as the Buddhist Chakmas who practiced Jhum cultivation and shared ethnic affinities with Northeast India (Chowdhury, 2008). However, the Pakistani state viewed these provisions as impediments to resource extraction and national development. Consequently, it initiated a gradual revocation of this autonomy, culminating in the abrogation of the 1900 Act via a 1963 constitutional amendment (Nayak, 2015). This strategic move, coupled with allowing non-CHT settlement, was a deliberate act of securitization to establish complete state control and neutralize tribal opposition to planned development projects (Adnan, 2008). This policy was further motivated by suspicion towards the tribals, who had demonstrated a pro-India stance during Partition, and by the strategic value of the CHT for commercial access to the Bay of Bengal (Khan, 2003).

The Kaptai Dam, built on the Karnaphuli River with USAID funding, epitomizes the destructive potential of such top-down development. The project was critically flawed in its conception and execution. It did not adhere to contemporary international standards, being built on a scale that displaced 435 people per megawatt (MW) of power generated. The decision to produce 230 MW of power directly resulted in the displacement of approximately 100,000 tribals, undertaken without a comprehensive environmental or social impact assessment (Haque, 2015). While the dam later proved beneficial for flood management and year-round transportation (Nayak, 2021), its immediate and human costs were catastrophic. The reservoir inundated 650 square kilometers, submerging 125 mouzas and 54,000 acres of cultivable land, which included both permanent and seasonal farms (Islam, 1981; Sopher, 1963). This led to the obliteration of a local economy that was, paradoxically, more robust prior to the dam's construction (Ghafur et al., 1987). The state's response to this humanitarian crisis was characterized by negligence, cultural insensitivity, and systemic corruption. The governing elite, perceiving the tribals as nomadic, assumed they would autonomously devise survival strategies, thus justifying the absence of a robust resettlement policy (Cerena, 1997). The compensation offered—a meagre Rs. 500-700 per hectare for land valued at Taka 5000—was grossly inadequate, ensuring the economic impoverishment of the displaced. Furthermore, a profound lack of accountability plagued the rehabilitation process. Of a $60 million rehabilitation package, only $31 million was officially allocated, and a mere $2.6 million was actually disbursed, indicating significant corruption (Nayak, 2015: 6). Employment opportunities generated by the project were largely usurped by outsiders, further marginalizing the local population.

The failure of state-led rehabilitation forced the displaced into untenable choices: relocate to inhospitable highlands, move to government-designated sites like Kasalong, or disperse to other parts of the CHT. Each option presented severe hardships, with movement to new areas often requiring permissions from forest departments to continue Jhum cultivation, thereby perpetuating a cycle of environmental strain and administrative control (Sopher, 1963). The resettlement process was further mismanaged, with many families unofficially settling in downstream areas like Langdu, Barkal, and Bhagaichari, only to be displaced a second time when the reservoir filled. This cycle of destitution and frustration triggered a mass exodus; approximately 40,000 Chakmas migrated

to India's northeastern states, while another 20,000 sought refuge in Myanmar. For those who remained, the situation remained dire, with only 4,938 out of 18,000 displaced families receiving any form of rehabilitation in the Kasalong area, and the government providing a mere 24,801 acres of land against the 54,000 acres lost (Nayak, 2019; Parveen & Faisal, 2002). The Kaptai Dam project transformed the Chakmas from an autonomous community into a victimized minority. It was executed within a political framework that deliberately dismantled their legal protections, viewed their homeland as a resource to be exploited, and displayed a callous disregard for their welfare. The resultant forced displacement, loss of livelihood, and inadequate compensation were not unintended consequences but the direct outcome of a development model that prioritized state control and economic gain over the rights and survival of its most vulnerable citizens. The legacy of Kaptai is a stark reminder of the violence inherent in non-participatory development.

