Article: Fragmented Identity of the Chakmas in Mizoram: Citizens or Illegal Immigrants?

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Abstract

The paper articulates the issue of framing the Chakmas in Mizoram as illegal immigrants or illegal settlers from Bangladesh by the Mizo society. This empirical study is based on the interpretations of oral narratives in order to explore the nuances and dynamics involved in framing the Chakmas as illegal immigrants. The study has also attempted to examine the subtle effects of discrimination and alienation on the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity. Finally, the paper raises the question of state intervention to embark on a mechanism to detect the illegal immigrants (if any), regulate cross-border migration so that the authentic Indian Chakmas do not become victims of discrimination and alienation.

Key words: Chakmas, Cross-border migration, Illegal immigrants, Religious conversion

Introduction

The Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are originally descendants from the Arakan valley of Myanmar, when the Chakma King Marek Yaja left his kingdom in the Arakan valley during the 15th century due to dynastic struggle for the Arakanese throne (Talukdar, 1994, p. 12; 1988, p. 26); later on, he established his kingdom in the CHT. The Chakmas belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of people. According to the Burmese, the Chakmas are known as TŠak or Tšék people, as the Burmese sometimes pronounced ‘S’ as ‘Th’. Again, Ma or Mī (Mian) means man or people in the Arakanese languages. Thus, the word Sawngma or Chakma or Chukma means people of Tsak or Thet clan (Talukdar, 1988, pp. 5-6; Chakma, 2019, p. 19).

The might of the Arakanese Kingdom, when it was at the pinnacle of its power in 1133 A.D., was acknowledged by the Kings of Bengal, Pegu, Pagan and Siam.
(Talukdar, 1988, p. 25). But in the subsequent years, due to internal feuds to ascend the Arakanese throne, some Chakmas under the leadership of the Chakma King Marekyaja fled to Bengal in 1404 A.D. and established his first capital at Alikadam in the upper part of Matamouree River; Marekyaja is claimed to be the first Chakma King in the CHT. Since the 15th century, the Chakmas had ruled the region for 300 years amidst consecutive raids by the Portuguese, the Arakanese, the Afghans, the Pathans and the Mughals (ibid., p. 31). The Mughals, who had predominantly ruled a large part of the sub-continent since the 16th century, had many conflicts with the Chakma kingdom. However, it is pertinent to mention in this context that during that period many Chakma kings and princes adopted the ‘Khan’ title in order to show their solidarity with the Mughal rulers but never converted to Islam (Talukdar, 1988, 2010).

The advent of the British to the region had altered the dominance of the above mentioned groups. By the end of the 18th century, the western part of Nizampur road of Chittagong was received by the British through a treaty with the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Khan. Albeit, the Chakma Chief King Sher Must Khan had received a portion of Chittagong by a proclamation made by the British dated 6th Sraban (1763 A.D.), but the conflict between the Chakmas and the British perpetuated over the issue of paying tribute, until in 1787 when the Chakma King Dharam Baksh Khan (Juan Baksh Khan) was forced to sign an agreement by the British after nearly ten years of protracted war. According to the treaty, the Chakma King had to pay 500 maunds of cotton, which is approximately 18,500 kg. of cotton, annually to the Company as revenue (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 41-42; Prakash, 2013, p. 12). It was only in 1860 that the CHT was fully made a part of the British Empire. This act brought an end to the independent rule of the Chakmas and the whole of the erstwhile Chakma Kingdom was amalgamated as a part of British India. Meanwhile, the Southern Lushai Hills, which formed a formidable part of the CHT, was included as a part of the Lushai Hills district of Assam on April 1, 1898 (Talukdar, 1988; Chakma, 2019; Singh, 2010).

However, the declaration of Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Bengal Boundary Commission, on August 16, 1947 to annex the CHT with East Pakistan was opposed by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samiti (PCJS) (Singh, 2010, pp. 33-35; Chakma, 2013, pp. 1-4; Talukdar, 1988, p. 47). In fact, prior to the declaration of independence and demarcation of boundaries, PCJS which was an association of the tribal people of CHT had begun to articulate their political future by discussing with the British Authority and the Congress High Command
at the Shimla Conference in 1945 (Chakma, 2013, p. 1). Consequently, a memorandum was submitted on February 15, 1947, and initially Indian leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had assured the PCJS leaderships that CHT would be included within India. Meanwhile, the PCJS leaderships had even hoisted the Indian National Flag on August 15, 1947 at Rangamati, on the basis of the Indian Independence Act of 1947. However, on August 17, 1947, the PCJS were appraised that the CHT was included within the East Bengal boundary, i.e. in East Pakistan (ibid., p. 5; Singh, 2010). The fate of CHT was changed as a consequence of the deal with the Sikhs regarding the partition of Punjab, which made a Muslim majority district of Ferozepur in Punjab a part of India (Singh, 2010, p. 35).

The Pakistan Government also took measures to integrate the Buddhist minority by sponsoring large number of Muslim-Bengalis to migrate and settle in the CHT (Singh, 2010; Chakma, 2013). The racial and religious disparity between the immigrant Muslims and the ethnic Chakmas, and the sponsored policy of the government to settle the Bengali speaking Muslim population in CHT, had caused ethnic tensions and conflicts, leading to displacement of the Chakmas (Chakmas, 2013; Weiner, 1993; Singh, 2010; Ghosh, 2016; Prasad, 2013). Simultaneously, the exploitation of natural resources of the CHT and the subsequent policy of development of the region (construction of Kaptai dam) have also alienated the indigenous populace from their traditional lifeworld dependent on the hills and natural resources for economic self-sustainability, leading to systematic displacement of the people (Singh, 2010, pp. 39-46).

