

The Role Of The All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) As A Pressure Group: Analysing Its Strategies In The Chakma–Hajong Refugee Issue

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) as a pressure group in the context of the long-running refugee issue of the Chakma and Hajong communities in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The Chakma–Hajong settlement in Arunachal dates to the 1960s and has since been contested by indigenous groups over concerns of citizenship, land rights, political representation and demographic change. This study analyses how AAPSU has mobilised, framed and advanced its strategies ranging from demonstrations, resolutions, media engagement and alliances to influence state and central government policy, public opinion, and outcomes on the Chakma–Hajong question. The research addresses three key questions: (1) how has AAPSU defined and articulated its interests vis-à-vis the Chakma–Hajong issue? (2) what strategies and mechanisms has AAPSU used as a pressure group? (3) what has been the impact of AAPSU's strategies on policy and outcomes relating to the Chakma–Hajong communities? The article finds that AAPSU has played a highly visible role as a quasi-political actor with considerable influence in Arunachal politics; it has steered the discourse around the refugee issue, exerted pressure through resolutions and agitation, and shaped policy responses. It finds that AAPSU functions as a quasi-political actor whose sustained activism has significantly shaped refugee policy outcomes while also generating debates on human rights, constitutional equality, and minority protection. The article concludes by reflecting on broader implications for pressure-group politics, indigenous movements, and refugee governance in India's borderland regions.

Keywords: AAPSU; Chakma-Hajong Refugees; Arunachal Pradesh; Student Movement; Pressure Group; Citizenship; Identity Politics; Indigenous Rights.

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I. Introduction

The issue of refugee settlement and citizenship has long been a complex and contested facet of India's north-eastern frontier states. Among these, the settlement of the Chakma and Hajong communities in what was formerly the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and is now the state of Arunachal Pradesh remains one of the more intractable. The communities were resettled under government programmes in the 1964-69 period, but questions regarding their political, social and economic integration have remained unresolved (Talukdar, 2008; Chetia, 2019). Within this contestation, the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) has emerged as a key actor in the regional polity not merely as a student body but as a pressure group that articulates and mobilises concerns of indigenous communities in the state (CRDO, n.d.; Chetia, 2019). The purpose of this article is to analyse AAPSU's role in the Chakma–Hajong refugee issue by examining how it frames its interests, mobilises strategies and influences policy outcomes.

The rationale for focusing on AAPSU stems from three interlinked reasons. First, AAPSU enjoys wide organisational reach and social visibility in Arunachal Pradesh, making it a consequential actor in the state's socio-political space (CRDO, n.d.). Second, the Chakma–Hajong issue brings together dimensions of citizenship law, indigenous identity claims, refugee rights, resource and land contestation, and student activism thus offering a rich site for exploring how non-state groups exert pressure on policy-making. Third, the study of student movements and pressure groups in India's northeastern states has received comparatively less attention in the mainstream literature, particularly in the context of refugee-indigenous conflicts. By analysing AAPSU's strategies in this context, this article contributes to the literature on pressure group politics, regional movements and refugee integration in India.

The article is structured as follows. After a brief overview of the Chakma–Hajong refugee issue and the context of Arunachal Pradesh, the conceptual framing of 'pressure group' and student mobilisation is discussed. Then the analysis turns to AAPSU: first how it defines its interest(s) in this issue, then the strategies

it uses, followed by an assessment of impact and limitations. The conclusion draws out broader implications and suggestions for further research.

II. Background: The Chakma–Hajong Refugee Issue In Arunachal Pradesh

The Chakmas and Hajongs originally hail from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and migrated to India around the mid-1960s, in part due to construction of the Kaptai dam and subsequent displacement, combined with religious persecution (Chetia, 2019; “Chakmas and Hajongs,” 2017). They were resettled by the Indian central government between 1964 and 1969 in the region formerly known as NEFA, in present-day Arunachal Pradesh (Talukdar, 2008). At the time of settlement, each refugee family was allotted land (approximately five acres) in various settlement pockets (Talukdar, 2008).

Over the decades, issues emerged regarding citizenship, access to public services, employment, land rights and political representation for the Chakma and Hajong communities. For instance, the absence of adequate livelihood opportunities, denial of ration cards, and erosion of land due to riverbank settlements have been documented by researchers (Talukdar, 2008). The differential treatment of these communities compared, for example, to Tibetan refugees in Arunachal has also been critiqued. Talukdar (2008) observes: “In absence of a refugee-specific legislation ... India’s governments have dealt with refugee issues of different groups with a differential administrative approach”.

