

# Transformation and Consolidation of Ethnic Identity in Arunachal Pradesh: Exploring the Role of the Educated Elite

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## Abstract

The paper proposes to focus on transformation and consolidation of ethnic identity in Arunachal Pradesh, a state located in northeast India, with special emphasis on the role of the educated elite as a catalyst in this process. The key concepts of this paper are- ethnicity, ethnic identity, community, nationality and ethnic mobilization. The paper has been divided into four sections. The first section deals with the conceptual framework. The second section seeks to examine the assertion of ethnic identity in Arunachal Pradesh within this framework. Section III focuses on the role of the educated elite in the transformation and consolidation of multiple ethnic identities into a national identity. Section IV summarizes the main observations of the paper.

**Keywords:** Transformation; Ethnic identity; Educated elite; Arunachal Pradesh; Community; Ethnic mobilization; Ethnicity

## Conceptual Framework

Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity which entails the subjective or symbolic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture in order to differentiate themselves from other groups [1]. The movement from ethnic category to community is a process that may involve such changes as the creation of a self-conscious language community out of a group of related speakers [2]. Eventually, an ethnic community may establish itself as a nationality if it succeeds in securing group rights through political action and political mobilization [3]. Different ethnic groups may compete with one another 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 seek to move into the privileged socio-economic or political position 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 try to mobilize their own ethnic group. On the other hand, the privileged group may mobilize to defend its interests and may also use ethnic sentiments in doing so [4]. Such mobilization and counter-mobilization lie at the core of ethnic politics.

While conceptualizing ethnic identity, it is pertinent to refer to the seminal works by Jean S Phinney and Seth Schwartz. Phinney developed a three stage model of ethnic identity development based on research with minority adolescents combined with other ego identity and ethnic identity models, especially the works of Marcia and Erickson. Her research involved both junior and high school adolescents who were found to be at one of the three levels of ethnic identity development [5]. The first stage, unexamined ethnic identity, is characterized by a lack of exploration. In this stage, individuals may experience a lack of interest in ethnicity or a general acceptance of others' opinions. The second stage of the model, ethnic identity search/moratorium, combines the notions of encounter and exploration. The individual starts to develop their ethnic identity during this stage which is often initiated by a harsh or indirect event. The final stage of the model is ethnic identity achievement which is marked by awareness about one's own identity and its synergetic articulation. It appears that the second and the third stages of this model are relevant to ethnic identity development among the Arunachalese students in the sense that the Chakma refugee issue ignited a sense of ethnicity among them, although they showed a lack of awareness of their ethnic identity prior to the cropping up of this

issue. They also demonstrated a propensity to articulate this identity and to transcend beyond ethnicity to achieve the level of nationality.

Another study that needs to be discussed in this context is by Schwartz, Zamboanga and Jarvis. This study examined acculturative stress and self-esteem as mediators of the association of ethnic identity and acculturation with psychosocial outcomes. The study sample consisted of 347 Hispanic adolescents in a "new" immigrant-receiving community in the Midwest. Results of the study indicated that relationships of ethnic identity to academic grades and to externalizing symptoms were mediated by self-esteem and that both U.S. and Hispanic acculturation orientations were directly associated with prosocial behavior [6]. The findings of this cross-cultural research may be taken into account for an analysis of the psyche of Arunachalese students vis-à-vis their Chakma counterparts.