The chronicle of marginalisation, systematic persecution and displacement of the Chakmas had reached its summit when the Kaptai dam was constructed during 1959-1963 sponsored by USAID (Singh, 2010, pp. 41-42). Furthermore, the victims of the catastrophe estimated to be more than 1,00,000, with 90 percent of them being the Chakmas, were not compensated and rehabilitated properly in contrast to about 8,000 Bengali settlers who also were displaced but were resettled in fertile land of the Kasalong tract (ibid.). The Chakmas who were dependent on agriculture for their livelihood were affected due to loss of about 52,000 acres or nearly 40 percent of agricultural land of CHT as a result of flood caused by the Kaptai dam (ibid.). It is also pertinent to mention here that during the British period, the CHT was declared as a ‘totally excluded area’ under the Government of India Act, 1935 (Singh, 2010, p. 30; Paul & Biswas, 2014, p. 44). But the abolition of this provision in 1964, due to the passage of a Constitutional
Amendment Bill in 1963, had privileged the non-tribal Bengali-Muslims to acquire land and settle in the CHT (Weiner, 1993, p. 1740). This had also facilitated the Pakistani regime to abolish the tribal police force that was constituted under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Frontier Police regulations of 1881, and the administration of the CHT was at large replaced by the Central Government. The demographic pattern of the CHT was changed due to increasing settlement of the Bengali-Muslims, and gradually the Chakmas became minority in their own land (Singh, 2010).

Thus, it is seen from the above discussion that the Chakmas in the CHT, especially in the aftermath of 1947, had to undergo perpetual discrimination often emanating from the very ethos and legacy of the ‘two-nation’ theory. Following this legacy, the CHT which was a predominantly Non-Muslim region, and constructed as a peripheral excluded area, had to face paradigm shift within the new Pakistani regime from its peripheral status to identifying with the larger national identity (Singh, 2010). The abolition of the special status of the CHT in 1964 had not only affected their economy but also their traditional social life, as the CHT was made open to non-tribal Muslim-Bengalis from the plains with whom they had many cultural differences (ibid.). As it is mentioned in a study by Sopher (1963), there was hesitation on part of the Bengali boatmen to transport pigs along with the Chakmas, and even the consumption of alcohol and the dressing pattern of the Chakma women were seen as culturally inferior by the newly settled Bengali-Muslims. Nevertheless, inadequate compensation and rehabilitation policy, discriminatory administrative policy, religious persecution and military abuse had forced the displaced Chakmas to finally migrate and seek refuge in India (Singh, 2010). Thus, the displacement of the Chakmas from the CHT in 1964 is rooted largely as a consequence of partition of the Indian sub-continent.

In response to the catastrophic phenomenon in the neighboring East Pakistan, the Government of India had opened the border gate and allowed the displaced Chakmas to enter India. The displaced Chakmas from the CHT were settled in the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh), particularly in the Miao and Vijaynagar region, under a special settlement policy of the Indian Government in the late 1963 (Chakma, 2019; Singh, 2010; Prasad, 2013).

Moreover, the debacle faced by the Indian Army during the Indo-China War in 1962 due to hostile terrain in the eastern periphery of NEFA, and the policy of the
Indian State to populate those impenetrable terrains with their own people had also marked the settlement of the Chakmas in NEFA, India (Chakma, 2019). In fact, the Tirap Frontier Division of NEFA was very sparsely populated due to which the Indian Government, during that time, had formulated this special settlement policy to settle the Chakmas as a ‘buffer population’ in order to be used as a protection against further Chinese aggression (Singh, 2010, p. 69). Therefore, the Chakma refugees were given valid migration documents and were even officially allotted 3-5 acres of land since 1973 under special rehabilitation scheme of the Central Government (Prasad, 2006, p. 479; Chakma, 2019, p. 15; Prakash, 2013, p. 3). Simultaneously, these re-settled Chakmas in the erstwhile NEFA were also given other facilities like ration card, educational facilities and even employment in central government departments. However, the fate of the Chakma people changed when NEFA was upgraded to a full-fledged state of the Indian Union, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh in 1987 (Ghosh, 2016, p. 20).

In addition to the above reasons, the Bangladesh war of Independence in 1971 was also instrumental for the displacement, migration and further settlement of the Chakmas in various Northeastern states of India (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura). The then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had played a crucial role in not only helping the creation of Bangladesh through military and financial assistance (an estimated 7000 crore rupees was spent), but she also took initiative in gaining international support from European countries like UK, France and the USSR (Andrio, 2016, pp. 736-744). Meanwhile, the Bangladesh-India border was opened to allow the war victims to take refuge in India, and the Chakmas were also among the various war victims that entered India during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In this regard, Mrs. Indira Gandhi on June 15, 1971 declared in the Rajya Sabha that, ‘We will have to go through hell to meet the challenge passed by the developments in Bangladesh’ (Prasad, 2006, p. 484). Similarly, echoing her support for the recognition of Bangladesh as an independent country, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on December 6, 1971 said in the Lok Sabha, ‘Pakistan had declared war against India. There is no importance of peaceful solution. Bangladesh people are engaged in their struggle for existence and India is fighting against aggression. They are, like us, fighting against a common enemy. I am pleased to inform the Houses that in the existing situation and due to repeated request of Bangladesh Government, we have carefully decided to grant recognition to People’s Republic of Bangladesh’ (Andrio, 2016, p. 740). Hence, following the above developments and in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the Indira-Mujib
Agreement of 1972 was signed with a view to establishing friendship, cooperation and peace between the two countries. It is pertinent to mention here that under this peace agreement, it was decided that the Chakma refugees who came to India from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) before 25/03/1971 will be considered for grant of Indian citizenship (Prasad, 2006, p. 480).

