



# “Territorial Displacement and Human Rights: The Chakma community’s struggle for Settlement and Identity in Tripura”

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## ABSTRACT

The Chakma community’s narrative within Tripura stands as a poignant tale of territorial displacement, persistent struggles for settlement, and the overarching pursuit of identity amidst a complex web of human rights challenges. This abstract endeavours to scrutinize and illuminate the multifaceted struggles faced by the Chakma community in Tripura, particularly focussing on their ordeal concerning territorial displacement, human rights infringements, and the perpetual quest for settlement and identity.

Territorial displacement serves as a pivotal backdrop against which the Chakma community’s narrative unfolds. The paper will delve into the historical context and contemporary implications of their displacement, emphasizing the socio-political, legal, and cultural dimensions that underpin their struggle. It aims to unveil the intricacies of their resettlement challenges, exploring the barriers inhibiting their access to secure settlements and recognition. At the heart of this analysis lies the fundamental question of human rights violations. The study will meticulously examine the spectrum of human rights challenges faced by the Chakma community, ranging from land rights to cultural preservation and political representation. It seeks to dissect the systematic violations and institutional hurdles that impede their pursuit of justice and equality within the Tripura landscape.

Identity, an integral facet of the Chakma narrative, remains under constant negotiation. The paper endeavours to unravel how the struggle for settlement intertwines with the preservation of their cultural identity, language, and heritage. It aims to capture the resilience of the Chakma community in preserving their unique identity amidst the challenges posed by displacement and human rights constraints. Drawing upon interdisciplinary lenses encompassing legal studies, human rights advocacy, and socio-cultural analyses, this research aspires to illuminate the complexities of the Chakma community’s plight aiming to contribute nuanced insights crucial for informed policy discourse and advocacy initiatives that uphold the dignity and rights of the Chakma community in Tripura.

**Keywords:** Territorial, Displacement, Human rights, Chakma, Settlement, Tripura

## Historical Context and Territorial Displacement

The Chakma community, with a vibrant cultural heritage and historical roots, has a compelling narrative in the lands of Tripura. Their origins trace back to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a region encompassing parts of modern-day Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. The migration of the Chakmas to Tripura occurred during the 16th and 17th centuries, marking the establishment of their presence in the hills of the region. The Chakmas, known for their agrarian lifestyle, settled in Tripura, cultivating the land and building a society deeply rooted in their traditions, language, and distinctive socio-religious practices. Their settlement was marked by a harmonious coexistence with the surrounding communities, contributing to the cultural mosaic of the region.

However, the historical trajectory of the Chakma community took a tumultuous turn due to significant events that led to their territorial displacement. The Partition of India in 1947, which resulted in the creation of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), marked a critical juncture. The redrawn geopolitical boundaries

significantly affected the Chakma community, whose settlements straddled these newly formed borders. The ensuing political changes disrupted their way of life, causing socio-economic and political upheaval.

A pivotal event that profoundly impacted the Chakma community was the construction of the Kaptai Dam in the Chittagong Hill Tracts during the 1960s. This large-scale infrastructure project aimed to provide hydroelectric power but came at a tremendous cost for the Chakma people. The dam's reservoir caused extensive flooding, leading to the involuntary displacement of numerous Chakma families from their ancestral lands. Homes were submerged, farmlands were lost, and livelihoods were disrupted, compelling many to seek new settlements. The displacement resulting from the Kaptai Dam had far-reaching consequences, pushing the Chakma community into a struggle for survival and seeking a new sense of belonging. In the face of adversity, many Chakmas sought refuge and resettlement in various regions, including the hilly terrains of Tripura. (Debbarma & George, 1993).

