



Attitude and Perception towards each other: A Study of Chakma Refugees and Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh

Panjang Aboh*

Abstract

More than fifty years have passed since the migration and settlement of Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh. Despite such a long stay, they have not been accepted by the Indigenous people of the State as one of them. There has been a constant demand for the deportation of Chakma refugees from the State by the Indigenous people under the leadership of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) since the early 1990s. Also, the Chakma refugees have been constantly demanding citizenship rights under the banner of the Committee for the Citizenship Rights of Chakma and Hajong of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) in collaboration with the Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students' Union (APCSU). However, the State and Central Governments have neither granted citizenship as demanded by the CCRCHAP and APCSU nor succeeded in deporting the refugees as protested by the AAPSU. In this process of demands and protests, little attention has been paid to the attitude and perception of Indigenous people and refugees towards each other, especially on ground. This paper is an attempt to know the attitude and perception of Chakma refugees and Indigenous people towards each other in the light of a long pending refugee issue.

Keywords: *Chakma, Indigenous People, Perception, Refugees.*

Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, attitude is a way of behaving, feeling or opinion about someone. Perception is the way in which something is regarded, understood and interpreted. There can be two types of perceptions- positive and negative. However, in the circle of refugee studies around the world, negative perception of host population towards the refugees is predominantly found. Refugee is any person who, as a result of events occurring before January 1, 1951, and owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion, is outside the country of his

*PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh - 791 112, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Email: abohpanjang1@gmail.com

nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear of for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unwilling to return to it (Sinha, 2014). The host population often perceived and considered refugees as ungrateful, creates social problems, threat to security, cause environmental degradation, and has an incompatible culture (Macdonald, Mekker & Mooney, 2023). The host population also considered refugees of imposing burden on local infrastructure, environment and resources (Whitaker, 2002) which gives birth to negative perception towards the refugees. The adverse affect of refugee influx on the host population is the major reason why host population harbor negative perception towards refugees. For example at the initial stage of Rohingya refugees influx in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, host population was quite welcoming but gradually refugees started affecting their livelihood of the host community due to deforestation, inflation and competition over resources which turn the host population towards the refugees (Jerin & Mozumder, 2019). The social stigma and stereotype associating with particular group of refugees can also result in negative perception towards the refugees. For example the Afghan women refugees in Balochistan, Pakistan, were regarded inferior to male counterpart by the host population which resulted in discrimination against them in accessibility to employment, basic services etc. (Kakar, Ullah & Salam, 2022). Sometimes the rights in the forms of educational benefits and health care facilities enjoyed by the refugees at the cost of the host population can also irked the later which can lead to the formation of negative perception. For example in Turkey, the educational and health benefits enjoyed by the Syrian refugees made the Turkish population impatient and annoyed towards the refugees (Nielsen, 2016). The presence of refugees in the host countries for a long time can also gives birth to negative perception of the host communities towards the refugees because it affects the provisions of public services, accessibility to economic opportunities and natural resources of the host communities (Habib, 2023).

Chakma-Hajong refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh is also largely determined by the perception between the host communities called Indigenous people and the refugees towards each other. Indigenous people are communities that live within, or are attached to, geographically distinct traditional habitats or ancestral territories, and who identify themselves as being part of a distinct cultural group, descended from groups present in the area before modern States were created and current borders defined (<https://www.who.int>). With reference to this study, Indigenous people are the tribal people of the State such as Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nocte, Nyishi, Wancho etc. Chakma and Hajong refugees are one of the longest settled refugees after the Tibetans in Arunachal Pradesh who are living as a 'stateless entities' after their migration from erstwhile East Pakistan in 1964 (Singh, 2016). Chakma and Hajong refugees of Arunachal Pradesh migrated from then East Pakistan between 1964 and 1969 along with many other refugees. Their main habitation is in the Chittagong Hills Tracts of Bangladesh (Chakma, 2022). The fellow Chakma and Hajong who migrated along with them have been successfully settled in other northeastern States like Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, etc, and are now part of their respective societies. But in Arunachal Pradesh, their absorption remains problematic as Arunachalis have never approved of their presence in the State on a permanent basis (Ghosh, 2016). It is important to mention here that

till 1972 Arunachal Pradesh was named North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and was administered by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, with the Governor of Assam acting as the agent to the President of India (Chakma, 2019). This was the reason why the Government of India could settle these Chakma and there was not such hue and cry over their settlement back then. Indigenous people of State started opposing the settlement of refugees in the post 1972 years especially in early 1990s when Arunachal Pradesh had already attained Statehood. The issue in Arunachal Pradesh is largely determined by the perception of the Indigenous people and refugee communities towards each other. Perception simply means how something is regarded, understood, or interpreted. Perception driven by an apprehension of being marginalized in the future in their homeland by alien populations in social, economic, and political spheres is what the Indigenous people of the State under the leadership of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) keep on expressing. The refugee population under the leadership of the Committee for the Citizenship Rights of Chakma and Hajong of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) and the Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students' Union (APCSU) on the other hand have been denying such allegations and apprehension by saying they are not against the rights and protection given to the Indigenous brothers and sisters but they are demanding their basic rights enshrined in the Constitution of India after about six decades of their settlement. The AAPSU kept insisting on the fact that Arunachal Pradesh is a 'protected' State under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, and therefore the settlement of the refugees was in violation of the law. The CCRCHAP held the opinion that they were forced to leave their original homeland by the East Pakistani regime through religious persecution and deliberate construction of the Kaptai Dam and were settled in then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India and NEFA Administration under the well throughout five settlements schemes and therefore, they are not the illegal immigrants. They also cite the Indira-Mujeeb Agreement, 1971, to validate their settlement and demand for citizenship right in Arunachal Pradesh. On one hand, the State Government is inclined towards the demands of the AAPSU and on the other hand, the Government of India has shown its willingness to grant citizenship to the Chakma and Hajong refugees. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has been vocal enough about the rights of the refugees which often is described by the AAPSU as a 'one-sided' view/opinion. The Commission has been alleged of favouring the refugees thereby ignoring the apprehension of the 'sons of the soil'. The judiciary on many occasions has pronounced their judgments in favour of the refugees which have always been objected to by the Indigenous people of the State. The AAPSU has alleged the Government of India of having a 'step-motherly' attitude towards the apprehensions and concerns of the Indigenous people. The CCRCHAP and the APCSU counter alleged the State Government and AAPSU discriminated against their people by not complying with the judgments of the court. They alleged the AAPSU of damaging their properties such as houses, and granaries, and also a physical assault on multiple occasions. The AAPSU on the other hand alleged the refugees indulged in anti-social and criminal activities such as murder, theft, rape, extortion etc. against the Indigenous people. Because of allegations and counter-allegations, the perception towards each other is not healthy. Such perception widens the 'trust gap' between the refugees and the Indigenous people which ultimately works as stumbling blocks on the way of peaceful resolution of the long pending refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the