Besides, the migration and settlement of the Chakmas in the various states of Northeast India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura), a large majority of the Chakma population has already been living in Mizoram since the pre-independent period (Singh, 2010, p. 113; Chakma, 2019, p. 15). The fact that the Chakmas have been living in Mizoram since the pre-independence era can be traced back to the event of annexation of a narrow strip on the eastern periphery of the CHT to the Lushai hills district in 1900 (Singh, 2010, pp. 113-114). This annexed part includes the present day Demagri (South-Western Mizoram now) and also included a population of 1500 who became subjects of the erstwhile Lushai hills district (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908, p. 323). Thus, this historical event of annexation of a portion of the CHT to the erstwhile Lushai hills district was instrumental in the making of the Chakmas as Indian citizens after India attained independence in 1947 (Singh, 2011, pp. 13-114; Chakma, 2019, pp. 38-39). However, on April 15, 1993 in an all-party meeting summoned by the then ruling Congress(I) Government, where regional parties like the Mizo National Front (MNF) and Mizo Janata Dal (MJD) were also present, took an unanimous decision to detect and exclude the ‘foreigners’ from the electoral rolls. Simultaneously, student organisations like the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) also intensified their movement against the issue of illegal Chakma immigrants since the early 1990s (Singh, 2010, pp. 114-115). In fact, in mid-1984 due to military crackdown on the Chakmas of the CHT, an estimated 1800 Chakmas fled and took refuge in Mizoram, and albeit most of these refugees were repatriated on January 29, 1986, but more than 4000 of them were given shelter at Tibira Ghat and Tagalak Bag in the Demagiri Sub Division of the Lunglei district of Mizoram (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 100-101; Prakash, 2013, p. 135).

Therefore, following such incidents of continuous migration and settlements in Mizoram, the Chakmas at large are often susceptible to a subtle identity as foreigners, illegal settlers or Bangladeshis despite being recognised as Indian citizens and one of the Schedule Tribes of Mizoram (Lianchhingia, 2004; Rosanga, 2004; Chakma, 2019). In such a quagmire situation, the Chakmas in Mizoram are stranded in between blurred identity of being a citizen and also
labeled as an illegal immigrant or settler. Therefore, the present study has been conducted in order to explore the answers of three research questions viz.:

- What are the factors responsible for labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants in Mizoram?
- How are they subjected to exploitation and discrimination due to their blurred identity in Mizoram?
- What are the factors responsible for negotiating their cultural spaces?

Methodology and Field

The study is qualitative in nature and has been conducted in Aizwal city, Kamalanagar town, Tlabung town, Nunsury village in Mizoram and Thegamukh market of Rangamati district, Bangladesh. Kamalanagar town is the Headquarter of the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC) situated in the southern part of Mizoram in the Lawngtlai district and is approximately 335 km away from Aizwal city. Tlabung town is situated in the South-Western part of Mizoram in the Lunglei district bordering Bangladesh and is approximately 332 km from Aizwal city. However, both the Nunsury village in the Lunglei district and the Thegamukh market in the Rangamati district of Bangladesh are situated across the Karnafuli River of the Tlabung town.

Aizwal city is home to a few Chakmas who are basically working in the private sectors, daily wage earners, government employees and students, alongside the predominantly Mizo population. The Kamalanagar town is predominantly inhabited by Chakma population with villages of various Mizo tribes like the Lai and the Mara. The Tlabung town has a mixed population of Mizo, Bengalis, Chakmas; and both the Nunsury village and the Thegamukh market are the last Chakma or the first Chakma hamlets in their respective countries.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the help of an interview schedule were conducted with the respondents belonging mostly to the Chakma community, though a few respondents from the Mizo community were also interviewed in the Tlabung town. The respondents’ names have been kept anonymous using pseudonyms, and the place and date of the interviews are also mentioned. The field study was conducted in the period between November, 2019 and March, 2020. For identifying respondents, snowball sampling technique was used and the study was based on oral narratives, practical experiences and focus group discussions.
**Blurring Identities as Citizens and Illegal Immigrants**

The Chakmas are labeled as illegal immigrants or illegal settlers from Bangladesh in the mainstream Mizo discourse in contrast to their constitutional status as Indian citizens and also an indigenous tribe of Mizoram (Chakma, 2019). This main narrative of the Chakmas ‘as not belonging/non-indigenous to Mizoram’ has also resulted in not only political alienation but they are also excluded from all sort of state assistance like appearing for entrance for higher studies, competitive examination, financial assistance, displacement and even social exclusion (ibid.).

In a study by Lianchhingia (2004), it is stated that the first Chakma immigration to Mizoram took place in between 1895-1905. The migration and settlement of the Chakmas during the early 1900 era was influenced by their habit of shifting cultivation and presence of fertile cultivable lands in the region under the Mizo Chiefs. Therefore, the Mizo Chiefs gave the Chakmas permission to settle in their areas in lieu of local tax to be paid to the Chiefs. However, after the Government came to know about the settlement of the Chakmas, it issued a Standing Order No. 16 of 1928 that ‘Non-Lushais should pay a Foreigner Tax of Rs. 5 per year to the Government, two baskets of paddy or Rs. 2 per year per house to the Chief and if they have jhums Rs. 3 per year to the Chief by those who keep cattle for trade in addition to usual Grazing fee to be paid to government’ (ibid., p. 18-19).