Government policies and decisions have been instrumental in shaping the fate of the Chakma community's settlement. However, these policies often lacked clarity and explicit provisions recognizing indigenous land rights, creating disputes over land ownership. In regions like Tripura, ambiguity in land laws and policies led to conflicting claims over traditional Chakma territories. The absence of comprehensive rehabilitation and resettlement policies compounded the challenges faced by the displaced Chakma community. The lack of clear governmental initiatives to address their settlement needs further exacerbated their struggle to secure new habitats and maintain their cultural identity. The historical backdrop of the Chakma community in Tripura encapsulates a complex narrative marked by migration, territorial displacement, and the repercussions of governmental policies. It illustrates the resilience of a community striving to preserve its cultural heritage while grappling with the impact of historical events and policies that have shaped their settlement and identity in the region. Despite these challenges, the Chakma community continues to assert its rights and seek recognition for its unique place in the socio-cultural fabric of Tripura. Territorial displacement has been a defining and distressing aspect of the Chakma community's history, profoundly impacting their land, livelihoods, and cultural integrity. The causes behind their displacement are multifaceted, rooted in historical events and policy decisions. (Singh, 2010; Majumdar, 1997).

### **Impact on Land, Livelihood, and Culture**

The territorial displacement had a devastating impact on the Chakma community's core elements. Their traditional lands, which sustained their agrarian lifestyle for generations, were submerged or rendered inaccessible due to the dam's reservoir. This displacement severed their deep-rooted connection to the land, causing irreparable loss and challenging their agricultural practices. The disruption to their livelihoods was profound, as the Chakmas relied heavily on agriculture for sustenance. Displacement stripped them of their means of livelihood, pushing many into unfamiliar territories where they struggled to secure land for cultivation, disrupting their economic stability and traditional way of life. (Debbarma & George, 1993).

Culturally, the displacement posed a threat to the preservation of the Chakma identity. Their distinct cultural practices, rooted in their relationship with the land, were severely impacted. Displacement disrupted social structures, community bonds, and traditional knowledge systems, risking the erosion of their cultural heritage. The displacement imposed immense challenges and struggles upon the Chakma community. Finding new settlements proved to be a daunting task, as they faced resistance, lack of resources, and unfamiliar terrains. The abrupt displacement disrupted their social fabric, fragmenting communities and diluting their collective identity. Securing land rights in the new areas posed significant challenges. Ambiguities in land laws and conflicting claims hampered their efforts to reclaim territory and establish stable settlements. The absence of adequate rehabilitation and resettlement policies compounded their struggles, leaving many Chakmas in precarious living conditions without adequate support.

Additionally, displacement led to social and psychological challenges. The trauma of losing ancestral lands, the upheaval of displacement, and the struggle for resettlement took a toll on the mental well-being of the Chakma community. The displacement-induced stress and uncertainty further marginalized them in their new surroundings. Despite facing these adversities, the Chakma community exhibited resilience and tenacity. They persevered in their pursuit of settlement and justice, mobilizing efforts to advocate for their rights, demand recognition, and seek restitution for the losses incurred due to displacement.

Territorial displacement inflicted profound wounds upon the Chakma community, disrupting their land, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. The causes behind their displacement, the consequential impact on their lives, and the myriad challenges faced in the aftermath illuminate the complexities of their struggle for settlement and preservation of identity amidst adversities imposed by historical events and policy decisions.

### **Human Rights Violation**

The territorial displacement of the Chakma community has been marred by significant human rights violations, exposing them to a myriad of injustices and challenges. These violations, occurring during and after displacement, have raised critical concerns about the community's rights under national and international laws. The Chakma community faced egregious violations of their human rights throughout their displacement journey. Forced displacement, a fundamental violation of human rights, occurred due to the

construction of the Kaptai Dam, resulting in the loss of homes, farmlands, and livelihoods without their free, prior, and informed consent. Despite living in Tripura for decades, many Chakma refugees have encountered severe bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining citizenship. Restrictive legal frameworks and the absence of proper documentation have left large segments of the community stateless. This legal limbo prevents them from accessing critical services like education, healthcare, and employment, and reinforces a cycle of exclusion and marginalization. The denial of citizenship rights is a clear instance of systemic human rights violations faced by displaced indigenous populations. (Chatterjee, 2005; Sarkar, 2004)

