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Displaced Brus from Mizoram in Tripura: Time for Resolution

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About The Author



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Abstract

History has been witness to the conflict-induced internal displacement of people in different states of Northeast India from time to time. While the issues of such displacement have been resolved in most of the North-eastern States, the displacement of Brus from Mizoram has remained unresolved even over past two decades. Over 35,000 Brus have been living in six makeshift relief camps in North Tripura's Kanchanpur, areas adjoining Mizoram under inhuman conditions since October 1997. They had to flee from their homes due to ethnic violence in Mizoram. Ever since, they have been confined to their relief camps living on rations doled out by the state, without proper education and health facilities. Called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), some of the young Brus from these camps have joined militant outfits out of desperation. There have been several rounds of talks among the stakeholders without any conclusive and time-bound resolutions. This paper is an attempt towards understanding the genesis of this problem and to recommend a few policy interventions.

Introduction

An internally displaced person (IDP) is someone who is forced to flee his/her home but who remains within their country's borders. There are mainly three reasons for displacement, i.e., conflict-induced, development-induced and natural disasters. The Northeast region of India comprises of eight states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim. It is considered one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world and is inhabited by more than 200 tribes¹. Here, in Northeast India, the conflict involving different ethnic groups has been taking place over the decades, these are mainly over land rights, political autonomy, demand for a separate state and secession. This has resulted in the internal displacement of persons in most of these states. Assam had the highest conflict-induced IDP in the world during the year 2014, according to a report prepared by Asian Centre for Human Rights in 2015. The report was prepared following field visits to the affected areas and claimed that there were over 3,00,000 IDPs in Assam, which was the highest in the world during 2014².

Most of the displacements which have occurred in these Northeast States of India, have been within the states and resolved. The displacement of 'Brus' from Mizoram is peculiar in many accounts, i.e., the *Brus* were displaced to another state, i.e., from Mizoram to Tripura in 1997, and the displacement has remained unresolved even after two decades. This paper seeks to highlight the genesis of the *Bru* issues, understand the conflicting views and areas of convergence among the stakeholders, and recommend policy interventions for a peaceful and abiding resolution for this long and complex problem.

¹ Internally Displaced person in India, available at http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105403/10/10_chapter%2004.pdf , accessed on August 31, 2017.

² Ketto, "Assam has world's highest number of people internally displaced by conflict", The Hindus, January 2, 2015, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-has-worlds-highest-number-of-people-internally-displaced-by-conflict/article6748443.ece> accessed on August 31, 2017.

Over 35,000 'Reang' tribals, who call themselves *Brus* have been living in six makeshift relief camps in North Tripura's Kanchanpur areas adjoining Mizoram under inhuman conditions since October 1997. They had to flee from their homes due to the ethnic violence in Mizoram. Ever since, they have been confined to their relief camps living on rations doled out by the state, without proper education and health facilities. They do not have voting rights in Tripura and are not being issued birth or death certificates. They are neither entitled to work under the MGNREGA³ Nor are they given farmland to earn a livelihood and are referred to as IDPs. The Mizoram *Bru* Displaced Peoples Forum (MBDPF), an organization of the displaced *Brus*, has expressed the willingness of the tribe to return to their homes in Mizoram if their demands, including security and rehabilitation in 16 cluster villages, were met. The Mizoram Government also remains ambiguous on the MBDPFs demand, which includes the free supply of food grain for two years along with the allocation of land to them, which has been opposed vehemently by the Mizo organizations. Some of the young *Brus* from these camps have joined militant outfits out of desperation. Contentious issues like a compensation package, security, identification, repatriation and rehabilitation in cluster villages need to be deliberated upon by all parties to find a mutually acceptable, pragmatic and amicable solution.

Objectives, Methodology and Scope

The main focus of the study is to understand the genesis of ethnic conflict leading to the displacement of *Brus* from Mizoram. The specific objectives of the study are to:-

- a. To understand the genesis of *Bru* displacement from Mizoram;
- b. To highlight the conditions of the displaced camps in Tripura and conflicting stance of the stake holders;

³ "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act" (or, MGNREGA), is an Indian labour law and social security measure that aims to guarantee the 'right to work.' It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage-employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

- c. To highlight the important issues concerning the Bru problem and suggest a way forward.