Although the Chakmas were imposed with foreigner tax by the Government in 1928, in the post-independence period, the Lushai Hills District (Revenue Assessment) Regulation 1953 exempted the Chakmas from paying the foreigners tax of Rs. 5 and instead was allowed to pay Rs. 2 like the Mizos. Thus, the Chakmas in Mizoram were also allowed to vote by the Mizo Union Party in 1948 in the first election of Advisory Council and in 1956 the Chakmas of Mizoram were also included in the Schedule Tribes list by the Government of India (ibid., p. 22). But the study concluded by stating that ‘the Chakmas were mistakenly admitted as citizens and settled with an institution of local self-government (Autonomous District Council) by the power of the administration. The land was formerly and originally the land of the Mizo Chiefs’ (ibid., p. 26).

Similarly, in another study by Rossanga, it is stated that ‘the population of Mizoram is, with the exception of immigrants like the Chakmas and Reangs/Brus, all one race or tribe. The Mizos are mostly Mongoloid stock in origin. The language spoken by the bulk of the population throughout the state is Mizo language. The Chakmas who had recently crossed the border from Bangladesh
(formerly East Pakistan) since the early twentieth century are mostly found in the western belts of Mizoram bordering Tripura and Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh’ (Rossanga, 2004, p. 96). Thus, both the above studies categorically discussed about the menace of the settlement of the Chakmas in the erstwhile land owned by the Mizo Chiefs and even highlighted the apprehension of continuous Chakma migration to Mizoram.

But on the other hand, a study by Poritosh Chakma has mentioned that ‘the Chakmas were the first people to live in the western and south-western parts of what constitute the political boundary of Mizoram today. Therefore, they are known as Bhumiputra meaning sons of the soil’ (Chakma, 2019, p. 35). The apprehension among the Mizos regarding the continuous influx of the Chakmas from Bangladesh got more focus when in 1995 a memorandum was submitted by some Chakma leaders to the then Prime Minister of India mentioning the presence of about 80,000 Chakma population in Mizoram and that they are discriminated against by the Mizoram Government (Singh, 2010, p. 114; Ghosh, 2016, p. 107). Furthermore, the memorandum also included the demand to put these 80,000 Chakma population under a common administrative unit administered separately through a suitable Central Government agency for all-round socio-economic and political development of the Chakmas in Mizoram (Rajya Sabha Committee on Petition, 1997, p. 3). In pursuance of the memorandum submitted in 1995, the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions in 1997 made the following recommendations:

- To treat the Chakmas with sympathy and give humanitarian assistance
- To expand the Chakma Autonomous District Council (CADC)
- CADC to be administered directly under the Central Government
- Allocation of more development funds for the CADC
- To grant citizenship to the Chakma refugees who came to Mizoram prior to March 25, 1971
- To grant citizenship to those Chakmas who are born in India and those Chakmas who are granted Indian citizenship should also be declared as belonging to the schedule tribes
- To grant citizenship to the Chakma refugees who came to Mizoram after March 25, 1971 on the basis of negotiation between the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh on the lines of the Indira-Mujib Accord.
These recommendations of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions caused severe resentment among the various political parties and the civil society organisations. In the same year, the Government of Mizoram prepared a report in which it was shown that during the period 1951-61, the decadal growth of the Chakma population in Mizoram was 67 per cent, which surpassed the state’s overall growth rate (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 107-108). Similarly, the influential Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and the Young Mizo Association (YMA) also took strong stand against the recommendations of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petitions by demanding the deletion of ‘doubtful voters’ from the electoral rolls (Singh, 2010; Ghosh, 2016). Thus, these political developments in Mizoram during the 1990s led the Mizoram government to insist that the Chakma problem in Mizoram was one of illegal immigrants and not one of refugees. Moreover, the Mizoram government also alleged the Chakmas of including illegal immigrants as bona fide Indian citizens in order to enhance their bargaining strength (Ghosh, 2016, pp. 108-109).

**Dynamics of Cross-Border Movements**

Tlabung (or Demagri, as called by the Chakmas) is a border town located between India and Bangladesh, and it has been an epicenter of trade between India and CHT, even before the international borders came into existence in 1947. The Khawtlangtupui or the Karnafuli River that flows through Tlabung is not only the natural terrain dividing India and Bangladesh but it has also been an important route of trade since the colonial period. The strategic location of Tlabung received more importance when on December 10, 2011 a Border Trade Facilitation Center was jointly inaugurated by the visiting Bangladesh state minister for CHT, Mr. Dipankar Talukdar, and Mizoram Trade and Commerce Minister, Mr. Lalrinliana Sailo (The Hindu, 2011).

Cross-border movement of people are influenced by various factors like inter-village relations, clan linkages, trade and agriculture that might surpass the national boundaries or what is deemed to be national (Samadar, 2012). In fact, in a study by Samadar (ibid.) on the trans-border migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal, he mentioned how the locals on either side of the border have normalised its existence and border has never been an exception to pause their daily movements for trade or other requirements. He further argued that lack of roads, schools and other means of decent livelihood compel the people living in the borders to look for trans-border communication as a means of support (ibid.).
Thus, such nuances make the border more flexible by allowing such trade and movement of people, though on small scale but on a continuous basis.