pendency of the refugee issue for about six decades is largely dependent upon the ‘popular’ perception towards each other between the Indigenous people and the refugee communities and this perception is driven by the concept of ‘sons of the soil’ (Getmansky, Sinmazdemir & Zeitzoff, 2018) versus the ‘unwanted outsiders’. In this paper, an attempt is been made to elicit the opinions of the Indigenous respondents as well as the refugees to understand their perception towards each other which could pave the way for the amicable resolution of the long pending refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh.

Methodology and Area of Study

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained by conducting a field survey and secondary data was obtained from books, journals, government reports, newspapers, etc. For drawing respondents, Purposive Sampling method was used considering the sensitiveness of the issue and to ensure the required information for the study is obtained. Primary data was obtained by employing closed-ended questionnaires, open-ended interview schedules and focus group discussions. For the study, 95 respondents each from Chakma refugees and Indigenous people were purposefully selected keeping in mind the convenience and purpose of the study making the total respondents 190. The field study was conducted in the four administrative circles of Changlang district which are inhabited by Chakma refugees and from each circle two Chakma villages were purposefully selected. The name of the eight Chakma were a) Bijoypur-I, b) Bijoypur-II, c) Jyostnapur, d) Dumpani, e) Milonpur, f) Golakpur, g) Punyabhumi, and h) M’pen-I. The eight Indigenous villages, two each from four circles, selected for the study were- a) Borkhet, b) Magantong, c) Innao Singpho, d) Innao Khampti, e) Kharsang HQ-I, f) Nongtham, g) Neotan and h) Phup. The refugee respondents can be categorized into four groups, namely- a) Common people (80), b) Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students’ Union (APCSU) Leaders (5) c) Committee for the Citizenship Rights of Chakma and Hajong of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) Leaders (5), and d) Gaon Burahs (5). The indigenous respondents comprised of following groups- a) Common People (80), b) District Students’ Union Leaders (5), c) Panchayat Leaders (5), and d) Gaon Burahs (5). From every Chakma and Indigenous village, 10 each common people were selected along with 5 APCSU Leaders, 5 CCRCHAP Leaders, 5 Gaon Burahs (Chakma), 5 All Changlang District Students’ Union (ACDSU) Leaders, 5 Panchayat Leaders, and 5 Gaon Burahs (Indigenous). These respondents were selected purposefully. In this way, the combined respondent's strength was 190 (95 each from Chakma refugees and Indigenous people).

Perception of Chakma Refugees towards the Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh

How would you describe the day-to-day relations with Indigenous people?

The first question asked during the field survey from various groups of Chakma respondents to know their perception concerning Indigenous people was on their day-to-day relations with Indigenous People of nearby villages. To this question, 60 out of 80 common people (Chakma) which is about 89% answered that their day-to-day relations with the indigenous people nearby their villages are friendly, and about 11% of the respondents from this category considered their relations neither hostile nor friendly. There was no single

respondent from this category of respondent who answered their relations as hostile. One respondent from Jyostnapur village stated in this regard saying,

“We consider Indigenous people as our own brothers and sisters. We have been living together for so many years sharing the same road, same markets, and same offices. So our relationship has always been friendly with each other”.

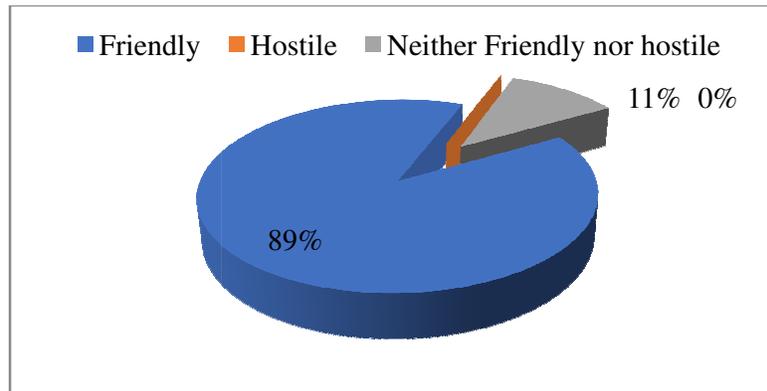


Figure 1 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

So far as Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students’ Union (APCSU) is concerned, all five respondents answered that their community has friendly relations with the indigenous people of nearby villages. Out of 5 leaders of the Committee for the Citizenship Rights of Chakma and Hajong of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) 4 consider their relationship with indigenous people as friendly and 1 answered in neither friendly nor hostile. 5 Chakma Gaon Burahs were also interviewed and of those 3 considered their relations as friendly and another 2 as neither friendly nor hostile. There was no single respondent from these three groups of respondents who considered their relations with Indigenous people as hostile. Maximum of the common Chakma respondents considered their relations to be friendly.

What according to you is the attitude of the AAPSU towards Chakma Refugees?