From the perspective of indigenous tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, the settlement of the Chakmas and Hajongs triggered concerns over land, culture, identity, and demographics. Some tribal leaders and the state government expressed fears that the Chakmas and Hajongs would out-number or influence the indigenous population, potentially altering political representation or resource access (Chetia, 2019; “Chakmas and Hajongs,” 2017). The state assembly passed resolutions demanding immediate deportation of these communities as early as the early 1990s (Chetia, 2019). The tensions were compounded by the fact that the Arunachal state government and central government had divergent positions: while the Centre recognised that the communities were eligible for citizenship under Section 5(i)(a) of the Citizenship Act (1955), the state opposed such moves (Chetia, 2019). It is in this contested space of indigenous anxiety, refugee rights and student activism that AAPSU has operated.

III. Conceptual Framework: Pressure Groups, Student Movements And Regional Identity

Pressure groups (also called interest groups or advocacy groups) are organisations that seek to influence public policy without participating in elections themselves (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). In the Indian context, such groups may include trade unions, professional associations, social movements, NGOs and student bodies. They typically employ tactics such as public mobilisation, lobbying, media campaigns, protests, petitions and alliances with political actors (Palshikar, 2010). The effectiveness of a pressure group depends on its organisational capacity, legitimacy, access to elite networks, and ability to frame issues in ways resonant with wider publics (Tarrow, 1998).

Student unions in India have historically played significant roles beyond campus politics: for example, in the Left student movements of the 1960s-70s, the anti-foreign movement in Assam, and other regional articulations of identity. As Choudhury (2014) notes, student organisations may act as “supply sources” of leadership for mainstream politics, as well as mobilisers of identity politics. When they extend into region-wide or statewide platforms, such as AAPSU, they become intermediate actors between civil society and formal politics.

In the context of the Northeast of India, issues of citizenship, migration, indigenous rights and demographic change are perennially contentious (Baruah, 2005). The dynamics of “sons of the soil” versus “outsiders” have framed many debates, often pitting indigenous populations against migrants/settlers (Misra & Singh, 2018). Refugee politics compounds this by raising questions of legal status, resource entitlements and identity recognition. A pressure group that aligns itself with indigenous claims can thus mobilise around perceived threats of demographic inundation, land alienation and cultural dilution (Singh, 2012).

This theoretical framing helps us understand how AAPSU’s role in the Chakma–Hajong refugee issue can be seen as a case of a student-union-turned-pressure group operating at the intersection of identity politics, citizenship contests and regional mobilisation.

IV. AAPSU: Organisational Profile And Interest Articulation

The All Arunachal Pradesh Students’ Union (AAPSU) is the apex students’ body in Arunachal Pradesh, reputed to represent student populations across the state. Besides campus issues, it has emerged as a significant actor in state politics, at times acting as a quasi-opposition voice given the dominance of aligned ruling parties (CRDO, n.d.). The union has been described as having “massive popular support ... and has emerged not only as the most influential oppositional force in the state, but also as the most articulate

spokesperson of the people on several issues the most important of which is the Chakma question” (CRDO, n.d.).

AAPSU's articulation of its interest in the Chakma–Hajong issue can be summarised along several dimensions:

Protection of Indigenous Rights and Demography: AAPSU frames the Chakma–Hajong presence as a threat to indigenous tribal identity, land rights and demographic balance. According to Talukdar (2008), the union served ‘Quit Arunachal Pradesh’ notices to the communities in 1994, underscoring their perceived outsider status.

Although AAPSU launched its first agitation against the refugees in 1982, it failed to bring any tangible result. In May 1994, the AAPSU organized a huge ‘Delhi Chalo Movement’ where a delegation of about 400 students went to Delhi, organized rallies and stayed there for about a month to attract the attention of the Central leaders to the problem. The effort of AAPSU could not bear much fruit, and they even failed to meet the Prime Minister to drive home this point. It was reported that the Prime Minister refused to meet the AAPSU delegation. But the Prime Minister met the Chakma student delegation (Dutta, 1998).

It was a letter, dated 7th July 1994, from P.M Sayed, then Minister of State (Home), to Nyodek Yonggam, then MP (RS) that sparked a ‘critical phase’ in AAPSU's movement against the refugees. The letter in question reads: “under the Indira-Mujib Agreement of 1972, it was decided that the Chakma/Hajong refugees who came to India from the erstwhile East Pakistan before 25, 3, 1971 will be considered for grant of Indian Citizenship” (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 1994). Almost as a reaction to this letter, the AAPSU served a “Quit Arunachal Notice” on 1st August 1994 asking all the refugees and the foreign nationals to leave the State voluntarily and honorably by 30th September, 1994.