The right to property, a fundamental human right, was severely compromised as the Chakmas were deprived of their ancestral lands without adequate compensation or resettlement measures. Moreover, the lack of legal protection and recognition of their land rights exacerbated their vulnerability, leading to their marginalization in the resettlement process. Additionally, displacement led to violations of economic and social rights. The disruption of their traditional agrarian lifestyle stripped them of their means of livelihood, impacting their right to work and an adequate standard of living. Access to education, healthcare, and other essential services became challenging in the new settlements, further violating their rights. In Tripura, conflicts over land rights have further marginalized the Chakma community. There have been documented cases where Chakma settlements were forcibly evicted or encroached upon by local authorities. These forced evictions disrupt communities that have already lost their ancestral lands and undermine their right to secure housing and cultural identity. Reports by international human rights organizations have highlighted these practices as blatant violations of indigenous peoples' rights. (Amnesty International, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2002)

International human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), uphold the rights of individuals and communities, including the rights to land, property, livelihood, and non-discrimination. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is particularly relevant to the Chakma community. It recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories, and resources, emphasizing their right to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity. Despite these frameworks, the Chakma community's rights have often been disregarded or inadequately protected by national governments, leaving them vulnerable to ongoing violations even within the ambit of international human rights standards.

### **Legal Aspects and the Chakma Community's Rights**

Under national laws, the Chakma community's rights have been a subject of contention and ambiguity. In India, despite constitutional provisions safeguarding the rights of tribal communities, including the right to land and resources, implementation and interpretation at the state level have often fallen short, leaving indigenous communities like the Chakmas vulnerable to exploitation and displacement. In several documented cases, Chakma settlements in Tripura have been classified as "illegal" by state authorities. This legal stance has led to forced evictions and the systematic alienation of land. Without formal land titles, many Chakma families are unable to defend their claims or seek legal redress. Human Rights Watch (2002) reported that such practices not only disrupt established communities but also violate the fundamental right to secure housing. This has further complicated efforts to attain a stable and recognized settlement status (Sarkar, 2004). Despite having resided in Tripura for decades, many Chakma refugees have been denied citizenship under existing legal frameworks. The stringent application of the Citizenship Act has left numerous Chakma individuals stateless, preventing them from accessing essential public services such as healthcare, education, and employment. This legal exclusion has reinforced their vulnerability and marginalization, as they struggle to prove a continuous legal presence or secure formal documentation (Chatterjee, 2005; Amnesty International, 2003).

Internationally, the Chakma community's rights fall under the protection of various human rights conventions and instruments. However, the challenge lies in enforcing these rights effectively within the national legal frameworks, where indigenous rights are often overshadowed or inadequately addressed. Efforts to address these rights issues have involved legal advocacy, petitions, and appeals both domestically and internationally. The community has sought recognition of their rights to land, restitution for losses, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives.

The territorial displacement of the Chakma community has been riddled with human rights violations, infringing upon their rights to land, property, livelihood, and cultural integrity. While international human rights frameworks provide a basis for protection, the challenges lie in their effective implementation at the national level. Addressing these violations requires concerted efforts to ensure the recognition and protection of the Chakma community's rights under both national and international laws.

### **Challenges in Achieving a Satisfactory Settlement for the Chakma Community**

The Chakma community has encountered multifaceted challenges in attaining a satisfactory settlement. Land disputes, overlapping claims, and inadequate legal frameworks regarding land rights have led to prolonged struggles in securing stable and recognized settlements. Bureaucratic hurdles and administrative complexities have slowed down the process of rehabilitation and resettlement. Lack of clarity in government policies and insufficient support in terms of infrastructure, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities have hindered the community's ability to rebuild their lives effectively. Moreover, the absence of meaningful

inclusion and consultation with the Chakma community in decision-making processes related to their settlement exacerbates their marginalization and undermines their agency in determining their future. Many Chakma settlements in Tripura have been designated as “illegal” by local authorities, leading to forced evictions. For instance, several communities have experienced sudden land clearances where their homes were demolished with little to no warning. These evictions have disrupted community cohesion and deepened the insecurity over land tenure, leaving many without the legal protection or compensation necessary for stable resettlement (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Sarkar, 2004).