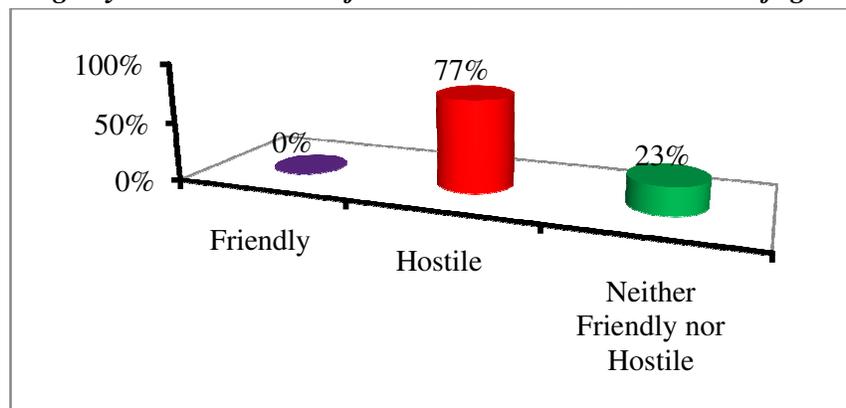


Figure 2 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Since the early 1990s, the Chakma-Hajong refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh is being spearheaded by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) on behalf of the indigenous people of the State. In August 1994, the AAPSU served a 'Quite Arunachal' notice to Chakma-Hajong refugees and other non-natives residing in the State asking them to leave the State effectively by 30th September 1994. Since then the AAPSU has been vocal against the Chakma-Hajong refugees. They kept on insisting that these refugee groups should be deported from Arunachal Pradesh back to their original country Bangladesh or resettled outside of the State. They hold the opinion that these refugees have to go out of Arunachal Pradesh as they cannot be settled here permanently because the State is home to Indigenous people whose rights are being protected by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873. They believe that the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, does not allow any non-native including Chakma-Hajong refugees to settle permanently in Arunachal Pradesh. Since the AAPSU has been one of the main stakeholders of the refugee issue and has always been vocal enough against the permanent settlement of refugees, this study attempted to know the perception of Chakma respondents concerning the AAPSU. Out of 95 respondents about 77% consider the AAPSU as hostile to the Chakma community, and 8 about 23% consider the AAPSU as neither friendly nor hostile. No respondent considers the AAPSU as friendly to the Chakma community. Out of 5 APCSU leaders, 2 consider the AAPSU as hostile and another 3 as neither friendly nor hostile. Among the 5 CCRCHAP leaders, 3 of them which is about 60% of the respondents from this category stated the AAPSU as 'hostile' but 2 of them answered 'neither friendly nor hostile'. Out of 5 Chakma Gaon Burahs, 2 consider the AAPSU as 'hostile' and another 3 'neither friendly nor hostile'.

Settlement of Chakma refugees has a negative economic impact on the Indigenous People?

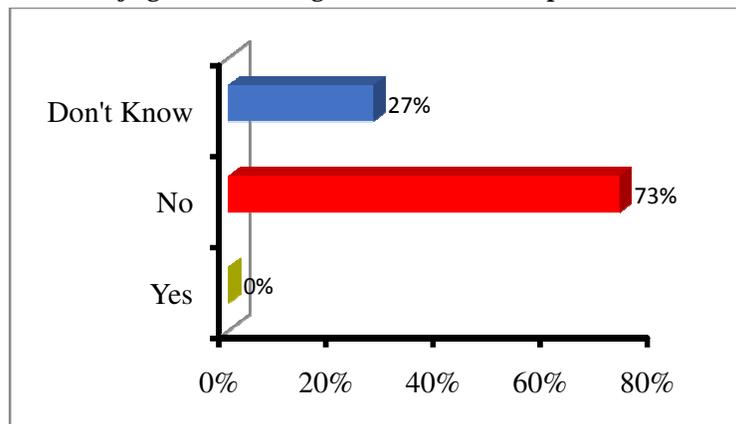


Figure 3 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Studies around the different parts of the world have found that one of the major negative impact or implication of refugee settlement is economic deprivation of the host population. This implication has turned the host population hostile towards the refugees in different parts of the world. Therefore, an attempt was made to know the opinion of the Chakma respondents on possible negative impact of their settlement on Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh. To this question, about 73% of the respondents did not agree, while around 27% answered in 'Don't know'. It is imperative to mention here that Chakma

respondents consider themselves as economic contributors rather than having any negative impact. According to many respondents, in about sixty years of their settlement, they have proved as economic producers by producing agricultural products as well as by remitting money to State by earning from outside of State and some from foreign countries. They were also of the opinion that they produce cheap labour in the labour market in comparison to other categories of workforce which mostly benefits the Indigenous People because they are the ones who hire them the most to work at their homes as well as in agricultural fields. They also consider themselves as important part of the local weekly/daily markets especially for making the organic vegetables items available to all communities.

If citizenship is granted, would you like to invite/bring Chakma People from outside of State to come and settle in Arunachal Pradesh?

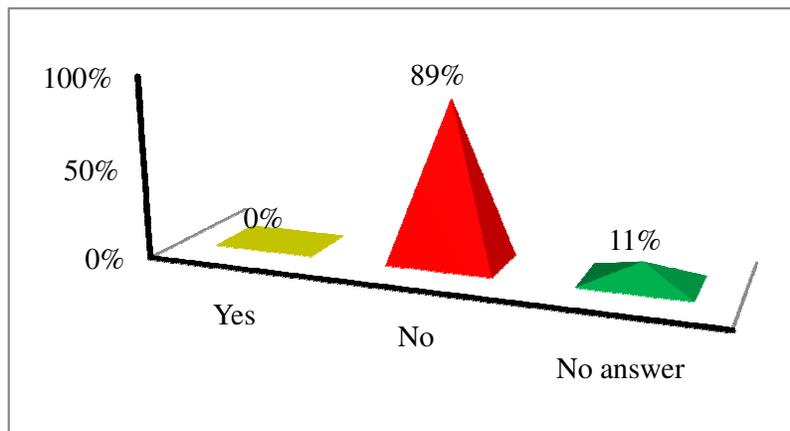


Figure 4 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

There is a perception among the Indigenous people of the State that once citizenship is granted to Chakma and Hajong refugees within the territorial jurisdiction of Arunachal Pradesh, many more Chakma and Hajong from across the international borders will migrate to Arunachal Pradesh to take advantage of granting citizenship. In such a case the State with already a huge Chakma-Hajong population will be flooded by hundreds and thousands of Chakma-Hajong from other country or States and the Indigenous people will be reduced to a minority in their homeland. Once the Indigenous people are outnumbered by these non-native Chakma and Hajong, there will be negative social, economic, and political implications for the Indigenous people. Considering this perception of indigenous people, an inquiry was made during the field survey to know the opinion of Chakma refugees. To this perception, about 89% of the Chakma respondents disagree while about 11% did not answer the question'. Respondents who do not agree with this perception believe that under no circumstances they would welcome fresh people from any part of the country or world since they are already facing landlessness issue for both cultivation and residence. A respondent from M'pen-I expressed his opinion in this regard saying,

“There is no question of welcoming anyone from outside of our State (Arunachal Pradesh) because we (Chakma) do not have sufficient land since our settlement days. Many of us cultivate the agricultural lands of local landowners.”