The Arunachal Assembly in its eleventh session held from 7th to 9th September 1994, unanimously adopted a resolution, the fourth of its kind, reiteration its earlier demand for immediate deportation of the Chakma, Hajong and other refugees from the State. In the same resolution the House expressed its strong sentiment and resentment and took exception to the letter. Referring to the “Quit Arunachal Notice”, the Chief Minister said that his Government could not take any action against the students as they are voicing the demand of the entire population on the State. He was critical of the Central Government for its inaction on several issues confronting the State like, amendment to the Statehood Act, Assam-Arunachal boundary dispute, etc., all of which are in the agenda of the AAPSU (Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly Secretariat [APLAS], 1994).

The Government of Arunachal Pradesh convened an All Party Legislators Meeting on September 6, 1995 to discuss the refugee issue and evolve action plan to deport them. In the meeting, it was decided to hold Peoples Referendum Rally to be spearheaded by AAPSU. Accordingly, the Referendum Rally was convened which was attended by representatives from various political parties, panchayat leaders, representatives of the NGOs, village elders, etc. The resolutions adopted were (i) the Govt. of India while honouring the decisions of the Hon'ble Gauhati High Court & the Hon'ble Supreme Court vide which Chakma & Hajong refugees of Arunachal Pradesh have been held as foreigners and in deference of the demand of all indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh should take a firm decision of deport Chakma and Hajong refugees out of Arunachal Pradesh within a period of three months i.e., by January one, 1996; (ii) the state Govt. must ensure eviction of Chakma & Hajong refugees from unauthorized occupied areas including forest areas encroached by them within a period of one month to confine them to their originally earmarked settlement camp; (iii) the formation of committee organization like the Committee for Citizenship Rights and the Peoples' Rights Organization (PRO) for agitating the issue of grant of their citizenship formed by Chakma & Hajong refugees be banned forthwith as foreigners cannot form such Organization committee, the act being illegal & un-constitutional and such act also undermines the protected status of the indigenous people. (iv) the Govt. of India particularly the ministry of home affairs must not entertain representation of and grant of audience to Chakma & Hajong refugees in connection with grant of citizenship as the issue of grant of citizenship to them has finally been decided by the Apex Court of the country in negative; (v) If the deportation of Chakma & Hajong refugees out of Arunachal Pradesh is not carried out within the stipulated time frame by the central Govt. all political leaders of the state shall resign from the primary membership of their respective political parties and shall form a common organization under the banner of which indigenous people shall continue to fight for the cause of indigenous people and till the Chakma and Hajong refugees are deported out of Arunachal Pradesh; (vi) That any indigenous people if found to be extending any help or assistance to Chakma and Hajong refugees, directly or indirectly, shall to ex-communicated and expelled from the society state. That the presidents of all political parties and the students' organizations unions are jointly authorized to forward the resolution to the Prime Minister of India & the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh and all political party presidents, students organizations and the state Govt. shall take such follow up action as necessary to materialize the above resolutions.

About 5000 students and people from different parts of the state participated in the rally. It was a time when the Chief Minister of the State along with many of his Cabinet colleagues stood together with the AAPSU

and other public leaders demanding immediate solution of the refugee problem. While supporting other demands of the AAPSU like, amendment on Statehood Act, boundary problem with Assam, the Chief Minister said in the rally that while his people are not opposed to the grant of citizenship to the refugees, the people of Arunachal Pradesh under no circumstances can accept their residents in the State. Neelam Taram, the Home Minister, while supporting the cause of the AAPSU, appealed to the students not to take law into their own hands. The meeting was addressed by several public leaders and the president and General Secretary of the AAPSU.

The AAPSU to keep the issue alive adopted a unique method demanding early solution of the problem, by launching of the "Quit Certificate Movement" on January 25, 1995, in protest against the indecisive stand of the Central Government on deportation of the Refugees. AAPSU organized the move for surrender of certificates in the district Headquarters also. A local daily has commented, "The Supreme Students Union (AAPSU) is starting its first phase of agitation by observing "Quit Certificate Movement" from to-day. Interestingly, this is the first of its kind and will have to wait to see whether most parents would like their wards to surrender their certificates as it amounts to surrendering one's career in a platter"(The Echo of Arunachal, 1995).