To ascertain the veracity of the claims of stakeholders, the study is primarily based on a field survey conducted in Tripura and Mizoram. Interaction with the stakeholders was carried out to understand their views.

Background



Map of Northeast of India

Northeast India comprises of Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Tripura. It is considered as one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world, a land inhabited by more than 200 tribes. The North-East Indian tribes have originated from the ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burmese, proto-Australoids, some groups of Indo-Mongoloids and have cultural linkages with their neighbouring countries⁴. Reang or Riang or *Bru* are one of the 21 scheduled tribes residing in parts of the Indian states of Tripura, Mizoram,

⁴ Tribes of Northeast India, Greener Pasture, available at <http://www.thegreenerpastures.com/tribes-of-north-east-india#.WMzs6lWGPIU>, Accessed on March 15, 2017.

Assam, Manipur. *Brus* also happens to be the second largest tribal group of Mizoram.



Mizoram - Map

Mizoram - Map showing
Mamit District

Brus reside in the western part of Mamit District of Mizoram but originally came from Shan state in Burma some centuries ago and moved to the Arakan Hills. From there, they moved to Maiantlang a hilly place in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) and then migrated to Tripura sometime in the 14th century. However, their migration from Tripura to Mizoram took place sometime in the 19th century. Their numbers in Mizoram increased substantially due to their

uprising against the then King of Tripura Ratan Manikya in the year 1942. By the year 1986, their population in Mizoram as compiled by the church organizations and other agencies was 23,534. The latest record of the *Brus* in Mizoram as published by the Baptist Today stated that there are 58,269 *Brus* in 80 villages of Mizoram. This population comprises of 11,350 families of the *Brus*. The *Brus* are principally animists, and their ceremonial and ritual practices are more or less in sync with those of the Hindus⁵.

Genesis of Ethnic Conflict

The roots of the conflict can be traced to 1994 when a political party called the Bru National Union (BNU) was formed to promote the tribe's welfare. In September 1997, at a conference in Saipuilui village in Mamit district, the BNU adopted a resolution to demand an Autonomous District Council (ADC)⁶ for the *Brus* in the western belt of Mizoram. The BNU anchored its demands in the presence of a majority of *Brus* in the sub-division and declared that their political,

⁵ Bru Insurgency in the Post 1987 Period, available at hodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/1202/12/13_chapter%206.pdf, Accessed on March 15, 2017.

⁶ There were several autonomous administrative divisions in Northeast India to which the central government has given varying degrees of autonomy within the state legislature. The establishment and functions of most of these autonomous councils are based on the sixth schedule to the Constitution of India.

economic and cultural rights among others were not justifiably protected under the prevailing political arrangement. The logic for the establishment of the ADC for *Brus* was that the other tribes in the state, including the Hmars, the Lai, and the Chakmas have their own ADCs. According to the Bru leaders, their cultural practices were obstructed, and they were forced to adopt Mizo language as the medium of instruction in schools/daily life and the names of about 20,000 Reangs were deleted from electoral rolls⁷. This demand of the *Brus* for their own ADC went unheeded.

The Mizos say the Bru exodus of 1997 was due to a circular signed by Bruno Msha, who was then the Bru Student Union President and is currently the General Secretary of the Mizoram Bru Displaced Peoples Forum (MBDPF). The circular asked all Bru headmen to evacuate their villages and leave Mizoram because of a possible clash between Bru militants and Mizoram security personnel. Msha, who denies signing any such document, claims the story is a Mizo attempt to blame Bru militants for the exodus⁸. The immediate cause of the ethnic conflict and exodus was also said to be the gunning down of a game watcher of the State Environment and Forests Department near Persang hamlet inside the Dampa Tiger Reserve along the Tripura-Bangladesh border by the suspected Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) on October 21, 1997⁹.

On October 23, 1997, Mizo youth from different villages congregated at Tuipuibari and passed a strong Resolution that all the illegal settlers of Chakmas and *Brus* should leave Mizoram within a week in general and those within Tuipuibari area within twenty-four hours in particular. The Resolution of Tuipuibari was followed by the burning of Bru houses. It was said that many *Brus* also set ablaze their own houses when they were about to leave Mizoram in the

7. Ali, Syed Sajjad, "The Reang Refugees," *Front Line*, Vol. 15, No. 15 July 18- 31, 1998. Available at www.frontlineonnet.com, Accessed on March 20, 2017.