Settlement of Chakmas in NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh

The Chakmas, having endured displacement and deprivation twice within the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), crossed into India seeking refuge in Tripura and Mizoram with the expectation of cultural and social assimilation among the local tribal communities. This aspiration, however, was undermined by rising inter-ethnic tensions and fears of confrontation with the Mizo tribes. In response, the Indian government, wary of exacerbating ethnic friction, sought alternative sites for resettlement. The initial proposal to settle the Chakmas in Assam was declined due to demographic constraints, after which the government identified the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) as a viable location, rationalizing that "surplus land was available there" (CCRCAP 1995). The decision-making process has often been criticized for its bureaucratic insensitivity and lack of consultation with local tribal authorities. While official claims suggested that the NEFA administration had been consulted, several accounts allege otherwise, suggesting that the settlement was implemented unilaterally under the guise that sparse population density would mask the arrival of the migrants (Basu & Das, 2011). Public opinion, moreover, was deliberately excluded from the discourse, as NEFA remained under direct central control at the time. Chaudhury (2003) further posits that the settlement also served a strategic purpose — facilitating intelligence-gathering along the volatile Indo-China frontier — thereby aligning humanitarian considerations with security imperatives.

Between 1964 and 1969, the Indian government resettled 14,888 Chakma migrants in the districts of Papum Pare, Changlang, and Lohit, allocating 10,799 acres of land and Rs. 4,200 toward the process. Each family received, on average, seven acres of cultivable land, a figure exceeding the average landholding in the CHT (Basu & Das, 2011; Basu & Biswas, 1997). Until then, NEFA had largely remained stable, inhabited by 26 distinct tribal groups with their own languages and cultural systems, and had witnessed only isolated violence, such as the Achingmori massacre, which had earlier prompted administrative isolation to mitigate conflict (Mukherjee, 2007: 56). Despite these concerns, the resettlement proceeded without amending NEFA's "special status" provision, reflecting a top-down exercise of state authority that left the Chakmas "resettled to be unsettled," politically marginalized, and effectively stateless (Chaudhury 2003). The omission of proactive citizenship measures deepened their precarity. While local opposition was initially absent, resentment surfaced following NEFA's transition to statehood in 1986, coinciding with renewed debates over indigenous rights and demographic entitlements (Ghosh, 2016). The All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), drawing ideological inspiration from the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and its Assam Movement (1979–1985), emerged as a vocal opponent of Chakma settlement, demanding their repatriation to Bangladesh (Hazarika, 1993). This shift transformed a bureaucratic resettlement into a protracted contestation over belonging, identity, and the politics of indigeneity in postcolonial Northeast India.

Issue of Contentions: Role of AAPSU

The protest against the settlement of the Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh initially remained dormant but resurfaced when the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), a body deeply committed to protecting indigenous rights, renewed its concerns. The AAPSU argued that the increased number of foreigners—specifically settled Chakmas and Tibetans—threatened the demographic balance of the state. They claimed these groups were becoming numerically dominant compared to other native tribes and demanded their expulsion. This demand was rooted in two primary concerns. First, the growing Chakma population was seen as undermining tribal dominance and potentially reshaping the socio-political composition of the state if citizenship were granted. Second, the government's decision to settle refugees in a constitutionally protected "inner line" zone appeared to compromise the indigenous peoples' special rights, derived from colonial legal frameworks and sustained through India's "special status" provisions.

In addition to concerns about demographic change, AAPSU's agitation centered on issues of citizenship, permanent settlement, Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, and access to land rights (Singh, 2010). The fears intensified after AAPSU claimed that 65,000 Chakmas were settled in 1991 out of a total population of 864,000, a ratio of 1:8. The organization viewed this demographic pattern as a potential precursor to political dominance, particularly in electoral contexts (Saikia, 1994). However, AAPSU's estimation proved exaggerated. Census records present a much lower figure: 24,083 Chakmas and 1,433 Hajongs in 1981, and 30,062 Chakmas with 2,134 Hajongs in 1991. Das and Chaudhury (2015) critiqued this exaggeration, citing Chief Minister Gegong Apang's 1994 statement that the official figure of Chakmas was closer to 35,000. Thus, the government's own estimations refuted AAPSU's claim. By 2005, Chakma (2005: 90) estimated around 60,000 refugees, consistent with the pattern of gradual demographic increase. The Human Development Report (2006) further illustrated population growth, noting a 2.98 percent rise in Arunachal Pradesh between 1961 and 2001—above the national average of 2.13 percent. Districts housing the Chakma settlements, particularly Changlang, Lohit, and Papum Pare, reported exponential growth rates of 8.13, 4.04, and 13.77 times, respectively. Yet, given inconsistent government data and sporadic population surveys, the actual Chakma demographic size remains uncertain.