None of the APCSU, CCRCHAP, and Chakma Gaon Burahs agrees with this perception. One of the CCRCHAP leaders thought, This perception is totally wrong. Neither will they come from other States of India like Tripura, Meghalaya, or Mizoram will come, nor from Bangladesh. In these States, they are not only Indian citizens but are also recognized as ST (Scheduled Tribe) with separate political and administrative setups called Chakma Autonomous Council. Even if they want to come due to any reason, we are not going to welcome them because there is no land to welcome them.

Thus, out of 95 Chakma respondents across different groups, no single respondent that agrees to such perception of the Indigenous people. The main reason cited by them for not agreeing to such a perception is the lack of available land, both agricultural and residential, for settling a new group of people. They also feel that such episode can once again upset the relations between their community and Indigenous people of the State.

Perception of Indigenous People towards the Chakma Refugees

How would you describe the day-to-day relations with Chakma Refugees?

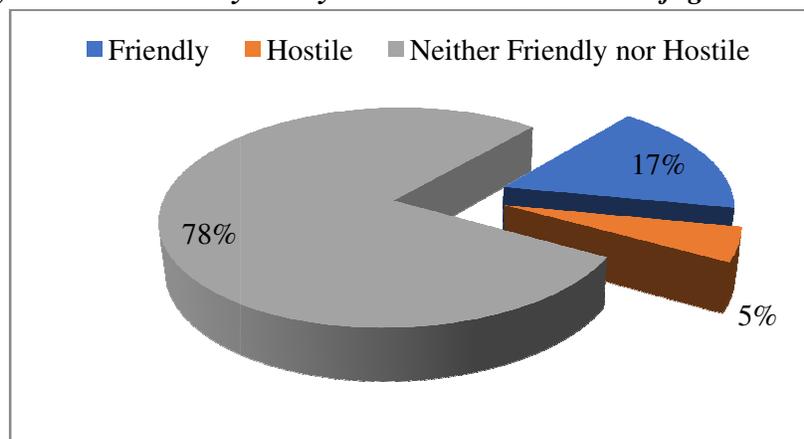


Figure 5 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Since there is a popular perception among the Indigenous people of the State that the Chakma and Hajong refugees are hostile towards them, an attempt was made to know the perception of the Indigenous people who inhabit nearby the Chakma villages on their day-to-day relations with the Chakma refugees. To this question about 17% stated that they have friendly relations with Chakma refugees and about 5% of the respondents considered Chakmas to be hostile towards them. However, the vast majority of the respondents of this group which account for about 78% were of the opinion that their day-to-day relations with refugees is neither friendly nor hostile. All the respondents from District Students Union and Gaon Burahs considered the day-to-day relations of Indigenous people as neither friendly nor hostile. So far as Panchayat leaders are concerned, 1 out of 5 answered that the daily relations of Indigenous people with refugees is friendly and the rest of the 4 replied the relations are neither friendly nor hostile. However, as stated above majority of the Indigenous respondents that counts for about 78% considered their day-to-day relations as neither friendly nor hostile.

What according to you is the attitude of the AAPSU towards Chakma Refugees?

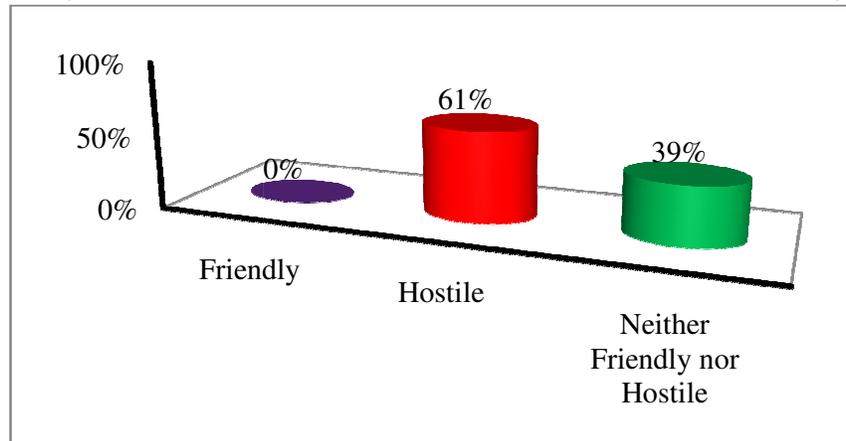


Figure 6 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

The AAPSU is one of the main stakeholders of the long-pending refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh. It had been spearheading the issue since early 1990s in the greater interests of the Indigenous people of the State. It has been continuously demanding the deportation of Chakma-Hajong refugees from State since early 1990s till date. They are still firm on their demand and keep on pressurizing the State Government to fulfill their long-pending demand. However, the State and Central Governments have not succeeded on doing so. In fact after the Supreme Court judgment of September 2015, the Central Government seems keen enough to grant citizenship to the eligible Chakma-Hajong refugees as per the direction of the Supreme Court. In this process of long legal battle, the AAPSU have not shied away from criticizing the judgment in the greater interest of the Indigenous people. Because of its role in the whole issue, the AAPSU is often considered ‘villain’ by the refugee community. Therefore, an attempt was made to know how the Indigenous people looked at the AAPSU with respect to their attitude towards the refugees. To this question, about 61% of the Indigenous respondents considered AAPSU as ‘hostile’ towards the refugees. However, they seem to be justifying the role and activities of the AAPSU. One respondent from Innao Singpho had to say,

“AAPSU may appear hostile to many people especially Chakam-Hajong but from my point of view they are doing it to safeguard the land, people and their rights but not form their personal benefit. Therefore, they cannot be simply termed as enemy of Chakma-Hajong”.