⁸ Furquan Ameen Siddiqui, "Pushed to the boundaries: The *Brus* of Mizoram," *Hindustan times*, Feb 23, 2014, available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/pushed-to-the-boundaries-the-Brus-of-mizoram/story-I1QjQWITM39I7O7GuHOEqM.html>, Accessed on March 20, 2017.

⁹ "MHA plans Bru refugee repatriation from Tripura in Nov" *United News of India*, Aug 5, 2016, available at <http://www.uniindia.com/mha-plans-bru-refugee-repatriation-from-tripura-in-nov/other/news/579836.html>, Accessed on March 20, 2017.

expectation of compensation. The actual number of Bru immigrants is not clear. The Tripura government claimed that the number of migrants count was as high as 12,000 people¹⁰.

Another displacement of Bru took place in November 2009. The direct cause of the attacks on the *Brus* in Mizoram was the murder of a Mizo youth on the morning of 13th November 2009 in Mamit district of Mizoram. It was alleged that a letter purportedly written by the 'Bru Revolutionary Union' (BRU) was recovered from the dead body. From 13th to 17th November 2009, about 500 houses in 11 villages belonging to the Bru minorities were burnt down by persons whom the officials of the State government of Mizoram termed as "miscreants" and "anti-social elements." About 5,000 *Brus* were displaced, and over 2,000 fled their villages and took shelter at Cheragi Bazar in Karimganj district of Assam, Chhimluang, Kanthol Bari and Lungthir villages in Tripura near the Mizoram border, and at Zampui Hills under Kanchanpur Sub-Division in North Tripura. It is clear that unilateral declaration of the repatriation of the *Brus* from on 16th November 2009 by the government of Mizoram without addressing the fundamental differences had created deep resentment among both the communities. Interviews with the officials of Mizoram government and community organizations of the Mizos and *Brus* indicate that even the murder of Zazokima was used to stall the repatriation process scheduled from 16th November 2009¹¹.

State of Displaced Camps

The town of Kanchanpur in northern Tripura lies about 45 km from the Mizoram border. 17 years ago, thousands of *Brus* fleeing attacks from Mizos took refuge here. Many crossed the border on foot. The displaced *Brus* put up temporary shelters on the



Location of Relief Camps

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The *Brus* of Mizoram: Unequal, Unwanted and Unwelcome A fact-finding report on Exodus of the *Brus* in November 2009", Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2010, available at <https://www.achrweb.org/reports/india/BRUS2010.pdf>, Accessed on March 20, 2017.

lower tracts of the Jampui hills that separate Tripura from Mizoram and Bangladesh. According to the then Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Badal Choudhury, there are 5,286 tribal families comprising of 31,223 men, women and children sheltered in six camps in Kanchanpur and Panisagar sub-divisions in the North Tripura district adjoining Mizoram¹².

A report by the Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network says that the ration quota is so inadequate that *Brus* do not report deaths as it means a further reduction of the rations. The abject conditions and the lack of employment and education have made the camps a good recruiting ground for militants. Many young *Brus* have missed out on education and cannot even get job cards under central Government schemes¹³. Adults get a cash dole of Rs. 150 per month and 600 gm of rice per day while minors get half that amount. This is much less than what other internally displaced groups like the Kashmiri Pandits and even the Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu in the past have received. Leaders of the MBDPF maintain that unless compensation is increased, no one will go back. Both the home department and Mizo organizations allege that any attempts at repatriation are hampered by the fake reporting of untoward incidents. The Bru side alleges that it is a conspiracy by the Mizos who don't want the *Brus* to return to Mizoram.

The Rise of Bru Militant Groups



Bru Militants

The insurgency of the Mizo National Front had ended with the signing of a Peace Accord on the 30th June, 1986. Mizoram has always been an island of peace in North East India. However, the establishment of the BNLFF led to growing

¹² "Mizoram to take back its tribal citizens from Tripura after 18 yrs", The Shillong Times, May 28, 2015, available at <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2015/05/18/mizoram-to-take-back-its-tribal-citizens-from-tripura-after-18-yrs/>, Accessed on March 20, 2017.