Population growth inevitably increased pressure on land and resources. Restricted to designated settlements and denied mobility beyond their designated zones, the Chakmas' expanding population encroached upon nearby forested and protected territories. Administrative records from 1994–95 document the evacuation of approximately 177 hectares of land across Diyun Reserve Forest, Bijoypur under Bordumsa range, Manabhum Ridge within Tengapani Reserved Forest, and Drupong Reserve Forest (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1996). Notably, these evictions occurred without violent confrontation. Although Arunachal Pradesh has historically remained free from large-scale ethnic conflicts, the encroachments alarmed indigenous groups who saw them as precursors to environmental degradation and sociocultural displacement.

Tribal anxiety was further entrenched by Britain's colonial-era legal infrastructure, which preserved the territories of indigenous groups through restrictive measures. The state inherited multiple protective legislations, including the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) of 1873, the Chin Hills Rules of 1876, the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation of 1880, and the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891. These laws prohibited non-indigenous persons, including Indian nationals, from acquiring or inhabiting tribal land to safeguard native interests (Prasad, 2007). Consequently, Arunachal Pradesh evolved into a de facto ethnic enclave, home to specific tribal groups. According to Chaudhury (2003), this framework cultivated a deep-seated sense of ethnic insecurity—what he termed the politics of indigeneity and minority anxiety.

AAPSU, leveraging these colonial provisions, justified its protests and blockades as defensive actions against the perceived violation of the "special status" of indigenous communities. Despite its intense mobilization, there was no record of violent conflict between Chakmas and indigenous tribes, largely because demographic changes

produced limited socio-economic impact (Saikia, 1994). Nonetheless, demographic projections suggested that if citizenship were extended, Chakmas would become the second or third largest ethnic group after the Adis—whose population was 1.26 lakh—surpassing several smaller tribes like the Akas, numbering only 5,140. Anxiety also stemmed from comparative literacy rates: Chakmas registered 43.72 percent literacy in 2011, approaching the state's overall rate of 65.38 percent. This rising education level, coupled with social mobility, fueled fears of competition for government employment and economic opportunities (Singh, 2016).

AAPSU thus framed migration as an existential challenge to tribal supremacy—casting the settlers as competitors for land, education, and political representation. Invoking constitutional and customary rights "over land" (Baruah, 2008), AAPSU condemned the settlement policy as a direct assault on tribal sovereignty. It strongly opposed Chakma demands for ST recognition, asserting that such a move would unjustly grant land entitlements and economic privileges designed exclusively for indigenous communities (Singh, 2010). These tensions highlighted a critical contradiction between national obligations rooted in humanitarian commitments and the state's insistence on protecting territorial indigeneity.

The complexities deepened due to the divergence between central and state authorities. Despite both often being ruled by the same party, the Arunachal Pradesh government repeatedly declined to cooperate with the Centre on implementing refugee regularization, citing what it called the "unanimous will" of the state's people (Das & Chaudhury, 2015). As a result, refugees continued to face systemic denial of citizenship rights and access to essential services such as healthcare, employment, and education (Talukdar, 2008). These exclusions entrenched marginalization, creating a humanitarian dilemma that challenged India's constitutional commitments to equality and justice.