Similar kind of opinion was expressed was a respondent from Phup village when he said, “Whatever AAPSU is doing is for the local people of Arunachal Pradesh, to protect the rights and future. So, it would be wrong to directly call them hostile towards refugees.”

About 39% of the respondents consider the AAPSU’s attitude and approach towards refugees as neither friendly nor hostile. However, there was not a single respondent that consider AAPSU as friendly to refugees.

What is your opinion on the deportation of Chakma refugees from Arunachal Pradesh?

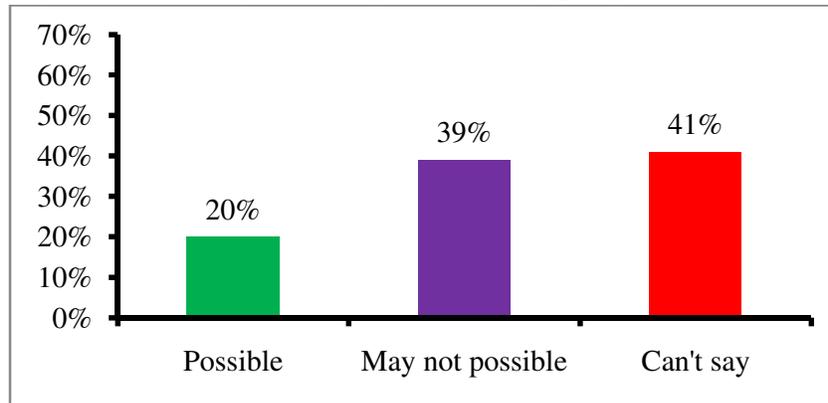


Figure 7 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Deportation of Chakma and Hajong refugees from the State has been the demand of the AAPSU since 1994. In this regard, the AAPSU also served 'Quite Arunachal' notice in August 1994. Since then the AAPSU has been demanding the deportation of these refugee groups from the State. They hold the opinion that since the State is protected by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, refugees must be deported from Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, an attempt was made to elicit the opinion of the Indigenous respondents comprising different groups on the practicability of the deportation or to say the long pending demand of the AAPSU. Out of the total indigenous respondents about 20% of the respondents believed that Chakma-Hajong refugees can be deported back to their original homeland or some other States of India and about 39% of the respondents thought that deportation may not be practicable after such a long stay and acquiring private properties in Arunachal Pradesh. About 41% did not know whether deportation is practicable or not. One of the respondents from Borkhet village stated that refugees can be deported back was of the opinion,

“If Central Government and Arunachal Government genuinely want to send them back, I think deportation is possible. There is nothing which a government cannot do”.

A respondent from Neotan who think that deportation may not be practicable expressed her opinion by saying, “They (Chakma and Hajong) have built RCC houses, bought lands and own businesses and so it may not be easy for the government to send them back. I doubt they (Chakma and Hajong) would agree to their deportation after such a long stay in our State”.

District Students' Union leaders are firm in their belief that refugees can be and should be deported back to their original homeland. However, out of 5 Panchayat leaders, none answered in the practicability of deportation of Chakma. So far as Gaon Burahs were concerned, 3 out of 5 believed that deportation may not be practical while 2 were not sure in this regard and answered in 'Can't say'.

Should Chakma refugees be given/granted citizenship on humanitarian ground considering their tragic history and long stay in Arunachal Pradesh?

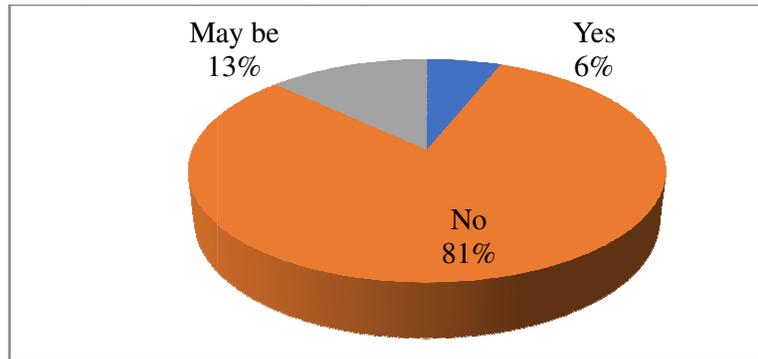


Figure 8 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

The demand for citizenship has been the crux of contention over the refugee issue between the Chakma-Hajong refugees headed by the CCRCHAP and the Indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh represented by the AAPSU. For the first time the question of whether the Chakma and Hajong are citizens of India or not surfaced in a writ petition filed by Shri Khudiram Chakma of Diyun Circle against the eviction order issued by Circle Officer, Diyun, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, on February 15, 1984. The petition was filed in the Gauhati High Court in 1985 to which the judgment was pronounced on 30th April 1992, which came to be known as Khudiram Chakma vs. Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh. This judgment did not recognize the petitioner and other Chakmas as citizens of India. Then the petitioner moved to the Supreme Court of India against the judgment of the Gauhati High Court and filed a civil petition in the Supreme Court. The Government of Arunachal Pradesh also filed a counter-petition in the Supreme Court. The former was dismissed and later was admitted which came to be known as State of Arunachal Pradesh vs. Khudiram Chakma, 1993. At that juncture, the government of India also intended to grant citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees. While in between the legal battle, in August 1994, the AAPSU asked the Chakma-Hajong refugees and other outsiders to leave the State by September 1994. Fearing the possible violation of the rights and forceful deportation of refugees, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) filed a petition in the Supreme Court making the State of Arunachal Pradesh and other respondents. This petition was known by the name National Human Rights Commission vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh and Another. An interim order to this petition was pronounced in November 1995 directing the State Government to safeguard the rights and liberties of refugees by stopping the AAPSU from taking any coercive action against the refugees. In 2007, another civil writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court under the title ‘Committee for C.R. of C.A.A.P. and Ors. vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh and Ors. The judgment to this petition was pronounced in September 2015, directing the State and Union Governments to confer citizenship to eligible Chakma and Hajong refugees within three months. Requesting the Supreme Court to reconsider the judgment, Special Leave Petition (SLP) was filed by the AAPSU which was admitted by the same court. Since then the issue of citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees is still in the court.