For an understanding of the relationship between local communities and ethnic minorities, it may be useful to refer to the discourses on minority nationalism, internal colonialism and nativism. Minority nationalism presupposes the existence of national minorities who perceive a threat from the majority community and aspire for political autonomy. Academic writings on the subject of minority nationalism seem to be dominated by two different viewpoints. One school has tended to describe local loyalties by such implicitly derogatory terms as tribalism, communalism and primordial loyalties [7]. At the other extreme, some writers sympathetic to minorities seem to believe that nation-building entails loss to the minority communities, involving the destruction of their distinctive cultures as well as their political and economic domination by the elites of the majority community [8]. Both these views tend to look upon minority nationalism and nation-building as contradictory to each other. Another theoretical perspective which focuses on the relationship between majority and minority ethnic communities is the 'Internal Colonial Model' developed by Michael Hechter. This theory in essence implies that the relationships

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between members of the core and peripheral communities in a state are characterized by exploitation. The core community, having acquired an advantage over the outlying communities in the period of state-building or in the early period of modernization, uses its political and economic power to maintain its superior position. The cultural and ethnic differences between the communities do not disappear and in certain circumstances, they may form the basis of demonstrations and even separatist agitations by members of the peripheral communities [9]. The two basic propositions of Hechter's model can be summarized as follows:

1. The dominant community defines and regulates influential roles and positions in such a way as to exclude members of the peripheral communities.

2. The economic development of the peripheral regions is controlled so as to make them highly specialized in their products and thus more vulnerable to fluctuations in world markets than the core region is [10].

Apart from these two different kinds of interface between communities in a society which are essentially perceived to be exploitative, a third perspective may be employed for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between local and migrant communities. This is termed as 'nativism' or 'nativist movement' which in essence signifies the conflict between migrants and indigenous communities, often described as 'sons of the soil' [11]. Myron Weiner has identified five conditions for nativist movements in India viz. presence of migrants from outside the cultural region, cultural differences between the migrants and the local community, immobility of the local population in comparison to other groups in the population, a high level of unemployment among the indigenous middle class and a substantial portion of middle class jobs held by culturally alien migrants and a rapid growth of educational opportunities for the lower middle classes. Myron Weiner also points out that development of either a regional or national identity is a precondition to the development of nativism. Nativism, according to him, is that form of ethnic identity that seeks to exclude those who are not members of the local ethnic group from residing and working in a territory because they are not natives. He, therefore, considers ethnic selectivity as the characteristic feature of nativism [12].

Since this paper seeks to explore the process of consolidation of ethnic identity by the indigenous Arunachalese educated elite through ethnic mobilization against Chakma refugees, it may be contended that nativism would be the most suitable theoretical framework for analyzing the dynamics of this phenomenon. It may be noted, however, that both minority nationalism and internal colonialism are appropriate for an enquiry into the core-periphery relationship between dominant mainstream Indian community and the Arunachalese.

### **Assertion of Ethnic Identity in Arunachal Pradesh**

An enquiry into the nature of tribes inhabiting Arunachal Pradesh shows that these tribes are so numerous and are culturally so distinct from one another that each of them can at best be termed as a distinct ethnic group. These tribes are yet to become self-conscious and cohesive entities like communities. Nor can they claim to establish themselves as a nationality since a distinct Arunachalee identity has not emerged because of the cultural diversities of the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh. Keeping in view the multicultural nature of the Arunachalee society, the very emergence of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) as a vanguard of the interests of Arunachalese as a whole definitely points towards the hegemonic role acquired by the educated elite under the banner of AAPSU.

It is evident from the available literature on student politics in northeast India that students have emerged as a significant social and political force and that student organizations based on ethnic affiliations have been playing the role of powerful pressure groups vis-à-vis the state governments of the region. These organizations seem to have acquired considerable bargaining power to influence government decisions in favour of the respective ethnic communities they claim to represent [13,14]. In fact, these ethnically organized student bodies have virtually rendered irrelevant class oriented student organizations like the All India Students' Federation (AISF) affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Students' Federation of India (SFI) affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [15].