Similarly, it is in this context that during our field study in Tlabung, we tried to explore the nuances of cross-border movement of the Chakmas. Therefore, in our interaction with the various stakeholders of the Chakma society in Mizoram, they have revealed the fact about the cross-border migration of the Chakmas but denied the settlement of these migrants in Mizoram permanently. Adding to this paradox, an interviewee said:

*In the absence of any clear demarcation in many areas in the Lunglei and Mamit district bordering Bangladesh, there are cross-border movement of people for selling their agricultural products, medical treatments, other trading purposes and even marriages also happen between the families across the borders, but they do not stay permanently and return back after completion of their task.* (Mr. Arun Chakma, age 42, Nunsury village, February 26, 2020).

He further argued regarding the claim of Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Young Mizo Association (YMA) and other civil organisations since the early 1990s about illegal immigrants and settlement of the Chakmas:

*The Claims of MZP, YMA and others framing the Chakmas as illegal immigrants or settlers is baseless; it is the Mizoram Government who enrolls and update the voters’ list, therefore, if they think then they should stop harassing the real citizens and find a mechanism to identify, detect and deport the illegal migrants. But only blaming the whole Chakma community as illegal immigrants and harassing us should not be the way in a democratic system.* (Mr. Arun Chakma, age 42, Nunsury village, February 26, 2020).

Moreover, during our field visit in Tlabung bordering Bangladesh, when we boarded a boat to the next market place, i.e. Thegamukh in Rangamati district of Bangladesh, we found that there is no such restriction on either side regarding the movement of people on boats which is the mainstay of transportation via the Karnafuli River. In fact, en route to Thegamukh, we also found that it was required to only register in the Border Out-Post controlled by the Border Security...
Force (BSF) by producing the boat permit. We were also told by the locals that under such phenomenon, the small traders and local farmers cross the borders either side to sell their products. Again, we were also told by the local Chakmas that though there exists free movement of people across the borders but the Chakmas never settle in the Indian side and return back as soon as their task gets completed. However, the Mizos completely hold an opposite view and in this regard a Mizo resident of the Tlabung region said:

*Cross-border migration should be checked and there should be proper checking and verification of documents. Because often there are marriages between the people of the villages across the borders and one cannot identify even if he or she gets settled within the Indian Chakma villages.* (Mr. Ralte, age 43, Tlabung, February 27, 2020).

These two factors viz., the submission of memorandum in 1995 by the Chakmas and the cross-border movements of the Chakmas, have contributed in making their blurred identity. This has also resulted in the discrimination and exclusion of the Chakmas in Mizoram.

**Experiences from the Field: Discrimination and Exclusion**

Keeping in view the above factors responsible in labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants, we have tried to explore the problems of discrimination and exclusion faced by them as a minority community. When the Chakmas were interviewed we identified two major aspects viz., education and employment and incidents of evictions that have been repeatedly advocated by our respondents in the field that reflects the way they are subjected to discrimination and exclusion due to their blurred identity.

**Incidents of Discrimination in Education**

In a study by Myron Weiner (1993), it is mentioned that the Government or dominant ethnic group may pursue many discriminatory policies that may make the life of the religious or ethnic minorities vulnerable. In this context, he highlighted six such cases of forced migration of people in the South Asia that he termed as ‘Rejected Peoples’. By ‘Rejected Peoples’ he mentioned about the forced migration of an estimated six to seven million Muslims from India to Pakistan and nearly eight million Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India in the
aftermath of the partition of British India, migration of about 1,50,000 Indian origin Burmese from 1948 to mid-1960s, the displacement of Tamil Estate workers in Sri Lanka, the stranded Urdu speaking Muslims in Bangladesh after its independence, the displaced Rohingya Muslims from the Rakhine State of Myanmar and the displaced Chakmas from the then East Pakistan between 1964-1969. Since, the Chakmas are also a minority group in Mizoram, therefore they might also face discrimination and exclusion. In fact, the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) in its report *India Human Rights Report 2009* accused Mizoram Government of practicing ‘systematic discrimination’ against minorities. The ACHR further alleged in its report that the Chakmas are subjected to more discrimination in terms of education, basic healthcare, employment and other rights (Paul & Biswas, 2014, pp. 119-121). It is in this context that in the present study an attempt has been made to explore the various incidents of discrimination faced by the Chakmas in Mizoram. Adding to this, one of the interviewees said:

*It remains an apprehension among us that though we are citizens of India since India became an independent country, we the Chakmas are always treated as foreigners. We even find difficult to get rented house in Aizwal city and other places where the houses are owned by the Mizos. However, in our common interaction or in our everyday life we have a friendly relationship, at school or colleges, and even when at need we are helped by them. For example, if we get stranded at highways or somewhere then they are very hospitable and kind and help us. But, the problem lies while getting access to our constitutional rights or rights to get state assistance. For example, in 2017, four of the Chakma candidates were among the 38 candidates from Mizoram who cleared the National Eligibility Entrance Test for qualifying to study MBBS. But the Mizo Zirlai Pawl and other civil organisations had protested against the inclusion of the Chakma candidates at equal par with the Mizo candidates. Hence, regarding jobs also we are discriminated.* (Mr. Krishna Chakma, age 27, Aizwal, November 23, 2019).