Since the demand for citizenship by the Chakma-Hajong refugees is the crux of the issue to which the indigenous people under the leadership of the AAPSU keep on opposing, a question was asked during the field survey whether Chakma and Hajong should be granted citizenship on humanitarian grounds considering their settlement in Arunachal Pradesh for about six decades. To this question, 81% of the Indigenous respondents answered in ‘No’ and about 13% answered in ‘May be’. Only about 6% of the total respondents agreed to grant citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees on humanitarian grounds. No District Students’ Union leaders agree on this question. One of the DSU leaders stated in this regard saying,

“No ground should be considered because we are against the permanent settlement and grant of citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees in our State. After deporting them from our State, it is up to Central Government whether to give them citizenship or not”.

Out of 5 Panchayat leaders, 3 respondents answered ‘No’ and 2 ‘May be’. So far as Gaon Burahs are concerned, out of 5 respondents, 1 agreed to grant citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees on humanitarian grounds while 3 did not want to grant citizenship even on humanitarian grounds and another 1 answered ‘May be’. Thus, maximum respondents did not want Chakma refugees to get citizenship even on humanitarian ground.

Would granting of citizenship encourage the Chakmas from other States and Country to migrate Arunachal Pradesh and take advantage of situation to avail Citizenship?

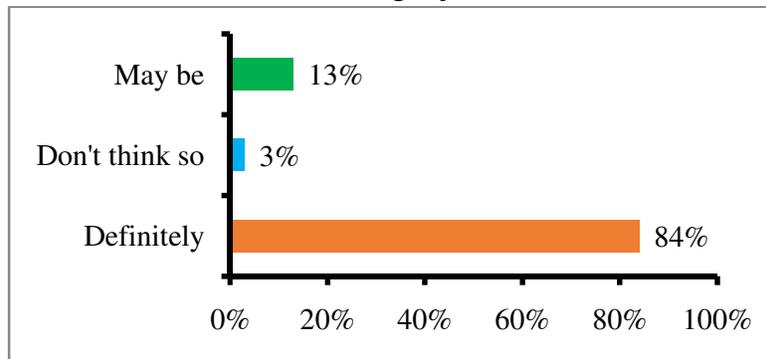


Figure 9 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

The AAPSU has always been saying that in case citizenship is granted to the Chakma and Hajong refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, many Chakmas and Hajongs from outside of the state and country will also come to take advantage of the citizenship which will pose a big threat to the Indigenous people in many ways such as demography, resources, politics, employment opportunities etc. Keeping in mind this perception, a question was asked from the Indigenous respondents of the nearby Chakma villages. To this question, out of 80 Common people, 68 respondents which accounts for about 75% agreed that in case citizenship is granted to refugees in Arunachal Pradesh many more of their people and relatives would come to take advantage of the situation and rest of the respondents were not were sure in this regard. 100% of the District Students Union and Gaon Burahs believed that Chakmas and Hajongs from

outside of Arunachal Pradesh will migrate to Arunachal Pradesh. 4 out of 5 Panchayat leaders also hold the same opinion while 1 was not sure and answered in ‘Can’t say’. In aggregate about 86.31% of the Indigenous respondents were of the opinion that in case citizenship is granted to refugees, many more of their people and relatives will sneak into Arunachal Pradesh to take advantage of the prevailing situation and about 13.69% were not were sure. There was no single respondent who thought that grant of citizenship to Chakma and Hajong would not encourage their people from outside to come to Arunachal Pradesh.

If Citizenship is given to Chakma refugees, do you think they would also demand Permanent Residential Certificate and Scheduled Tribe status?

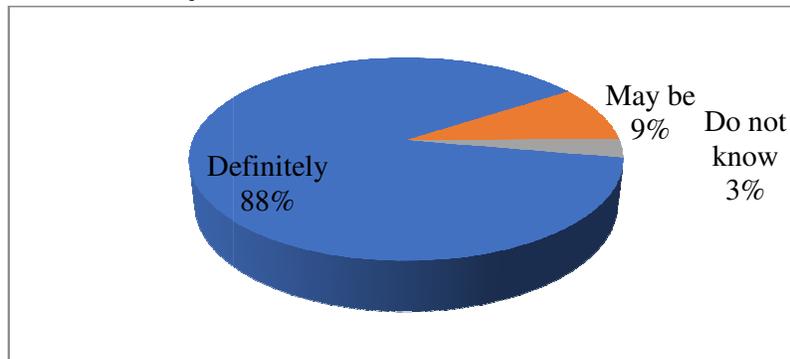


Figure 10 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

There is a common perception and understanding among the Indigenous people of the State that tomorrow if citizenship is granted to Chakma and Hajong refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, they will gradually demand the rights enjoyed by the Indigenous people, especially Permanent Residential Certificates (PRCs). They hold the opinion that once their demand for PRC is achieved, next they will demand the Scheduled Tribe status like the Indigenous tribes of the State. This perception cannot be directly ruled out considering the statement made by then Vice-President, APCSU, Shri Ajay Chakma when he said,

“The Primary issue for us at the moment is citizenship and the question of grant of Scheduled Tribe status to the Chakmas will come later. If we continue to face similar kind of discrimination despite being citizens of India then certainly we will have to ask for other things also” (Singh, 2010).

