



Bonds of Brotherhood and Ancestral Unity: Emotional Integration with Respect to Refugees in Mizoram

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Abstract

The British colonial government's introduction of fixed political boundaries in the Mizoram region was a part of their administrative and governance strategy, and it often did not align with the natural cultural and historical affiliations of the Mizo ethnic groups. This historical context has had a lasting impact on the political and cultural landscape of the region.

After gaining independence, the new post-colonial Indian state inherited many of the administrative and political structures established by the British colonial rulers. This included the maintenance of the political boundaries that were imposed during the colonial period. The continuity of these colonial political boundaries had adverse impacts on the Mizo or Zo ethnic community. The colonial boundaries often cut across the traditional territories and homelands of the Mizo or Zo people. As a result, these communities found themselves divided by international boundaries, with some of their members residing in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Within the Indian state, the Mizo or Zo community also faced challenges due to inter-state boundaries. These boundaries could separate Mizo or Zo populations living in different Indian states, creating administrative and political divisions that did not necessarily align with the cultural and historical connections of the community.

Recent years have seen challenges to the rigid political boundaries that separate these communities. The inflow of Chin and Kuki refugees and displaced people from Myanmar and Manipur into Mizoram has contributed to the emergence of new patterns of cross-border ethnic solidarity and expressions of "brotherhood beyond borders."

This paper seeks to analyse the intricate socio-cultural interactions and convergences that have created trans-border spaces where cultural, familial, and social connections are actively nurtured and maintained. These spaces reflect the resilience of shared identity and community bonds that persist despite political divisions.

Keywords: Boundaries, refugees, brotherhood

Introduction

The issue of refugees remains a global concern in the 21st century, with conflicts, persecution, and forced displacement continuing to drive large refugee populations. The international community, through the UN and other organisations, continues to work on addressing the protection and assistance needs of refugees.

The term refugees has been debated over the years at all levels, and a firm definition was arrived at after years of redefining the concept by the United Nations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the primary UN agency responsible for protecting and assisting refugees. It uses the definition of a refugee established in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. According to the Convention and Protocol:

"A refugee is someone who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are

afforded certain rights and protections under international law".

Refugees in Mizoram

Colonial borders frequently straddled the ancestral lands and customs of the Mizo or Zo people. These groups were thus split apart by colonial borders, with some of their people living in Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar.

Located in north-east India, Mizoram is a landlocked state whose northern region borders Manipur, Assam, and Tripura, while its southern region shares 722 kilometres of international boundaries with Bangladesh and Myanmar. Around 35,000 refugees from Myanmar, more than 1,000 individuals from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, and more than 12,600 displaced individuals from Manipur currently reside in Mizoram.

In 1958, a severe famine struck the hilly regions of northeast India, northwest Myanmar, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The cause was cyclical bamboo flowering that coincided with a plague of crop-eating rodents. In 1966, Mizo dissatisfaction with the Indian government's response

prompted the Mizo National Front, which is currently in power in Mizoram, to declare independence. Many Mizo fled to Bangladesh and Myanmar as the Indian Air Force responded with airstrikes, the first occasion in its history that it has bombed its own population. Despite the 1986 peace agreement, there are still a lot of Mizo in northwest Myanmar, particularly in the Tarhan district of Kalay city in the Sagaing Region, which borders the Chin Hills. Thousands of Chin people started entering Mizoram in 1988 as a result of the Myanmar military's brutal suppression of anti-democracy demonstrations. The Chin Human Rights Organisation estimated that there were more than 50,000 Chin people living in Mizoram in 2004; the state administration counted more than 9,000 of them.

Approximately 35,000 citizens of Myanmar, including women and children, have sought refuge in Mizoram after the military overthrew the government in a coup in February 2021.

The state is also home to more than 1,000 tribal people who fled their villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts due to fighting between the Bangladesh Army and the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA), which started in November.

Mizoram's Response

The number of Zo-Kuki-Chin refugees in the state of Mizoram is remarkably high as compared to any other Indian state, notably the other six sister states in the North East. There are currently about 35,000 refugees living in Mizoram from coup-affected Myanmar, over 1,000 from the troubled Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, and over 12,600 internally displaced people from Manipur, which is heavily affected by ethnic violence.