Citing another example, an interviewee, who is also a student leader, said:

*In 2015 State Technical Entrance Test, 13 Chakma students were selected, but they were deprived and were not allowed to appear*
for the personal interview. The MZP, YMA and other civil organisations of the Mizo had opposed their selection and there were many protests by them opposing the same. However, we the Mizoram Chakma Students Union (MCSU) had filed a petition in the Guwahati High Court and the court gave verdict in favor of us allowing the students to appear for the personal interview. (Mr. Rohit Chakma, Aizwal, age 31, November 23, 2019).

Another interviewee said that in Mizoram, the government had classified three categories of people in regard to employment or education in the higher and technical educational institutions viz., the first category are the indigenous tribes, the second are the non-indigenous permanent tribes and the third category includes the children of the employees employed in the Central Government departments and posted in Mizoram. According to him, there was an attempt to alienate the Chakmas from the first category through a change in the government service rule. Moreover, the interviewee also told us that in order to be eligible to apply for a government job under the Mizoram Government, one must study Mizo language till Class 8, but again this remains a problem among the Chakma areas because in CADC students are taught in Chakma language.

Thus, in regard to the above incidents of discrimination in terms of education and also access to employment, an interviewee said:

As education is the basic requirement for human beings to achieve enlightenment and also to move forward with the pace of time, therefore, excluding us from such facilities has made us remain backward. Moreover, the various criteria required to apply for a government job like to studying in Mizo language till class 8 also exclude many Chakmas from applying in the govt. job. Thus, exclusion from educational privileges is one of the most important and basic form of discrimination that the Chakmas are facing. (Mr. Amar Chakma, age 25, Aizwal, February 12, 2020).

In terms of facing continuous discrimination, an interviewee said:

Although the Chakmas are an indigenous tribe and also have been recognised as one of the STs in Mizoram, we are still discriminated or viewed as illegal immigrants. The reason behind this may be
due to the fact of cross-border movements which have imprinted in the minds of the Mizos that migration is still continuing. Therefore, in this regard, the government should pass a law to detect if any illegal Chakma immigrants are present in Mizoram. Because due to this blurred identity, the indigenous Chakmas also become victims of discrimination and exclusion. (Mr. Bikash Chakma, age 34, Kamalanagar, February 25, 2020).

**Incidents of Conflict and Evictions**

The present settlement of many villages in Mizoram (both Mizos and Chakmas) can be traced back to 1967 when the scheme of ‘grouping’ of villages was introduced by the Indian Government as a strategy to counter the insurgency activities of the Mizo National Front (MNF). The main objective of the scheme was to cut off the main bases of the MNF that they had in the Mizo villages located in the hilly interiors. Another purpose of the grouping of villages was to segregate the population and keep them under the watchful eye of the Indian security forces. Thus, by doing so it was aimed to facilitate the security forces to expatiate their counter-insurgency operation (Nunthara, 1981; Lintner, 2012; Goswami, 2009; Paul & Biswas, 2014). This scheme was modeled on Sir Robert Thompson’s regrouping of villages in Malaya during the communist insurrection there in the 1950s (Lintner, 2012, p. 115).

The scheme was categorised into four distinct parts – Protected and Progressive Villages, New Grouping Centres, Voluntary Grouping Centres and Extended Loop Areas under the provisions of the Defense of India Rules, 1962 and the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, 1953. However, the grouping of villages had serious impact on the social, political and economic life of the Mizos. The relocation of people from their ancestral villages had not only physically displaced them from their homes, but it also alienated them from their traditional social life, practice of jhum cultivation and most importantly from the freedom that they used to enjoy before the regrouping (Nunthara, 1981).

Moreover, an estimated 45,107 villagers of 109 villages were relocated between January 4 and February 23, 1967 into 18 ‘group centres’ on the main road through the Mizo Hills, which connects Vairangte on the border with Assam proper and with Aizwal and Lunglei (Lintner, 2012, p. 114).
The relocation of villages also caused acute food shortages throughout 1968, 1969 and 1970 as the people were alienated from their ancestral cultivation lands. This led to a transitional effect on their occupation as most of them were compelled to work as daily wage labor, resulting in further disintegration of traditional village solidarity as people were forced to move out of their villages in search of new occupations (Nunthara, 1981; Goswami, 2009). Thus, the Chakmas also are not an exception to the effects of the grouping of villages in 1967 and the following incident of eviction related to the scheme of grouping of villages.

Moreover, in December 2019, a village named Kamalabagan in Lunglei district was evicted as it was declared illegal and the villagers had no land documents. In this eviction, about 750 persons and 140 families were displaced, and they were settled with the help of some Chakma civil organisations and local villagers in the Nunsury village bordering Bangladesh in the Lunglei district (Interview, 2020). On our visit to the Nunsury village we saw many makeshift camps of the displaced families. On interacting with one of such displaced persons, we were told that as they did not have land documents and were living in the private land owned by some Mizo landowners for which they were asked to vacate the land. He also said that though they have not destroyed any of their property, they are alienated from their land and farms. Now, they are left with no alternative but to work only as daily wage earners or to migrate to other places for livelihood. Another interviewee of the Nunsury village who helped the evicted villagers to settle within the Nunsury village said:

*During the Mizo movement way back in the early 1960s, there was a system implemented by the Government in 1967 to group various small villages scattered erstwhile in hilly region within a single village unit, and under this system the Kamalabagan village was established and the Chakma people settled there. But the people were not conscious that they should register their land. In contrast to the Chakma villagers, three Mizo persons had registered the land on their behalf in the period 1994-95 under Tlabung Village Council and renamed it as ‘Serhuan’, which is a Mizo term for ‘Kamalabagan’ or ‘Orange garden’. As the villagers who have been living there did not have land documents, they were evicted by the landowners. However, there was no clash or destruction of property. But the people had to get leave their main source of livelihood, i.e. jhum cultivation, and their children were also...*
forced to drop out of their school. (Mr. Debo Chakma, age 52, Nunsury, February 26, 2020).