Analysts argue that this stalemate reflects the Centre's ambivalent approach toward refugees. Banerjee (2016) observes that New Delhi's policies reveal inconsistencies between its humanitarian posturing and regional political pragmatism. To reconcile security, demographic, and diplomatic sensitivities, the government adopted what Bhaumik (1997: 130) describes as a "dual policy on refugees." Under this policy, India simultaneously upholds humanitarian obligations while allowing state governments to prioritize local political pressures. Consequently, refugees like the Chakmas remain in a liminal state—neither fully assimilated nor entirely excluded from the legal and territorial framework of the Indian nation.

The crisis in Arunachal Pradesh thus encapsulates the broader tension between developmental nationalism and ethnonational protectionism. The Chakma issue is not merely a demographic concern but a manifestation of historical anxieties over cultural preservation, territorial control, and political representation. The British-era regulatory ethos, while intended to protect tribal communities, created enduring legal and geographic enclosures that shaped postcolonial state policies. These frameworks, rooted in exclusionary protectionism, continue to limit the scope for refugee integration and multicultural coexistence. Moreover, AAPSU's resistance reflects the state's complex negotiation between identity and modernity. While its activism exposes legitimate indigenous apprehensions, its rhetoric also perpetuates exclusionary politics, often conflating demographic fear with a broader xenophobic narrative. The Chakmas' restricted mobility, combined with the denial of citizenship and land rights, has confined them to segregated developmental margins—producing spatial and social immobility that hinders both integration and sustainable development. Despite the absence of overt conflict, the state's fragile ecological and ethnic equilibrium remains vulnerable. Environmental degradation from overpopulation in confined settlements and the perceived erosion of tribal autonomy sustain mistrust between the settlers and local groups. The perpetuation of temporary administrative measures instead of structural solutions has reinforced the Chakmas' in-between status: legally invisible yet geographically permanent.

The issue of Citizenship

The Chakmas, once citizens of Pakistan, were rendered stateless following the creation of Bangladesh. Abandoned by the Bangladeshi government and resettled in Arunachal Pradesh, they experienced a condition of "bare life," as conceptualized by Giorgio Agamben—existence without political rights or recognition. Their settlement in a tribal-dominated region was viewed by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) and major political actors as temporary and humanitarian rather than permanent. Consequently, any move toward granting them citizenship was met with opposition. Despite judicial and constitutional efforts to secure their rights, implementation on the ground failed, reflecting administrative reluctance and political insensitivity (Banerjee, 2016).

The central government, Judiciary, and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) consistently supported granting citizenship to the Chakmas. Generations of Chakmas were born and died seeking naturalisation under the Citizenship Act of 1955, yet remained stateless for over five decades. The AAPSU's protests during the 1990s led to widespread human rights violations: essential supplies were blockaded, resulting in deaths; schools were destroyed, denying access to education; and violent attempts were made to evict Chakmas from their settlements. In response, the Chakmas formed the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP) to mobilise public opinion and demand the restoration of their fundamental rights (AAPSU, 1994).

The CCRCAP brought these violations to the NHRC, which ordered an investigation from the state government. Receiving no cooperation, the NHRC petitioned the Supreme Court. The Court upheld the Chakmas' human and citizenship rights based on Sections 5(1)(a) and 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955, making these provisions applicable to persons residing in Assam since 1985. However, in Khudiram Chakma vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh (1993), the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the state, categorising Chakmas as foreigners and their settlements as illegal under Section 7 of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR), 1873. The Court held that Section 6A—granting citizenship to persons who entered India before January 1966 and resided in Assam—did not apply to the Chakmas, as they had only briefly stayed in Assam in 1964. Since their settlements later fell within Arunachal Pradesh, their hopes of acquisition of citizenship through this route were extinguished.

In contrast, in NHRC vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh (1996, 1 SCC 742), the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Chakmas, declaring them eligible for citizenship under Section 5(1)(a), which allows registration after seven years of ordinary residence in India. The Court emphasised that refugees and stateless persons are entitled to the same fundamental rights as citizens under Article 21 of the Constitution. This judgment marked a critical assertion of India's constitutional humanism, recognising human rights beyond the prism of formal citizenship.