Similar kind of opinion was expressed by then Gaon Burah of Dharmapur Shri Upendra Lal Chakma saying, CCRCHAP is demanding citizenship, permanent residenship and APST status together. Once we are given citizenship, other things like APST status etc. will automatically follow” (Singh, 2010). One Dina Lal Chakma of expressed similar kind of opinion while saying, “Citizenship alone will not do. We also need the be recognized as APST without which we cannot have access to land, school, employment and other facilities as enjoyed by the locals (Singh, 2010).

The All Changlang District Students' Union (ACDSU) leaders had no doubt in this regard. The General Secretary said in this regard by saying,

Once citizenship is granted in our State (Arunachal Pradesh), a floodgate for other demands such as PRC and ST certificates will further put the Indigenous people's future at risk. Many of our jobs will be snatched by these Chakmas and Hajongs and more and more of our people will not get jobs. Also, they will have 100% voting rights and at least two constituencies will be ruled by them (Chakma-Hajong). So, there are lots to lose for us if citizenship is granted to Chakma and Hajong refugees.

Similar is in the case of the Panchayat leaders. All 5 Panchayat leaders too felt that once citizenship is granted, they will demand for Scheduled Tribes Status and Permanent Residential Certificates. In this regard, a Panchayat leader from Neotan village said,

“Granting citizenship means giving them everything because once citizenship is granted they will have equal rights, especially in terms of voting and looking at their huge number of voters, the State Government could succumb to their demand for PRC and ST also”.

So far as Gaon Burahs were concerned, 4 out of 5 had to say that if citizenship is granted, they will surely demand the Scheduled Tribe status and Permanent Residential Certificates in the future. In aggregate about 88% of the respondents believed that once citizenship is granted to Chakma and Hajong refugees, they will also demand Permanent Residential Certificates and Scheduled Tribe status. About 9% answered in 'May be' and rest of the 3% of the respondents had no clear opinion in this regard.

If citizenship is granted, do you think Chakma candidates can win Assembly Election?

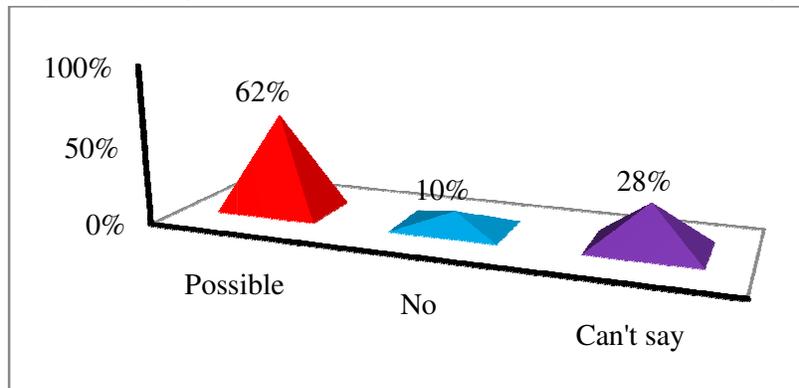


Figure 11 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

It is often perceived that if Chakma-Hajong refugees are granted citizenship, they have the population strength of not only impacting the electoral outcomes of some assembly constituencies but also can win elections as a candidate. Therefore an inquiry was made from the Indigenous respondents of the study area to know their opinion on this matter. To this about 62% of the respondents believed that if citizenship is granted to Chakma refugees,

there is a possibility of winning assembly elections by their candidates. A respondent from Borkhet village was of the opinion,

“If they get citizenship, our constituency {49-Bordumsa-Diyun (Gen)} would be occupied by them, both as voters and as a candidate.”

Another respondent from Innao Singpho village said, There is no doubt that if citizenship is given, there will be a Chakma MLA from 49-Bordumsa-Diyun constituency because they have about 70-80000 population alone in Bordumsa-Diyun. In comparison to their population, we are (Indigenous people) are in microscopic minority. The future of our people will be in darkness because political power is everything in a democratic country like India.

A respondent from Neotan village expressed his opinion in this regard saying, “Giving citizenship to Chakma refugees means allowing them to dominate us politically due to their huge population and local people will be dominated and exploited in their homeland by outsiders.”

Do you consider Chakma vendors as important part of the local markets?

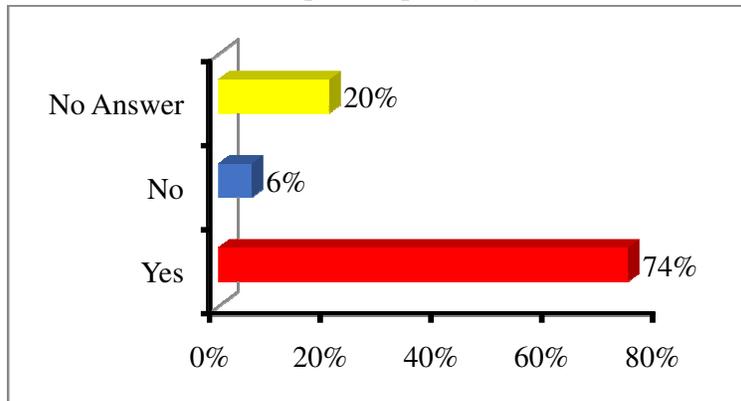


Figure 12 (Source: Field Survey, 2022)

Though Chakma-Hajong refugees are not liked when it is about citizenship but when it comes to local markets and organic vegetables, they are most preferred by the people including the Indigenous people of the State. In every settlement areas, Chakmas are the major sources/producers of local organic vegetables in the nearby daily and weekly markets in Bordumsa, Diyun, Miao and Kharsang circles of Changlang district. Therefore, a question was asked on the importance of Chakma vendors in nearby markets. To this about 74% of the Indigenous respondents considers Chakma vendors as important parts of local markets. A respondent from Innao Khampti said,

“The markets of Innao and Diyun town are filled with Chakma vendors. They are main sellers of organic vegetables like mustard leaves, chilly, pumpkin etc. Without them I don’t think people of Innao and Diyun will be able to get organic vegetables.”