¹³ "Bru Tribe: Refugee in Their Own Country," Vidur, March 07, 2014, available at <https://mevidur.wordpress.com/2014/03/07/bru-tribe-refugee-in-their-own-country/> Accessed on April 20, 2017.

militancy in the post-1997 period. The BNLF, an armed outfit of the *Brus*, was formed in 1996, its objectives being the protection of rights, dignity and the religious identity of *Brus*, which it identifies with Hinduism. Initially, it had demanded a separate Bru homeland in Mizoram. Subsequently, it toned down its demand for an Autonomous District Council and was willing to negotiate for something less, like a Regional Council. Besides this, it has also taken up with the Mizoram government the issue of repatriation¹⁴ of Bru refugees who had been displaced during the October 1997 ethnic clashes.

BNLF had both inter-organizational as well as external linkages, which it used to procure arms and train cadres. Among its external linkages, Bangladesh was prominent wherein its cadres reportedly ran camps and used Bangladeshi soil, particularly the jungles along the international border with India, where they had hideouts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The BNLF had very close links with the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) and had even signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which stipulated, among other things, that the NLFT would provide arms, ammunition and every logistic support to the BNLF. Thus, the NLFT helped BNLF grow and gain in strength. However, this linkage went sour because of the BNLFs alleged pro-India tilt and as a result, the BNLF came into contact with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM), which obliged the outfit by providing an unspecified number of AK 47 rifles and ammunition. Besides, the BNLF has also maintained contacts with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). This had also been revealed by then Chief Minister of Mizoram, Lalthanhawla, in 1998¹⁵.

Since September 7, 2001, the BNLF has been engaged in a series of negotiations with the Mizoram Government. However, a solution has not been arrived at. The points of difference between the two sides relate to determining the number of refugees who would be repatriated from Tripura and the structure

¹⁴ Repatriation is a process in which people return back to their place of origin or citizenship. This process includes steps of returning the refugees or military personnel to their place of origin.

¹⁵ Bru National Liberation Front, SATP, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/terrorist_outfits/BNLF.htm Accessed on April 20, 2017.

and nature of the political arrangement that should be put in place after the refugees are rehabilitated. Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM) is a breakaway faction of BNLF formed in 2003. On May 26, Mizoram Government has endorsed the draft proposals for laying down of arms by the BNLF cadres and repatriation of Bru refugees lodged in the Tripura relief camps¹⁶. In the eight years of its existence, the BNLF has been involved in extortion, abduction of several Mizos and killing of security personnel

In April 2005, the Mizoram government and the militant group BNLF had signed an agreement after 13 rounds of talks to solve the decade-old ethnic crisis, leading to the surrender of about 1,040 militants of the BNLF and BLFM. However, BLFM and BNLF militants did not surrender at that time and continued their violent activities¹⁷. In the MoU, there was no time frame for repatriation of Bru IDPs but the MoU provides for the identification of genuine *Brus*.¹⁸ The MoU, however, did not address the problems of displaced *Brus* who constitute the overwhelming majority of the *Brus* of Mizoram. It only attempted to rehabilitate the BNLF cadres.

Identification and Repatriation Process

The identification process conducted in the relief camps at Tripura was completed during the period November 2nd to 23rd, 2016. The officials identified 32,755 *Brus* belonging to 5,413 families as *bona fide* residents of Mizoram, while the state government had earlier proposed to repatriate around 21,000 people belonging to 3,445 families. Meanwhile, the proposed physical repatriation of Bru families from the six relief camps in Tripura scheduled to commence from November 30th, 2016 failed to take off due to several reasons, including the absence of a formal decision from the Ministry of Home Affairs to

¹⁶ Bru National Liberation Front, SATP, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/terrorist_outfits/BNLF.htm, Accessed on April 20, 2017.

¹⁷ BLFM militants surrender, Meghalaya Times, Sept. 09, available at <http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/archives-old/57-state/state/13399-blfm-militants-surrender>, Accessed on April 20, 2017.