Subsequently, in W.P. No. 886 of 2000, the Delhi High Court affirmed that Chakmas born in India before July 1, 1987, were Indian citizens by birth under Section 3(1)(a) of the Citizenship Act. It directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to enrol eligible Chakmas as voters. While the ECI conducted revisions to include Chakma names in voter lists, state authorities obstructed these efforts through restrictive orders requiring Inner Line Permits for enrolment, revealing institutional prejudice. To avert political backlash, the ECI suspended the enrolment of 426 Chakmas in the 14-Doimukh constituency. Nevertheless, 1,497 Chakmas were successfully registered as voters, affirming their legal recognition as citizens (Philip, 2004).

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019 introduced new provisions under Sections 2(1)(b) and 6B to expedite citizenship for religious minorities—Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian—migrating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before December 31, 2014. These groups were exempted from being classified as illegal migrants under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, and the Foreigners Act, 1946. However, the CAA specifically excluded areas under the Inner Line Permit, including Arunachal Pradesh, thereby nullifying its applicability to the Chakmas (Chakma, 2022). The central government's assurances, including references to the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972, were repeatedly dismissed by the Arunachal Pradesh

government, which invoked its special protective status under the "protected area" framework to deny citizenship to non-Arunachalees (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1996).

India's overall approach to refugees demonstrates a paradoxical stance. Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, India has upheld the principle of non-refoulement and extended significant humanitarian assistance to displaced groups. The country's constitutional design, rooted in universalism, has often compensated for the absence of a formal asylum law. Under Article 51(c) of the Directive Principles of State Policy, India has sought to respect international law and treaty obligations. The judiciary's role in cases involving Chakmas reflects this normative engagement, extending constitutional rights to non-citizens through expansive interpretations of Articles 14, 21, and 25, which ensure equality, life, liberty, and freedom of religion (Chimni, 2000). This jurisprudence echoes earlier precedents, such as India's decision to host over one lakh Tibetan refugees between 1950 and 1959, despite its political opposition to Tibetan autonomy (Chimni, 1994).

Nevertheless, the Chakma issue exposes a tension between India's constitutional universalism and the localised politics of ethnic preservation in Arunachal Pradesh. Statutory and judicial affirmations of citizenship have repeatedly faltered at the stage of implementation, revealing the limits of central authority over state-level exclusionary frameworks. The refusal to regularise Chakma citizenship underscores the entrenched ethno-political anxieties that shape state governance in the region. Although the Judiciary and NHRC have articulated a strong human rights framework, the persistence of bureaucratic inertia and regional resistance has perpetuated the Chakmas' statelessness. Their experience highlights India's struggle to reconcile human rights obligations with ethno-territorial sensitivities and the constitutional challenge of translating judicial mandates into lived citizenship.

Theoretical Discussions

The study offers a compelling examination of Chakma migration to India, interpreted through Dixon's model of environmental degradation and acute conflict, and further contextualized using the ENCOP model to explain post-migration dynamics. A critical engagement with these frameworks reveals both the analytical strengths and conceptual limitations in explaining the Chakma case. Dixon's model posits that population pressure leads to environmental degradation and consequent resource scarcity, which in turn drives migration and conflict. However, in the Chakma context, the study rightly challenges this causality. The environmental degradation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) stemmed not from demographic stress but from state-led development—the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s. This human-engineered ecological disruption displaced thousands of Chakmas by inundating fertile lands and destroying livelihoods. The application of Dixon's model therefore demands modification: population pressure was not the trigger; rather, development-induced displacement generated demand- and supply-induced scarcity. This reaffirms that environmental change as a push factor for migration can originate from structural and political decisions rather than from natural demographic growth.

Furthermore, the study's identification of structural scarcity—arising from systematic marginalization of tribal groups—is crucial. The state's discriminatory policies, exclusion from employment, and unequal access to developmental benefits deepened economic and political alienation. In Dixon's framework, such structural inequalities complement environmental degradation as secondary triggers of migration. Yet, the Chakma case exposes a blind spot in Dixon's model: the limited attention given to governance and power asymmetries as fundamental causes of forced migration. Here, resource scarcity was artificially manufactured through top-down state decisions and unequal distribution rather than organic ecological stress.