Similar kind of opinion was expressed by a respondent from Kharsang HQ when she said, Kharsang weekly market as well as Miao market is owned by Chakma vegetable sellers especially in terms of local products. Only very few of Tangsa women are found in these markets as vegetable sellers. Most of us, be it Tangsa or Singpho, prefer vegetables and other products sold by Chakma vegetable sellers than those sold by non-tribal people. So they are important part of weekly and daily markets. Only about 6% of the respondents answered otherwise and about 20% of the respondents did not answer the question.

Findings and Conclusion

The data obtained from the ground reflect the fact that on one hand, the Chakma refugees want the Indigenous people to accept them as part of Arunachal Society while on the other hand, the Indigenous people still are not ready to embrace the refugees as one of their own. Concerning the day-to-day relationship, about 75.78% considered their day-to-day relationship with the Indigenous people of nearby villages as 'friendly' and there was no single respondent who considered their relationship to be 'hostile' with the Indigenous people of the nearby villages whereas only about 11.57% of the total Indigenous respondents considered their day-to-day relations with Chakma refugees as 'friendly'. The majority of the Chakma respondents which constitute about 86.31% of the study consider the AAPSU 'hostile' towards their community. When the same question is asked to Indigenous respondents, they consider the activities of the AAPSU necessary for the rights and protection of the Indigenous people of the State.

Regarding the possible migration of Chakmas from across the borders to Arunachal Pradesh to take advantage of the citizenship in case Chakmas and Hajongs of Arunachal Pradesh are granted citizenship about 93.69% of the Chakma respondents answered 'No' but when a similar question was asked to Indigenous respondents, about 86.31% answered in 'Yes'. Thus, their perceptions are poles apart in this regard. Citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh to refugees is the crux of the issue. Neither the AAPSU nor the Indigenous people of the State want refugees to be granted citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh.

Now, considering the historical plight of the refugees and also their long stay in the State, an attempt was made to know the opinion of the Indigenous respondents whether they agree to the grant of citizenship to refugees on humanitarian grounds. To this about 75.79% of the Indigenous respondents answered in 'No' and only about 10.53% answered in 'May be'. The general opinion of the Indigenous people is that refugees should be deported out of Arunachal Pradesh, either to their original country or to some other States of India where there is no clash with the interest of the native people. Now, the question is whether the option of deportation is practical or not considering their long stay. To this, about 26.32% of the respondents believed that if there is strong political will, they can be deported out of State. However, about 36.84% of each of the respondents answered 'May not be practical' and 'Cannot say'. There is a general perception among the Indigenous people of the State that if refugees are granted citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh, they would also demand Permanent Residential Certificates and the Scheduled Tribe Status/certificates which to date are not available to them except for some particular purpose. Therefore, an inquiry was made in this

regard from the Indigenous respondents to which about 95.79% hold the opinion that if citizenship is granted to refugees, they would also demand the Permanent Residential Certificates and the Scheduled Tribe Status/certificates which would be an encroachment upon their age-old rights over land and other resources. Legal protection given to the Indigenous people of the State by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, is often referred to by the AAPSU and the Indigenous people saying the settlement of refugees was in violation of this law which prohibits non-native from going beyond the demarcated boundary line called 'Inner Line' without a valid pass or permit and people going beyond the said line cannot show interest on the soil and other resources. However, despite being this law in force, the refugee communities were settled by the Government of India. Therefore, this study wanted to know the opinion of the refugee respondents on whether their settlement was in violation of the law. To this question, not even a single respondent in 'Yes' but most of the respondents accounting for about 53.68% stated that they 'Do not know'. The rest of the respondents answered their settlement was not in violation of any law because they were resettled by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, with a proper resettlement scheme. The Indigenous respondents on the other hand still hold the opinion that the settlement was done without the prior consent of the Indigenous people of the State (then NEFA) and it was arbitrary and in violation of the age-old rights over the land and resources which were protected by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873.

Thus, the attitude and perceptions of the Indigenous people and Chakma refugees are contrary to each other and unless this is addressed by both the Central and State Governments through talks and dialogues by bringing all the stakeholders on the table, mere court judgments are not going to solve the long pending issue.

References

- Chakma, L.B., (2022), *Chakmas of south-east Asia: anthropological, social and cultural study*. Jaipur-302006, Yking Books.
- Chakma, P. (2021). *Chakmas: Indigenous peoples of Mizoram* (2nd Ed.). Bluerose Publishers.
- Getmansky. A., Sinmazdemir, T., Zeitzoff, T. (2018). Refugees, Xenophobia and Domestic Conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*, 55(4), July, pp.491-507.
- Ghosh, P.S., (2016). *Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South Asia*. New Delhi-110044, SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Habib, Md. Reza. (2023). Rohingya refugee-host community conflicts in Bangladesh: Issues and Insights from the field. *Development in Practice*, 33(3), pp.317-327.

- Jerin, Ismat and Mozumder, Muhammed. K, (2019), Exploring host community attitudes towards Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. *Journal of Mental Health and Psychological Support in Conflict Affected Areas, Intervention*, 17(2), November, pp.169-173.
- Kakar, M. Makki, Ullah, Hakeem and Salam, Sayed. A. (2022). Voices from the margins: Perceptions and Attitudes towards Afghan Refugee Women in Balochistan, Pakistan. *Asian Social Studies and Applied Research*, 3(2), May, pp.361-369.
- Macdonald, G., Mekker, I., and Mooney, L., (2023). Conflict Dynamics between Bangladeshi Host Communities and Rohingya Refugees. *United State Institute of Peace*, 519, April, 20037.
- Nielsen, Selin. Y. (2016), Perceptions between Syrian Refugees and their Host Community. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 15(3), November, pp.99-105.
- Singh, Deepak. K., (2016). Lost in Transition: A Narrative of Non-existence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(36), September, pp.46-54.
- Singh, Deepak. K., (2010). *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India*. New Delhi-110044, SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Sinha, Manoj. K, (2014). Handbook of Legal Instruments on International Human Rights and Refugee Laws, Gurgaon-122002, Lexis Nexis.
- Whitaker, Beth. E, (2002). Refugees in western Tanzania: The Distribution of Burdens and Benefits among local hosts. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15(4), July, pp.339-358.
- <https://www.who.int>.