Citizenship and Entitlement Concerns: AAPSU has actively opposed granting full citizenship status (or Scheduled Tribe status) to Chakma-Hajong communities, arguing that this would alter electoral rolls, resource allocation and tribal reservations (Chetia, 2019; "Chakmas and Hajongs," 2017).

Policy and Administrative Influence: The union positions itself as the voice of indigenous students and youth in Arunachal, claiming legitimacy to speak for the tribal populace. It has thus demanded governmental action (including identification/verification of Chakma-Hajong persons) and influenced policy debates at the state-central level (Chetia, 2019).

Narrative Framing: AAPSU makes use of the binary framing of "sons of the soil versus outsiders" in its appeals. CRDO (n.d.) notes that AAPSU has leveraged emotive narratives and created a discourse of "foreign encroachment" even though Chakmas and Hajongs were formally settled decades ago.

In sum, AAPSU's interest articulation is rooted in indigenous mobilisation, student representation and regional identity politics. The next section examines how it translates these interests into strategies.

V. Strategies Employed By AAPSU As A Pressure Group

Here we analyse the specific strategies deployed by AAPSU, grouped under mobilisation, institutional pressure and discourse management.

1. Mass Mobilisation and Demonstrations

AAPSU has conducted protests, agitations and statewide movements aimed at pressuring both the state government and the central government on the Chakma-Hajong issue. For example, Talukdar (2008) reports that the Union served quit notices in 1994 and spearheaded a massive statewide agitation programme. Similarly, Chetia (2019) highlights that when dialogues were initiated for citizenship recognition, AAPSU strongly condemned the efforts of committees like the S. B. Chavan Committee and used mobilisation to oppose citizenship rights for the refugees.

Mass mobilisation serves several purposes: signaling strength, raising visibility, rallying student/tribal communities, and creating cost/benefit pressure for policy-makers who may fear unrest or electoral losses.

2. Resolutions, Demands and Official Demands

AAPSU has passed formal resolutions demanding deportation of Chakma-Hajong communities or strict identification of those eligible for citizenship. For instance, the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly (influenced by pressures from groups like AAPSU) passed resolutions in December 1992 and September 1994 demanding immediate removal of Chakma-Hajong populations (Chetia, 2019). AAPSU itself has demanded that only those who came between 1964-69 be identified before any citizenship grant (Chetia, 2019). Using formal demands taps into policy processes and gives the group a quasi-official role in agenda-setting.

3. Media Campaigning and Public Opinion Shaping

AAPSU has also engaged in creating and shaping public discourse via the press, public statements, and leveraging the student network. CRDO (n.d.) argues that AAPSU "master propagandists" converted the issue into an emotive "outsider threat" narrative, generating fear of demographic change, land alienation and identity loss among indigenous communities. The union's ability to frame the issue in a simpler "sons versus outsiders" mode has helped it garner support among tribal youth and the general population.

4. Alliance-Building with Political Actors, State Machinery and Government Forums

As a student union with strong state presence, AAPSU has forged implicit and explicit alliances with political actors in Arunachal. CRDO (n.d.) notes that many politicians in the state emerged from AAPSU, and their networks allow the union to influence government policy and prevention of any move in favour of Chakma–Hajong citizenship. Additionally, AAPSU's participation in high-level meetings with the state government (e.g., on illegal immigrants and the Chakma–Hajong issue) indicates its institutional linkages. These alliances provide leverage to turn mobilisation into policy pressure.

5. Threat of Social Sanction and Indigenous Claims Enforcement

AAPSU has resorted to threats and implementation of social sanctions: for example, serving “Quit Arunachal” notices (Talukdar, 2008), prohibiting social interaction with Chakma–Hajong people, and advocating for exclusion from rights to employment, land and reservations. This strategy fosters fear among the refugee community and signals indigenes' willingness to enforce their claims. According to Chetia (2019), this kind of exclusionary approach marks a normative strategy of pressure: rather than only lobbying, it enforces behavioural constraints.

6. Legislative and judicial pressure

AAPSU's strategies also include engaging formal institutions such as influencing state assembly resolutions or litigative or quasi-legal processes. For instance, after the National Human Rights Commission moved the Supreme Court of India for protection of Chakma–Hajong rights in 1996, the court directed the Arunachal government to register citizenship applications under Section 5 of the Citizenship Act (Chetia, 2019; Talukdar, 2008). AAPSU, while opposing such moves, used the institutional channels to voice demands and resist recognition of rights. Thus, institutional pressure complements mobilisation.