It is in this context that the role of the AAPSU becomes significant for local politics in Arunachal Pradesh. It may be interesting to take a look at the Preamble to the AAPSU Constitution which declares that the objective of the AAPSU is to promote unity and fraternity among the students in particular and the people of the State in general, to explore and exploit the energy of the student community of the State in the greater interest of the Nation and to preserve and promote the tradition and culture of the people of Arunachal Pradesh [16]. It appears that the phrase 'people of Arunachal Pradesh' has been used in a loose manner because the State is home to more than a hundred tribal communities, each with a distinct tradition and culture as well as non-tribals from various parts of India. Obviously, the AAPSU cannot claim to be a champion of all these communities. Rather, it seems to represent the interests of the dominant ethnic groups in the State. It may be observed, therefore, that an element of ethnicity is implicit in the Preamble to the AAPSU Constitution, even though it may not have been spelt out explicitly.

The year 1979 marked a turning point in the history of the AAPSU as this year showed a drastic departure from its erstwhile strategy of prayer, petition and partnership with the Government. This change of strategy was triggered by a boundary dispute with Assam. On the other hand, the Assam agitation against foreign nationals launched by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) inspired the AAPSU to a great extent and it gave its support to the Assam agitation by launching its movement in 1982 demanding deportation of refugees from Arunachal Pradesh. It was at this stage that ethnic issues began to figure prominently in the programmes of the AAPSU.

Ethnic identity issues again came to the forefront of the political debate in Arunachal Pradesh in 1994 when the AAPSU embarked on an agitational programme against the Chakma and Hajong refugees. The problem can be traced back to 1964 when about 30,000 Chakmas and Hajongs migrated to India in the wake of their displacement caused by the construction of the U.S.-financed Kaptai Hydrel Project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and also by the persistent socio-religious persecution by the East Pakistan Government. They were rehabilitated by the Government of India in the then North Eastern Frontier Agency (N.E.F.A.), now Arunachal Pradesh. Since then, the Chakmas and the Hajongs are living in demarcated areas of Diyum and Bordumsa in Changlang district, Chowkham area in Lohit district and Kokila area in Papum Pare district of Arunachal. Things threatened to reach a flashpoint when on August 1, 1994, the AAPSU issued "Quit Arunachal" notices to the Chakmas, Hajongs, Nepalis and Bangladeshis to leave the State peacefully by September 30, 1994. As a follow-up of the notice, the AAPSU also organized rallies in different parts of the State, including Kokila and Miao, where the refugee settlements are concentrated [17].

It may be interesting to examine some of the statements issued

by the student leaders from time to time on this issue as well as the arguments offered by them to justify the demand for deportation of Chakmas, Hajongs and other migrants from Arunachal. Domin Loya, a prominent student leader and the General Secretary of AAPSU, was of the view that the foreign nationals should be made aware that they were given shelter on humanitarian grounds and that they should not take undue advantage of the hospitality shown by the people of this State [18]. This shows that the student leadership is aware of the compulsions that led the Government of India to accommodate the Chakmas in the then N.E.F.A. At the same time, an intolerant attitude towards the settlers is clearly perceptible. Such an attitude may perhaps be explained in terms of two factors. First, in the perception of the AAPSU, the Chakmas form a sizable non-local population vis-à-vis the small indigenous population [19] and secondly, the AAPSU seems to have articulated the concern of the indigenous tribal society about protection of its rights to land and resources and its reluctance to share these with non-locals. Viewed in this context, ethnic politics in Arunachal acquires the dimension of a nativist movement because it highlights the conflict between the sons of the soil or the natives and the non-natives. Expressing disapproval of the manner in which the Chakmas have been asserting their rights, the AAPSU President, Takam Sanjoy stated somewhat sarcastically, "When we have fed them, they want to sleep. When we allowed them to sleep, they want to extend their claims" [20]. The student leader was also critical of the fact that the Chakmas could dare demand citizenship by approaching the Supreme Court [21].