The ENCOP model (Environment and Conflict Project) extends the analytical space to post-migration effects, emphasizing the forms and intensity of conflicts arising from environmental migration. The study underlines that the Chakmas did not migrate spontaneously into Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA, present-day Arunachal Pradesh) but were resettled through state-sponsored schemes. This deliberate rehabilitation distinguishes it from typical refugee inflows driven by uncontrolled migration. The ENCOP model aptly explains this dynamic by highlighting how state mediation can contain or exacerbate conflict based on management strategies. In this case, potential ethnic conflict was mitigated through state control over settlement boundaries and population containment, preventing open resource competition between the Chakmas and indigenous communities.

However, while the ENCOP model accounts for conflict prevention, it underrepresents latent tensions. The absence of overt violence does not equate to harmonious coexistence. The structural exclusion of Chakmas from citizenship rights, local autonomy, and employment opportunities signifies a continuous undercurrent of political conflict, even if it remained non-violent. Thus, the model's emphasis on visible conflict may overlook prolonged structural and identity-based tensions that persist in the Chakma experience. Overall, the analysis of Chakma migration through Dixon's and ENCOP frameworks demonstrates that environmental degradation, when politically mediated, becomes a catalyst for displacement, while post-migration peace depends more on inclusive governance than environmental or demographic factors. Yet, both models fall short in fully capturing the political dimensions of identity, citizenship, and structural inequality that sustain the marginalization of displaced communities long after resettlement.

Conclusion

The case study situates the case within theoretical frameworks including Homer-Dixon's scarcity-conflict model and the ENCOP conflict typologies, highlighting the complex interplay of environmental degradation caused by state-led development projects (notably the Kaptai Dam), political marginalization, and identity-based exclusion. The Chakma migration exemplifies how forced displacement originates less from natural demographic pressures and more from structural state interventions that produce artificial resource scarcity and socio-political exclusion. The Kaptai Dam, by submerging vast arable land without adequate rehabilitation, inflicted profound ecological and economic disruption on the Chakmas, underscoring the violence embedded in non-participatory development paradigms. The subsequent resettlement in Arunachal Pradesh, conducted without effective consultation or citizenship guarantees, entrenched statelessness and fostered ethnic insecurities amongst indigenous groups, especially under the aegis of organizations like the AAPSU.

Though overt violent conflict has largely been avoided, the political exclusion of the Chakmas—manifested in denial of citizenship, restricted mobility, lack of Scheduled Tribe status, and limited access to resources—perpetuates a latent, structural conflict rooted in identity and legal ambiguity. The stalemate reflects a tension between India's constitutional universalism and localized ethnonationalist protectionism, revealing the limits of central government authority in enforcing inclusive policies over resistant state apparatuses. Both the scarcity-conflict model and ENCOP framework, while analytically useful, inadequately address the political dimensions of identity, governance, and protracted marginalization that characterize the Chakma experience. Based on the above, it can be suggested that the government should enforce clear and unequivocal legislative measures to grant citizenship and legal recognition to the Chakmas and Hajongs in Arunachal Pradesh, fulfilling judicial mandates and India's constitutional obligations to equality and human rights. It also pertinent to institutionalise platforms for dialogue and negotiation between host indigenous communities and the Chakma settlers, such as joint land management boards and consultative councils, to address land, resource-sharing, and cultural coexistence sustainably. Moreover, it also important to promote education and awareness with both Chakma and indigenous populations to foster mutual respect, cultural understanding, and reduce xenophobic narratives. Moreover, a

regional collaboration between India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar on population displacement issues to address root causes such as ecological degradation and political marginalization, aiming to reduce forced migration pressures. Implementing these measures could transform the Chakma migration challenge from a source of chronic instability into an opportunity for inclusive development and resilient regional integration, ensuring that the rights and dignity of displaced communities are upheld alongside indigenous protections.

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