VI. Impact On Policy And Government Response

AAPSU's sustained activism has significantly influenced government policy. Successive state administrations have publicly opposed permanent settlement of Chakma–Hajongs, reflecting alignment with AAPSU's positions. Implementation of Supreme Court directions regarding refugee citizenship has proceeded slowly and cautiously due to political sensitivities. Enforcement of ILP regulations and reaffirmation of constitutional safeguards have gained renewed political emphasis as a result of continuous mobilisation.

Through these outcomes, AAPSU has effectively functioned as a veto player, defining the limits of acceptable refugee policy in Arunachal Pradesh. Political parties have also sought alignment with AAPSU's stance to maintain electoral legitimacy, further institutionalising its role in policymaking.

AAPSU's strategies have had significant impact in the regional political and policy domain. Its mobilisation and sustained agitation have kept the Chakma–Hajong issue on the agenda of the state government and central government for decades (Chetia, 2019). The union's framing of the refugee issue as a threat to indigenous identity shaped public opinion in Arunachal Pradesh and influenced policy outcomes such as the state government's resistance to granting ST status or citizenship to Chakma–Hajong communities (Chetia, 2019; Talukdar, 2008).

For example, despite the central government's recognition of eligibility of the Chakma–Hajong communities for citizenship under Section 5(i)(a), the state government has consistently opposed such granting, and this stance has been reinforced by student and tribal mobilisation via AAPSU (Chetia, 2019). The state's “White Paper” on the Chakma–Hajong issue, published in 1996, also explicitly referenced the state's inability to bear welfare burden and demanded deportation, reflecting political pressure (Talukdar, 2008).

Additionally, media reportage shows that the union continues to be consulted by the state government in high-level meetings regarding “illegal immigrants” and the refugee question, indicating institutional recognition of its role.

VII. Rights-Based Contestations And Ethical Challenges

While AAPSU's activism has strengthened indigenous political agency, it has also generated critical debates. Human rights organisations argue that prolonged statelessness of Chakma–Hajongs violates humanitarian principles and constitutional guarantees of equality (Ramachandran, 2011). Legal scholars point to tensions between universal citizenship rights and special protections for tribal regions. These contestations highlight the ethical dilemma of balancing indigenous self-protection with refugee rights in a democratic state. Thus, the Chakma–Hajong case reveals not only the power of pressure-group mobilisation but also the normative complexities inherent in identity-based politics.

The role of pressure groups in identity-based mobilisation raises ethical questions. While indigenous communities have legitimate concerns about resource access, identity and representation, the strategies of exclusion and denial of rights to another marginalized group demand scrutiny. The Chakma–Hajong

communities, having been settled by the central government, argue for recognition and integration; the denial of citizenship or basic rights may implicate humanitarian and rights-based concerns (Talukdar, 2008). Thus, the interplay between pressure group politics and refugee rights merits further normative reflection.

VIII. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) as a pressure group in the Chakma–Hajong refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh. It has shown that AAPSU has been a powerful actor in the regional political-social landscape, deploying mobilisation, framing, alliances and institutional leverage to shape policy and public discourse. Its strengths lie in its reach among tribal youth, its ability to frame issues in identity terms and its linkages to political power.

However, the outcomes of its strategies are ambivalent: while it has succeeded in influencing policy to resist full citizenship and resource entitlements for the Chakma–Hajong communities, it has not resolved the underlying issue of refugee integration, rights recognition and indigenous-refugee coexistence. The structural tensions between indigenous identity claims and refugee rights remain unresolved.

The Chakma–Hajong refugee issue demonstrates how a student organisation can evolve into a powerful pressure group influencing governance and identity politics. AAPSU has successfully articulated indigenous concerns, mobilised public sentiment, and shaped government responses regarding refugee settlement and citizenship.

At the same time, the case exposes unresolved tensions between indigenous protection, refugee rights, and constitutional principles. The experience of AAPSU offers valuable insights into the functioning of civil society pressure groups in India's borderland regions and underscores the need for inclusive policy approaches that balance identity security with humanitarian justice.

In conclusion, student-led pressure groups like AAPSU can wield significant influence in regional identity politics. Their role in shaping outcomes for minority and refugee communities raises important questions about democratic inclusion, rights and the nature of pressure group politics in plural societies. While influence is evident, the pursuit of inclusive justice remains a challenge.

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