Let us now take a look at some of the allegations of the AAPSU against the Chakma refugees. It is alleged that they are creating serious law and order problems, threatening the demographic balance, peaceful co-existence and the very identity of the indigenous people of the State. The AAPSU alleges that their illegal settlement in the state, demand for permanent citizenship rights and misrepresentation of facts and figures to various forums, have created panic among the bona fide people and tarnished the image of the State. The AAPSU further alleges that the Chakmas have dishonoured the verdict of the Supreme Court which is highly objectionable [22]. As far as the AAPSU's concern about a perceived threat to the demographic balance is concerned, let us cite some of the facts and figures in this connection. The AAPSU has estimated that there are at least 2,00,000 "foreigners" in the State out of which the Chakma population constitutes more than 1,00,000. However, the official figure of the Chakma population has been shown as 35,000 in 1994. On the other hand, the Refugee Deportation Council (RDC) has challenged the official estimate on the ground that the Government figures relate to the refugee population officially registered in the settlement areas. The RDC claims that the Chakma influx is a continuous process and that they are now scattered in many areas, outside the zone originally earmarked for their settlement [23]. Keeping in view the conflicting versions about the actual number of Chakmas residing in Arunachal, it will be interesting to examine whether any major demographic changes have occurred in the State. It may be noted that in 1981, indigenous tribals constituted the majority of the population of Arunachal in all the districts except in Lohit and Dibang Valley [24]. In 1991, Scheduled Tribes were not in a majority in Lohit, Dibang Valley and Changlang districts [25]. This implies that some changes took place in the population structure during 1981-1991. There was a slight but steady decline in the tribal population in all the districts. The most spectacular development, however, was the sharp fall in the percentage of tribal population in Changlang district. This may be interpreted to mean that the presence of refugees has perhaps brought about a change in the demographic structure in Changlang district only, not in the State as a whole.

But the fact remains that a threat, whether perceived or actual, on the demographic structure in Arunachal has generated ethnic sentiments and is being considered to have grave consequences for the indigenous culture and identity. This was highlighted by speakers in a workshop on right of self-determination and self-government of indigenous peoples hosted by AAPSU in Itanagar in 1995. It was observed that indigenous peoples who have their own distinct identity, culture, ethos, own way of life and self-governing system were suffering from political, economic and social discrimination and were being systematically marginalized and pushed to non-dominant entity in the present political system of India which is alien to them. It was also felt that the unabated influx of foreigners and also internal migration from other parts of the country and settlement of refugees in traditional homelands of indigenous population were reducing them into a minority in their own homelands. The speakers emphasized that a situation was arising where the so-called mainstream ruling elites were treating the homelands of indigenous people as their internal colony and adopting colonial behavior towards genuine movements of indigenous people [26]. It may be noted in this context that students, under the banner of AAPSU, as members of the articulate intelligentsia in Arunachal perceive the Indian State and the ruling elite as potential exploiters, primarily because of the sympathetic stance of the Union Government towards the Chakma refugees as reflected in its decision to grant them citizenship rights. Viewed from this angle, the 'internal colonial model' seems to have been cited as a propaganda weapon rather than as an intellectual tool for understanding the attitude of the Indian State towards the indigenous people.

### Transformation of Arunachalee Identity and the Role of the Educated Elite

Patterns of ethnic politics in northeast India reveal that ethnic sentiments and aspirations have been mostly articulated by ethno-centric regional parties. However, in Arunachal Pradesh, regional parties are conspicuous by their absence, with the exception of the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) and Arunachal Congress, both of which are defunct today. While the Congress dominates state politics in Arunachal, the space created by the absence of regional political entities seems to have been captured by an emerging ambitious educated elite represented by the student community who are vociferously articulating all ethnic demands of the indigenous people.

It appears that the AAPSU has been able to generate in the native psyche a fear of alienation of their land and resources. The indigenous tribal society which is extremely sensitive about protection of its right to land and resources is averse to sharing them with non-locals, particularly the refugees. A feeling has gained ground that the dependence of indigenous peoples on land, forest and water bodies, their sentiments and their rights have been completely ignored and that the Government of India has acted arbitrarily on all these issues. It is in this context that the rights of self-determination and self-government were emphasized by participants of the AAPSU-sponsored workshop in Itanagar.