In fact, in our focus group discussion with the villagers at Nunsury on February 26, 2020, we were appraised by the villagers that the framing of the Chakmas as foreigners, illegal immigrants or Bangladeshis often result in such incidents of eviction, violence, discrimination and even mass deletion of eligible voters from the electoral roll in 1995. And this incident in 2019 was not the first incident when the Chakmas were displaced; in 1992 another similar incident of displacement and eviction had happened where the Chakmas of Marpara area bordering Bangladesh became victims of ethnic violence, due to a personal scuffle that occurred in a Chakma village of Bangladesh where two Mizo persons from Mizoram were killed as they were accused of assaulting a village women there. Following this incident, rumor spread in Mizoram that Mizos were attacked in Bangladesh by the Chakmas resulting in burning down of Chakma houses in Haolung Sara, Bogakali, Marpara, Naba and Erengsuri villages and many Chakma families became displaced and were forced to take refuge in the camps of the Border Security Force (Focus Group Discussion, 2020).

Similarly, an interviewee narrated:

In 2016, a scuffle broke out between some Chakma students of Demagri High School and local Mizo men of Tlabung town, where the Chakma students had beaten the Mizo persons as the former had been physically assaulted by the latter. Again in 2018, there was an incident where a temporary gate was made near the Demagri State Bank of India by some Mizo locals and any Chakma person who crosses the gate was beaten by them without any reason. However, later on the administration had removed the gate. (Mr. Debo Chakma, age 52, Nunsury, February 26, 2020).

These incidents narrated by the victims themselves and other villagers who had witnessed the violence, discrimination and eviction done to their fellowmen told us that they are in no position to oppose or counter such activities as they remain an ethno-religious minority group in Mizoram. Moreover, the framing of the indigenous Chakmas as illegal settlers from Bangladesh also acts as a catalyst in instigating such conflicts and discriminatory norms. We found that the framing of Indian Chakmas as illegal settlers and the subtle discrimination against them are
inter-related. If any mobilisation by the Chakmas occurs demanding equal access to constitutional rights, such mobilisations are used by the Mizo leaders to organise the common Mizos against the Chakmas. However, as argued by our respondents, the relationship between the Chakmas and the Mizos at the personal level are rather cordial, and differences arise only when matters turn political.

Negotiating the Cultural Spaces: Alienation and Conversion

Following the above discourses on how the Chakmas are labeled as illegal immigrants and the incidents of discrimination and exclusion, the present study also attempts to examine the impact of these factors on the religious conversion of the Chakmas. As minority groups, who are positioned inferior to the majority mainstream socio-cultural attributes or even in unfortunate political phenomenon, they are prone to social stigmatisation due to skin color, dialect or language, religious belief, food habits, dress patterns, gender and so forth (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Similarly, such visible attributes concerning the skin, religious belief, dress patterns or even their life style contribute towards group predilection, just as even though second or third generation individuals having dark skin or middle-eastern features in America may still be perceived as Arabs and are susceptible to discrimination (ibid.). However, acculturation is also largely influenced by factors such as family structure, individual status, power relationship between majority-minority and so forth. In many cases, these factors or the vulnerable social, political and economic phenomenon faced by a minority group acts as a catalyst for certain cultural changes or adaption, in concomitant with the dominant culture that may elevate them from their current vulnerable situation, and therefore acculturation process is susceptible to various above mentioned dynamics rather than only merely the effect of interaction between two groups (Marin, 1993).

Therefore, in context to the above discourses on acculturation process and also the dynamics of majority-minority relationship, we have attempted to examine the impact of discrimination and exclusion on the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity based on oral narratives and practical experiences.

While interacting with our interviewees, who belong to both Buddhist Chakmas as well as Christian Chakmas, we found many dynamics that have triggered their conversion. One of our interviewees, a Buddhist Chakma, said:
Conversion from Buddhism to Christianity is influenced by many factors like lack of education, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and even political discrimination. Because it is observed that the Chakma people who are economically poor and lack education are more inclined towards being converted to Christianity. As the Christian Missionaries provide the poor people with educational assistance or even financial help, the people from the remote villages and also those who are victims of poverty have adopted Christianity. Moreover, it may also be due to the feeling that their social position may elevate like that of the Mizos and that their stigmatisation as an inferior group may end. Because still many among the Chakmas think that both Christianity and the Mizos are superior to the Chakmas. (Biswa Chakma, age 45, Kamalabagan, March 2, 2020).

Adding to this argument, another interviewee said:

Due to political negligence and our vulnerable position, many of our educated youths who are unemployed are also convinced for conversion. Recently, my friend who is a graduate was offered a job in their institution if he gets converted to Christianity. However, he did not get converted. (Mr. Sunil Chakma, age 38, Aizwal, February 23, 2020).