The state of Mizoram has responded in a positive manner towards welcoming this large number of refugees who have fled their homes to find shelter in the state. The state administration has offered the immigrants shelter in Mizoram, where the main ethnic Mizo community connects strongly with the Chin and shares the same Christian faith. Meanwhile, Mizo volunteer organisations, churches, and local residents have spearheaded a grassroots humanitarian response.

Response by the Government

In Mizoram, nearly 8,100 refugee children from Bangladesh, Manipur, and Myanmar have registered in government schools according to the state's Education Minister, Mr. Lalthandama Ralte. 6,366 of the 8,119 pupils enrolled in Mizoram's schools are from Myanmar, 250 are from Bangladesh, and 1,503 are from Manipur. The minister also stated that the youngsters, who are members of the Zo tribe, are to receive an education from the Mizoram government and that they have received free textbooks and school uniforms in addition to midday meals, much like the pupils in the area.

With an astounding turnout of 97,350 participants, Mizoram recently had its greatest rally since its founding in 1986. This demonstrated the remarkable unity of the Mizoram people as they stood in solidarity with their fellow brethren in Manipur. The Manipur and Mizoram governments were requested by the Ministry of Home Affairs to gather biographical and biometric information on "illegal migrants" residing in their states, with a deadline of September for completion. Later, the deadline was extended by a year at the government of Manipur's request. The Centre insisted on the procedure, even though the Mizoram administration chose to pursue other

options and bring the issue up with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

Mizoram chief minister Zoramthanga, who is also the president of the ruling MNF, recently said that his government opposed the Centre's order to deport Myanmarese refugees and allowed them to take shelter in the state. He stated that only Rs 3 crore had been approved by the central government out of the Rs 10 crore that we had requested as humanitarian aid to help the refugees from Myanmar.

Mizoram's Chief Minister, Zoramthanga, expressed the state's unwavering commitment to supporting the Mizo ethnic tribes in Manipur. After meeting with 50 leaders of Mizo ethnic tribes from Manipur, he too (Singh V., 2023) ^[7] took to his official social media platforms to emphasise the importance of maintaining a strong sense of unity among the Zo kindred tribes, even when separated by political boundaries and different names. He urged that differences in political affiliations and nomenclatures should not jeopardise the deep-rooted brotherhood shared by these tribes living in various countries and states.

In response to Home Minister Amit Shah's statement in Parliament, where he suggested that Kukis from Myanmar played a role in the ethnic tension in Manipur, Rajya Sabha member K. Vanlalvena from Mizoram contradicted this claim. He mentioned that Mizoram had provided shelter to over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar since 2021 and emphasised that these refugees had not caused any issues or problems in the state. This statement underscores Mizoram's stance on providing refuge to those in need and their commitment to maintaining peace and harmony despite hosting a significant number of displaced individuals.

NGO's and Church

In an effort to provide for people's fundamental necessities, Mizo volunteer associations have collaborated with the state government, Christian churches, Chin non-profits, and diaspora organisations.

In Mizoram, a strong commitment to helping Chin refugees is evident among local leaders. Professor Malsawmliana, the assistant secretary of the Young Mizo Association, stressed their determination to ensure the safety and well-being of these refugees, emphasising the unity and willingness of the Mizo people to support humanitarian causes.

Ricky Lalbiakmawia, the spokesperson for Mizo Zirlai Pawl, underlined the urgency of the situation, with Chin people fleeing life-threatening circumstances. Despite opposition from the Indian government, he expressed their belief that, as Christians, humanitarians, and fellow brothers and sisters, it is their moral duty to provide refuge and assistance to those in desperate need.

Charity concerts with Mizo and Chin singers have also generated donations.

Response towards other Refugees

While the Chin and Bawm refugees have found some degree of welcome in Mizoram, the state's receptivity varies for other groups. In 2019, numerous Mizo people took to the streets to protest against an amendment to India's Citizenship Act, which the chief minister cautioned could potentially lead to an influx of illegal immigrants into the state.

This amendment aimed to provide a pathway to citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. However, it faced criticism from human rights organisations for excluding Muslims. Furthermore, the Mizo, like several ethnic groups in

India's northeastern states, expressed concerns that this amendment could jeopardise the preservation of their indigenous identities.

