

# The Refugee Problem in Arunachal Pradesh: History, Legal Contestations, and Socio-Political Dynamics

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## Abstract:

The refugee problem in Arunachal Pradesh is among the most enduring and contested issues in India's northeast. Emerging from the forced migration of the Chakma and Hajong communities from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the 1960s, this phenomenon has evolved into a complex interplay of citizenship debates, indigenous identity politics, demographic anxieties, and legal contestations. This review synthesises historical accounts, legal debates, socio-political responses, and contemporary policy discussions to analyse the causes, impacts, and unresolved dimensions of the refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh. It explores how state, civil society, and judiciary have shaped competing narratives around belonging, rights, and regional security, and assesses prospects for durable resolution within India's constitutional and federal framework.

**Keywords:** refugee, Arunachal Pradesh, Chakma, Hajong, citizenship, indigenous identity, policy debates.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The refugee problem in Arunachal Pradesh traces back to the 1960s when large numbers of Chakma and Hajong people fled persecution and ecological displacement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (now in Bangladesh) and were resettled in the then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA; Choden, 2022). Although initially treated as refugees, their long-term settlement, lack of formal citizenship, and socio-political contestations have transformed this humanitarian situation into a protracted political issue embedded within local and national debates on identity, rights, and governance (Orgs oppose proposed granting of citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees, 2017).

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ROOTS OF THE REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

The earliest wave of refugees arrived following ethnic clashes and displacement linked to the creation of the Kaptai Dam in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the early 1960s, which uprooted thousands of Chakmas and Hajongs (Choden, 2022). These groups were permitted to settle in parts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh, primarily in Changlang and surrounding districts, under government policy that did not settle the question of permanent citizenship or voting rights. Over subsequent decades, their population has grown, by some estimates numbering in the tens of thousands, marking them as a significant minority community within the state (Choden, 2022).

### 3. LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTESTATIONS

A central contention surrounding the refugee question has been the status of Chakma and Hajong settlers under Indian law. Though settled by the Indian state, they were historically excluded from full citizenship rights and related civic entitlements such as voter registration and permanent resident certificates (Chakma citizenship will cause social unrest, 2017). Their legal status has prompted judicial intervention at times, notably with directives from higher courts aimed at resolving citizenship ambiguity, but implementation has been uneven and politically contentious (Choden, 2022).

The debate was further sharpened by national legislation like the Citizenship Amendment Bill (now Act), which many indigenous groups perceived as potentially extending citizenship rights that would alter the demographic balance in Arunachal Pradesh (Citizenship rights for refugees unacceptable: AAPSU, 2018).

### 4. SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTESTATIONS AND INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

The refugee presence quickly became a flashpoint in regional identity politics. Organised indigenous groups, including the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) and other local organisations, have consistently opposed granting full citizenship and related entitlements to Chakma and Hajong communities, arguing that such measures threaten tribal demography, cultural integrity, and control over land and resources (Citizenship rights for refugees unacceptable: AAPSU, 2018; Orgs oppose proposed granting of citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees, 2017).

In 2018, AAPSU publicly declared that neither it nor the state's indigenous population would accept citizenship rights for these refugees, framing their stance as necessary for protecting cultural survival (Citizenship rights for refugees unacceptable: AAPSU, 2018).

Similar opposition was expressed earlier when state and umbrella organisations united against proposed citizenship rights, endorsing protest actions and articulating concerns over demographic and legal uncertainties (Orgs oppose proposed granting of citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees, 2017).

Political parties have also weighed in. The People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) criticised refugee organisations for allegedly "communalising" the issue and reaffirmed opposition to granting land rights, APST status, or citizenship within Arunachal Pradesh, calling instead for a comprehensive refugee policy pending resolution or resettlement (PPA slams Chakma, Hajong orgs; seeks to know status of resettlement plan, 2023).

### 5. CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY, AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Discussions on citizenship are not merely administrative; they are deeply tied to perceptions of identity and demographic security. Indigenous leaders and civil society emphasise fears that granting citizenship and entitlements could eventually dilute tribal majorities, akin to patterns seen in other northeastern states affected by migration, such as Tripura (Choden, 2022). These fears have shaped local political discourse and have been invoked in opposition narratives against policy shifts affecting refugees (The refugees question, 2024).

Conversely, advocates for rights emphasise that many Chakma and Hajong descendants were born and raised in the region over generations and thus occupy a socio-cultural space that complicates simple labels of "refugee" versus "settler," raising fundamental questions about belonging and constitutional rights (Choden, 2022).

### 6. CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS AND POLICY DEBATES

More recent political discourse has brought renewed attention to the possibility of relocating Chakma and Hajong refugees out of Arunachal Pradesh, reportedly as part of political strategies around citizenship

implementation under CAA provisions (Why Centre's decision to grant Chakma-Hajong refugees citizenship has Arunachal Pradesh up in arms, 2025). Statements from national ministers suggesting relocation to Assam drew controversy, with indigenous supporters of relocation contrasting with concerns from other northeastern groups worried about similar demographic pressures (Why Centre's decision to grant Chakma-Hajong refugees citizenship has Arunachal Pradesh up in arms, 2025).

These debates reflect not only competing local priorities but also broader federal dynamics in addressing long-standing refugee grievances while respecting regional autonomy and identity concerns (Choden, 2022).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The refugee problem in Arunachal Pradesh exemplifies a protracted policy challenge shaped by historical migration, legal ambiguity, identity politics, and competing claims to rights and belonging. As Indigenous groups and refugee communities continue to negotiate political realities, any lasting resolution must carefully balance constitutional rights, socio-cultural protections, and humanitarian considerations. Progressive legal clarity, inclusive dialogue, and equitable administrative frameworks will be essential to addressing this complex issue and averting escalation of social tensions in the region (Choden, 2022; Citizenship rights for refugees unacceptable: AAPSU, 2018).

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