Thus, social exclusion, lack of access to state assistances like education facilities, employment and others often lead to religious conversion. A study done by Akcapar (2019), regarding the religious conversion to Evangelism from Islam by the Afghans refugees in India and Iranian refugees in Turkey, has also revealed these factors acting as catalysts in their conversions. In fact, another interviewee said that:

Sometimes even the material attraction of going to the Sunday Church wearing colorful traditional dresses and men with formal suits also attracts our Chakma people to follow this trend, as it exhibits a kind of cultural superiority. Thus, many among us, who feel socially excluded otherwise by the dominant culture, have also converted thinking that conversion would integrate them with the
dominant society. (Mrs. Sunali Chakma, age 47, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Interestingly, during our interaction with the people, many also admitted certain cases like:

If someone from the Chakma community is convicted of any crimes, the missionaries approach the concerned individual and convince in such a way that if he/she gets converted then their conviction would be condoned or reduced. (Mr. Bikash Chakma, age 34, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Another interviewee argued:

The missionaries also try to convince the poor and needy people to convert into Christianity by offering them financial help for medical treatment or any such other emergencies. (Ms. Rupali Chakma, age 43, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

However, on interviewing the Christian Chakmas, we found contrasting facts from them regarding the reasons for their conversion to Christianity. While the elder persons were of the view that factors like lack of education, poverty, social exclusion and non-availability of other assistance from the state have compelled them to get converted in their younger days, some of the members of the younger generations argue that it is the ethical and religious teachings of the Bible that they are more convinced in order to follow Christianity. In this context, an elderly Christian Chakma said:

As I was not educated and did not know much about the worldly affairs, I remained concerned only with my livelihood as a jhum cultivator, just like most of my fellowmen. But the Christian Missionary came to our village, and like many other villagers, I too was convinced to get converted as they promised that it would help us in our life, work and also protect us from diseases and evils. Now, I am okay with my identity as a Christian but I also have good relationship with both my Buddhist Chakma brothers and also with my Christian Mizo neighbours. I believe that God is one and he is watching us, therefore we should always live as
human beings no matter what our religious or ethnic identity is. (Mr. Thomas Chakma, age 66, Tlabung, February 26, 2020).

But one younger interviewee, who is a Christian, argued little differently:

I believe that it is the faith and the good thing in the preaching of the Bible that have convinced the Chakmas to get converted to Christianity, rather than the opportunity to get employment, education or other material assistance. (Mr. Jonas Chakma, age 23, Nunsury, February 27, 2020).

Nevertheless, various socio-political and economic dynamics are at play in the context of the conversion of the Buddhist Chakmas to Christianity; but another apprehension was also noted by the interviewees that if such continuous conversion happens then it might even be a challenge for them to maintain their identity as Chakmas in the future, because according to them the Chakma ethnic identity is related to Buddhism (as the Chakmas are said to be one of the descendants of the Sakya Clan where Gautama Buddha himself was born (Talukdar, 1988). In this regard, an interviewee said:

The Chakmas are one of the oldest Buddhist community and we are largely identified as such. Perhaps, this is also one of the reasons why we are still persecuted in Bangladesh because of our religious minority status in a Muslim dominated country. But the conversion of our brothers and sisters to Christianity have deep impact on our identity, as after being converted many of them cease to participate in community meetings or gatherings along with their Buddhist brethrens. Moreover, even in the celebration of our cultural festival, i.e. Bizu, they tend to celebrate it separately in the Churches. Thus, such differences may affect our community solidarity by creating the notion of ‘self’ and ‘other’. (Mr. Bijoy Chakma, age 44, Kamalabagan, February 25, 2020).

Thus, in context to the above narratives from various sections of people, i.e. Buddhist Chakmas, Christian Chakmas and also from elder and younger generations, we have found that factors such as economic backwardness, poverty, educational deprivation, social exclusion, political alienation, etc. have
contributed towards the religious conversion of the Chakmas from Buddhism to Christianity.

**Conclusion**

The above discussion examines the factors that have played an important role in labeling the Chakmas as illegal immigrants. The making of this blurred identity of the Chakmas have also resulted in the subsequent discrimination and exclusion of the Chakmas from educational facilities, employment and they have remained victims of various incidents of violence and evictions.

Hence, the discussion reveals the challenges faced by the Chakmas politically and socially in Mizoram due to their fragmented identity, both as citizens and illegal immigrants. It is important that the state evolve a mechanism to identify and detect or regulate the cross-border migration of the Chakmas to Mizoram. In the absence of any such measure till date, the Chakmas who are the authentic citizens of India and are indigenous to Mizoram are susceptible to continuous discrimination.

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1 On 14 August 1997, Mr. O. Raja Gopal, the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha Committee on Petition presented the 105th Report of the Committee on Petition in the Rajya Sabha. The report was based on a petition jointly signed by Smt. Snehadini Talukdar of Mizoram and Shri Subimal Chakma of Delhi. This petition was submitted by the Chakma leaders highlighting to the various problems faced by the Chakmas of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Some of the issues mentioned in the petition were regarding the inclusion of nearly 8,000 Chakmas of Mizoram under a single administrative unit administered by a Central Government Agency, to enroll all the eligible Chakmas in the voters’ list, to provide security to the life and property of the Chakmas and to undertake developmental programs under the Border Area Development Program in the Chakma inhabited areas; whereas, in regard, to Arunachal Pradesh, issues of granting Indian citizenship to the Chakmas and Hajongs, to withdraw ban on ration cards, admission to schools and colleges, employment, medical facility, trade and commerce concerning the Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh, to compensate the victims of arson in the Bijoypur village and other Chakma settlement areas.
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