Problems and Concerns

With the influx of unprecedented refugees in Mizoram over the years, there is no doubt that there will be problems and challenges for the state and its people. Some of the challenges faced by Mizoram may be briefly discussed in the following points:

- The internal security situation in Mizoram has been worse over the past few years due to the influx of refugees from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and now Manipur. The state administration and security forces have supplied different figures for the number of individuals from Myanmar, but over 8,000 people are from Manipur and over 900 are from Bangladesh, where officials claimed the number was expected to rise even more. According to local officials, the inflow from Bangladesh is especially concerning since there is a chance that guns and drugs will be smuggled in, creating a new front for security authorities to handle. ^[5]
- The state of Mizoram's economy is still in its infancy, with industries and entrepreneurs just beginning to make a name for themselves. This presents a number of financial issues with central funding being the only source of funding for the state economy.
- There is lack of resources to shelter refugees: The internally displaced people (IDPs) are forced to live in the transit camp because there are no practical places for them to stay.
- Although host communities in Mizoram continue to accept and support Chin people in an open manner, the local response is finding it difficult to meet the continuous requirements of the humanitarian community. Due to a lack of employment possibilities, the majority of Chin people in the state rely on financial support from Chin diaspora groups and relatives who live outside.
- Like in other states, Mizoram's lawmakers have long been beset by accusations of corruption and political favouritism, which has made the situation worse.

United Nations on Refugees

As far as protecting refugees and internally displaced people is concerned, the UN Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, is in charge. Originally created to assist Europeans who had been displaced by World War II, UNHCR, often known as the UN Refugee Agency, is the UN organisation that assists refugees. On December 14, 1950, the UN General Assembly formed UNHCR, giving it a three-year mandate to finish its duties before dissolving. The United Nations Convention pertaining to the Status of Refugees was ratified on July 28, the following year, providing the legal framework for aiding refugees and serving as the fundamental law governing UNHCR's operations. Thus, UNHCR continued to assist refugees after its three-year term instead of ceasing operations.

Refugees in the Context of UN's SDGs

Over 100 million people have been displaced from their homes due to conflict and persecution. One cannot accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals without considering the rights and needs of refugees, internally displaced people, and stateless people in a world increasingly defined by poverty, conflict, and climate change.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a top priority for the UNHCR. The UN created the 2030 Agenda, which was formally introduced on September 25, 2015, during the UN General Assembly and contains the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda lays forth a 15-year action plan to end poverty, save the environment, and enhance the opportunities and quality of life for all people worldwide.

The 2030 Agenda's two guiding principles are to ensure human rights for all and to ensure that the plan of action reaches everyone ("leave no one behind"). This means that the world community has committed to working together to identify and assist the most vulnerable people. This is in line with UNHCR's responsibility to safeguard refugees and the displaced, who are among the world's most vulnerable people. Mizoram has performed remarkably well as per the latest SDG-India index ranking postulated by NITI Aayog although there are certain areas that need to be improved. To effectively accomplish the SDGs, it is critical to improve the condition of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless people and to adopt long-term solutions, particularly in conflict-affected areas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the emotional unity in Mizoram is a remarkable phenomenon that stems from a combination of several factors. The central role played by social media, along with the nurturing influence of the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA), has been pivotal in fostering a profound sense of unity and solidarity among the people. This unity is further reinforced by the shared Mizo language and religion, creating a strong sense of camaraderie that binds the population together. Additionally, the youthful demography of Mizoram's population contributes to the development of a robust sense of unity.

The decision to offer shelter to refugees from Bangladesh, Manipur and Myanmar stands as a testament to Mizoram's compassionate spirit and its willingness to assist those in need. However, it is essential to acknowledge the financial constraints that the state may face in sustaining these efforts over the long term. While emotional unity remains a driving force in Mizoram, pragmatic considerations may necessitate a reevaluation of the state's ability to continue offering shelter and support to these refugees.

In this dynamic context, the people of Mizoram, their apex NGO, and the state government will continue to grapple with the challenging task of balancing their compassionate ideals with the practical demands of resource allocation. Nonetheless, the unity and solidarity witnessed in Mizoram are a source of inspiration, demonstrating the power of a community coming together to extend a helping hand in times of crisis. From a humanitarian perspective, especially one where we share common ancestry and history, the bonds run deep, and therefore one cannot deny providing shelter and resources to a brother in a time of crisis.

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