There are other factors which motivate and sustain ethnic politics in Arunachal? In this regard, it will be interesting to take note of the literacy rate of the Chakmas vis-à-vis that of the natives. According to one estimate, the literacy rate of the Chakmas is 70%-75% compared to 42% of the natives of Arunachal Pradesh. On the basis of this piece of statistics, it may be argued that the Chakmas with their high literacy rate are likely to emerge as stiff contenders on the employment front. Thus, economic factors appear to be an important determinant of ethnic politics in Arunachal. The Chakmas grow rice and wheat in the

fertile low-lying areas of Miao sub-division and maize, vegetables and horticultural products in the uplands. They are also the main suppliers of agricultural produce to Miao and other towns in Changlang district [27]. So the Chakmas appear to be highly enterprising and are doing reasonably well in the field of agriculture. Relative prosperity of the Chakmas vis-à-vis the natives seems to have been an effective instrument of ethnic politics used by the educated elite under the banner of AAPSU when they articulated the resentment of the locals against the more prosperous Chakmas by enforcing an “economic blockade” upon the Chakmas in Changlang district and by calling upon the natives not to buy anything from the refugees.

The Chakma leadership, on the other hand, reacted strongly against the aggressive posture adopted by the AAPSU. They complained bitterly of discrimination and injustice by the State Government and its administration. They also 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. Government officials, however, 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 [28].

It appears, therefore, that the Chakma issue with its ethnic and economic ramifications for the indigenous people has emerged as a major catalyst in the hands of the educated elite to unify the heterogeneous ethnic identities of the Arunachalese into a more or less homogenous national identity as distinct from the Chakma refugee identity. This task seems to have been accomplished by the elite primarily because of its ability to convince the numerous tribes of the common threat that the Chakmas pose to their very existence, their livelihood and their identity. Thus, the prevailing trends of ethnic politics in Arunachal indicate that ethnic identities are in a process of transformation and consolidation into a unified Arunachalee national identity.

It may, however, be pointed out in this context that there are significant differences in the identity processes of the Arunachalese and the Chakmas. While the AAPSU has sought to mobilize heterogeneous ethnic groups for construction of a single national identity, the Chakmas, on the other hand, have forged solidarity with other smaller refugee groups like Hajongs to consolidate their refugee identity. This has enabled them to approach international bodies like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in order to protect their refugee rights. For the Chakmas, therefore, their refugee identity has taken precedence over their ethnic or national identity and this refugee identity seems to be a major catalyst in the Chakma struggle for self-determination in Arunachal Pradesh.

## Concluding Observations

In the light of the above discussion, it may be argued that the educated elite providing leadership to the AAPSU has played a hegemonic role in the indigenous society of Arunachal by generating in the popular psyche a perceived fear of marginalization of tribal identity. This has no doubt led to a counter-mobilization by the Chakma leadership in their desperate struggle for survival. Interestingly, the indigenous elite which is articulating the ethnic sentiments of the Arunachalese has gained support from the State Government. On the other hand, the

Union Government is perceived to be sympathetic to the aspirations of the Chakmas. Thus, intervention by the Union and State Governments in ethnic politics and perceived identification of the two on both sides of the ethnic divide seem to have accelerated the process of ethnic polarization in Arunachal. The AAPSU as an organization of the tribal educated elite is likely to derive the maximum mileage in this ethnic politics by adopting an aggressive stance on the Chakma issue and by projecting itself as the only champion of indigenous interests. It may be observed, therefore, that the educated elite have not only emerged as major players in the ethnic politics of Arunachal in the absence of any other significant agent capable of articulating the ethnic sentiments of the Arunachalese in a vigorous and effective manner, but has also played a major role in the transformation and consolidation of Arunachalee identity.

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