The Chakma community's quest for a satisfactory settlement remains an ongoing struggle marked by challenges stemming from historical injustices, administrative obstacles, and inadequate policy frameworks. The complexities surrounding land rights, governmental initiatives, and the absence of comprehensive rehabilitation measures continue to impede the community's aspirations for a secure and dignified settlement. Addressing these challenges necessitates concerted efforts to ensure the recognition of their rights, inclusive policies, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes to achieve a sustainable and satisfactory settlement for the Chakma community. Even when some legal recognition is achieved, many Chakma individuals face ongoing socio-economic challenges. Limited government rehabilitation programs have meant that settlements often lack basic infrastructure, resulting in poor living conditions. The lack of adequate economic opportunities further compounds their plight, as many Chakma refugees find it difficult to integrate into the mainstream economy, thereby affecting their long-term settlement stability (UNHCR, 2005; Sarkar, 2004).

The displacement of the Chakma community has had a profound impact on their cultural identity, posing challenges to the preservation of their rich heritage. Efforts to maintain and revive their cultural practices in new settlement areas have been vital in safeguarding their identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Displacement disrupted the cultural fabric of the Chakma community, severing their deep-rooted connection to their ancestral lands and traditional way of life. The forced relocation caused a rupture in the transmission of cultural practices, language, rituals, and knowledge systems that were intricately tied to their homeland. The loss of physical spaces and cultural landmarks, along with the fragmentation of communities, led to a sense of dislocation and identity crisis among the Chakmas. The displacement-induced trauma and the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar environments threatened the continuity of their cultural heritage.

### **Efforts to Preserve Chakma Culture and Heritage in New Settlement Areas**

Despite the challenges posed by displacement, the Chakma community has undertaken commendable efforts to preserve and revitalize their cultural heritage in the new settlement areas. Community-driven initiatives aimed at the revival of traditional practices, language, arts, and rituals have been instrumental in maintaining their identity. Cultural events, festivals, and gatherings serve as platforms to transmit knowledge and values across generations. Schools and community organizations prioritize the teaching of the Chakma language, folklore, and traditional crafts, ensuring the continuity of their cultural legacy. In several Chakma settlements around Agartala, community members have established cultural centers that serve as hubs for preserving traditional art, music, dance, and language. For instance, the Chakma Cultural Association (as reported in regional studies) organizes regular workshops, exhibitions, and performances that showcase indigenous folklore and crafts. These centers provide a platform for intergenerational learning and help maintain a collective cultural memory amid displacement. Choudhury, N. (2016). Ethnic identity and the politics of displacement: Insights from the Chakma in Tripura. *Contemporary South Asia*, 24(4), 333–349. Annual celebrations of traditional festivals, such as the Chakma New Year and religious ceremonies, have been revitalized in Tripura's new settlement areas. These festivals feature traditional rituals, folk music, and dance performances that reinforce communal bonds and offer a space for cultural expression. By reintroducing these events in their new environment, Chakma community leaders help transmit cultural values to younger generations and foster a sense of belonging. Chatterjee, P. (2005). The Chakma refugee crisis in Tripura: Identity, displacement, and human rights. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(24), 2460–2467. Recognizing the risk of cultural erosion, several Chakma communities have initiated educational programs that emphasize the teaching of the Chakma language, literature, and history. Community-run schools and language classes—often supported by local NGOs—integrate traditional knowledge into their curricula. These initiatives aim not only to preserve the Chakma language but also to instill pride in their indigenous heritage among younger community members. Sarkar, T. (2004). Refugee rehabilitation and citizenship challenges: The Chakma experience in Tripura. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(15), 1374–1380. Moreover, the establishment of cultural centers, museums, and documentation projects has played a pivotal role in preserving and showcasing the unique cultural heritage of the Chakma community. These endeavours serve as repositories of history and serve to educate both community members and outsiders about their rich traditions.

