

HISTORY OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

In a State where political parties have often struggled to build a strong opposition, one organization has consistently held governments accountable, shaped public debate, and mobilized thousands of young people on the streets. The All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union, popularly known as AAPSU, is not just a student body. For decades it has acted as the conscience of identity, demography, citizenship, and indigenous rights. Understanding AAPSU is essential to understanding how student politics in the Northeast has influenced governance and democratic participation at large.

Keywords: *AAPSU, Arunachal Pradesh, student activism, indigenous identity, tribal rights, Chakma-Hajong refugees, Inner Line Permit, job reservation, citizenship rights, refugee settlement, political opposition, constitutional rights, Northeast India, democracy, and human rights.*

From a school in Assam to the apex student body

The role of AAPSU goes back to the late 1940s, long before Arunachal Pradesh existed as a political entity. At the time, the region was a remote frontier with very few schools. Students from communities such as the Adi (then called Abors), Galo (then called Galong), and Mishong (then Miri) were admitted to the Sadiya Government high School in neighboring state Assam, where they first felt the need for a common platform to express their concerns.

This led to the formation of the Adi-Mishong Student's Union in 1974, with its headquarters at Pasighat. According to academic accounts of the movements, this early union played a pivotal role in spreading awareness about education and social change among tribal families, often by convincing parents to send their children to school. The regular meeting of the union encouraged students in other areas to set up similar branch unions, which gradually expanded the organizations reached.

The many name changes

As branch unions multiplied, the organization was restructured several times to reflect the changing political map of the region, with the formation of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1959, the Adi-Mishong union was reorganized in the All NEFA Students Union. The constitution of the present union was drafted and adopted with 16 articles on 15 October 1967, giving it a federal structure and the motto "Learn to Serve". When NEFA became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh 1972, the body was renamed the Arunachal Pradesh Students Union. The State's evolution, from what was once described as a mere "geographical expression" to a full-fledged State on 20th February 1987, mirrors the growth of the union itself.

Why a student Union became so powerful

One of the most striking features of AAPSU is the political weight it carries. In the absence of a Stable Opposition Party, the union frequently functions as the fact's opposition, regulating other student organizations across the State and pressuring both the State and Central governments on their policies.

The influence is reflected in the careers of its former leaders. Several past AAPSU Presidents went on to occupy the highest officer in the State. As documented in research published on the union's role in State politics, Former President of AAPSU Jarbom Gamlin became chief minister, Takam Sanjay became a member of Parliament and Cabinet minister in State and Nabam Rebia served as Speaker of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly and members of the Parliament of Rajya Sabha. For many young leaders, the union has served as a training ground for a future in public life.

The issues that drive the movement

AAPSU's agenda has always combined immediate student concerns with larger questions of indigenous survival. Its core demands have historically included the deportation of foreign Nationals, Protection of Jobs and land for indigenous people, resolution of inter-state boundary disputes, and strict enforcement of the inner line permit (ILP) system. The union has frequently pressed for Job Reservation for Arunachalees and has opposed granting Scheduled Tribe status to non-indigenous groups. Recently the AAPSU scrapped 80:20 ratio of job reservation and now, 100% for tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Chakma-Hajong questions

No issue has defined AAPSU more than its opposition to the settlement of Chakma and Hajong refugees. To understand the controversy, it helps to know the background. In the 1960s, the Chakma and Hajong Communities were displaced from the Chittagong Hill Tracks of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. As researchers have detailed, the Government of India settled them in parts of the NEFA region between 1964 and 1968, largely without consulting local tribal communities. Overtime, resentment grew among indigenous groups such as the Adis, Mishmis, Kamtis, and Singphos, who fear the demographic and economic impact of the settlements. By the time Arunachal Pradesh attained Statehood in 1987, AAPSU had built a strong movement opposing any grant of refuge as citizenship to the two communities i.e. Chakma and Hajong.

From bandhs to 'Quit Arunachal' notices

The union has used a wide range of protest tactics over the decades, from district-level bandhs and rallies to legal interventions. One of the most dramatic episodes came in 1994, when, as the same study notes, the Chakma and Hajong Communities were served with "Quit Arunachal Pradesh" notices, the State. Around the same period, the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly itself passed resolutions in 1992 and 1994 demanding the immediate deportation of the refugees. The Central government took a different view. It maintained that the Chakmas and Hajong were eligible for citizenship under the Citizenship Act of 1955, settling up a long-running tension between New Delhi and the indigenous population that continues to this day.

The movement in recent years

The agitation is far from a historical footnote. In 2017, AAPSU called a twelve-hour, dawn-to-dusk shutdown against the center's move to grant limited citizenship to the refugees. The shutdown was backed by almost all tribal organizations and NGOs in the state. According to contemporary news reports, union leaders argued that since Delhi had sent the refugees to the state on a temporary basis, it was the Centre's duty to relocate them elsewhere in the country.

More recently, in Time 2025, the union organized a large “referendum rally” from Akashdeep complex to Raj Bhawan in Itanagar, themed “Save Arunachal from Illegal Immigrants”. Reports of the march noted the unions claim that the refugee population had unofficially crossed three lakh and its demand for a clean-up of the electoral rolls. Notably, while pressing for deportation, the union also urged the government to consider relocating the refugees to other parts of the Country if immediate deportation was not feasible.

Inner line Permit and the protection of identity

Beyond the refugee issue, the union has been a consistent advocate for the inner line permit (ILP), a travel document required for outsiders to enter Arunachal Pradesh. The system traces its origin to the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, and it remains as key tool for regulating the entry of non-locals into the state.

In 2024, AAPSU worked directly with the state government on reforming the system. As reported in coverage of a high-level meeting, the union presented a detailed survey recommending that ILP issuance be centralized under one department, and records be digitized, and that a dedicated department be created to oversee the permit system. This collaboration shows how the union has matured from a purely agitational body into one that engages constructively with policy.

A broadening agenda

While identity and demography remain central, AAPSU’s concerns have widened over the years. The union has linked up with the North East Students Organization (NESO) on regional issues, including protests against the citizenship (Amendment) act and demands to extend the ILP system across the wider region. It has also engaged with questions of governance, residential proof certificates, electoral roll verification, and the accountability of elected representatives. In 2022, for example, the union launched a series of phase-wise bandhs over the alleged issuance of residential proof certificates to refugees, demanding the cancellation of these documents and action against the officials involved. This evolution reflects a shift from narrow student grievances towards a comprehensive role in shaping the State’s social and political direction.

The Debate around its methods

The union prominence has not been without criticism. Some observers argue that its activities are at times politically motivated, given how closely it is interwound with the State’s electoral politics. The reliance on bandhs, which disrupt daily life and the economy, has also drawn scrutiny. At the same time, scholars writing on the refugee questions, including those who have themselves been associated with the anti-Chakma movement, have begun calling for democratic and human’s solutions that balance indigenous rights with the legal and humanitarian status of long-settled communities. This debate captures the Central tension of student led ethnic movements across the Northeast: how to protect a vulnerable indigenous identity without denying the rights of others, what do you think? Should a student union play the role of a *de facto* political opposition in a democracy, and where should the line be drawn between protecting indigenous identity and upholding the constitutional rights of long-settled refugee communities?

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