### **Successes, Setbacks, and Ongoing Struggles:**

The journey of the Chakma community in their fight for justice has seen both successes and setback. Setbacks in the form of bureaucratic hurdles, political resistance, and the slow pace of justice have posed significant challenges. Despite their relentless efforts, the full recognition and restitution of their rights, particularly



regarding land and settlement, remain elusive. The fight for justice is an ongoing struggle for the Chakma community. While they have achieved milestones in raising awareness and gaining recognition for their grievances, systemic barriers and vested interests continue to impede the full realization of their rights. The perseverance and resilience displayed by Chakma leaders and activists serve as a testament to their commitment to achieving justice and equality. The Chakma community's resistance and activism against displacement and human rights violations have been integral to their struggle for justice. Leaders, activists, and organizations have played crucial roles in amplifying their voices, employing various strategies of resistance, and navigating challenges in their quest for recognition, restitution, and the protection of their rights. Despite obstacles, their unwavering determination and advocacy efforts signify an ongoing commitment to securing justice and dignity for the Chakma people.

### Comparisons with Similar Indigenous Struggles Worldwide

1. **The Rohingya Crisis (Myanmar)** - The plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar bears resemblances to the Chakma community's struggles. Both communities have faced displacement due to government actions, leading to human rights abuses and challenges in securing settlement and recognition of their rights.
2. **The Maori in New Zealand** - The Maori people have experienced historical displacement and colonization similar to many indigenous communities. Their struggle for land rights, cultural preservation, and political recognition parallels the Chakma community's quest for recognition of their cultural heritage and territorial rights.
3. **The Native American Tribes in the United States** - Various Native American tribes in the US have faced displacement, loss of lands, and violation of their rights. Their fight for sovereignty, land restitution, and cultural preservation resonates with the struggles of the Chakma community.

These comparative studies emphasize the need for concerted efforts at local, national, and international levels to ensure the recognition and protection of the rights of indigenous communities worldwide.

### Conclusion

The struggle of the Chakma community in Tripura encapsulates a profound narrative of resilience, displacement, and the quest for justice amid challenges to their settlement and preservation of identity. Territorial displacement has been a pivotal force shaping their history, profoundly impacting their land, livelihoods, and cultural integrity. The Chakma community's journey has been marked by historical events, such as the Partition of India and the construction of the Kaptai Dam, leading to their forced displacement and loss of ancestral lands. Government policies and decisions have further complicated their settlement, exacerbating their struggles in securing land rights and recognition of their cultural heritage.

Amid these challenges, the Chakma community has displayed remarkable resilience, advocating for their rights through activism, legal avenues, and community-led initiatives. Leaders, activists, and organizations have played pivotal roles in amplifying their voices and demanding justice for the injustices they have faced.

However, the journey towards justice and settlement for the Chakma community remains arduous. Challenges persist in accessing essential services, securing stable settlements, and preserving their cultural identity in the face of displacement-induced traumas. Yet, amidst these challenges, hope persists. The Chakma community's determination, cultural resilience, and ongoing advocacy efforts signify a steadfast commitment to securing recognition, restitution, and a dignified settlement. Their struggle serves as a testament to the resilience of indigenous communities globally, highlighting the importance of safeguarding their rights, preserving their heritage, and ensuring their voices are heard in shaping their future. As efforts continue to address their grievances and secure their rights, the Chakma community's struggle stands as a reminder of the imperative to uphold human rights, dignity, and justice for all marginalized communities.

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