¹⁸ ACHR Review, "Despair in Bru IDP Camps in India," 11 Jan. 2006, Available at www.achrweb.org, Accessed on 09/07/2009. Accessed on April 20, 2017.

fix the rate of enhancement of the rehabilitation package for the resettled *Brus*. MBDPF, the apex body of Bru refugees, lodged in six relief camps in Tripura, has revived their demand for a separate autonomous district council by filing a writ petition in the Supreme Court to this effect. The writ petition, which called for the creation of a separate autonomous district council for the Bru community, is a reversal of the letter written by the forum on May 4, 2016, to the Ministry of Home Affairs, in which it said that it was no longer pressing for autonomy for the community. The MBDPF, in the petition, appealed to the apex court to direct the Government of India to establish an Autonomous District Council for the Bru community in accordance with Article 244 (2) of the Constitution read together with the Sixth Schedule. State Home Department officials expressed concern, saying the petition, if admitted by the apex court, might again derail the proposed repatriation process¹⁹. According to the Mizoram voters' lists those who were yet to be repatriated were 3,455 families - 2,594 families from Mamit district on the Mizoram-Tripura border, 628 families from Kolasib district on the Mizoram-Assam border and 233 families from Lunglei district on the Mizoram-Bangladesh border²⁰.

¹⁹ "Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum revive demand for autonomous district council" The Indian Express, December 2, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/bru-tribal-refugee-camps-revive-demand-for-separate-autonomous-district-council-4407475/>, Accessed on April 27, 2017

²⁰ "Bru refugees to be removed from Mizoram voter list" Jagran Post, 03 Feb 2015, available at <http://post.jagran.com/bru-refugees-to-be-removed-from-mizoram-voter-list-1422946045>, Accessed on May 10, 2017

Contentious Issues and Impediments

Failed attempts of Repatriations

The surrender of BNLF/BLFM cadres to the Government of Mizoram between April 2005 and March 2006 paved the way for the repatriation of Bru refugees from Tripura to Mizoram. The first effort to repatriate the *Brus* on November 16, 2009, was not only hampered by the killing of a Mizo youth, Zartzokima of Bungthum village on the Mizoram–Tripura border by Bru militants on November 13, 2009, but it also triggered another exodus of an additional 5,000 *Brus*. After the derailment of the first repatriation attempt, the Mizoram government prepared Road Map II to rehabilitate the fresh migrants after the 2009 incident. The repatriation and resettlement process finally started in November 2010. Since then, six rounds of repatriation have taken place with little success.

The last attempt to repatriate the *Brus* between June 2nd, 2015, and September 4th, 2015, also failed miserably, as only one Bru woman named Porati, a native of Zawlnuam village in Mizoram, opted to be repatriated to Mizoram from the relief camps of Tripura.²¹ The next round of repatriation efforts were scheduled in March-April 2017 as the state government had made arrangements for implementation of the road map for the repatriation of *Brus* from Tripura, but this did not take place as planned.

Registration of Voters

The Election Commission of India instructed Mizoram Election Department to conduct a special summary revision of voter's lists in the six relief camps in Tripura in September 2015. As per the instructions, those descendants of Bru refugees



Registration of Bru Voters

²¹Deepak Kumar Nayak, "Brus: Still Delayed Homecoming", India Blooms, available at http://indiablooms.com/ibns_new/news-details/0/24555/Brus-still-delayed-homecoming.html, Accessed on May 30, 2017

enrolled in Mizoram's voter lists in 1995 who would attain the age of 18 on January 1, 2016 would be registered by the election officials while holding hearings in the relief camps. This was opposed to by major civil societies and student bodies saying that those staying outside the state should come to Mizoram to have their names enrolled in the electoral rolls. The 'General Secretary' of the Central Committee of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), Vanlalruata said that even Mizos from Mizoram who were working outside, unless they came to the state during the elections, were not allowed to exercise franchise and there was no ground to grant special allowance to the *Brus* staying in six relief camps in Tripura to exercise their franchise by postal ballots.

The Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) or the Mizo Students Federation also had objection to the instructions of the Election Commission saying that those *Brus* remaining in the Tripura relief camps were, in fact, those who refused to return despite several attempts by the Centre and the state governments and also despite the warm welcome from Mizo people. Describing the decision of the Election Commission as giving undue favor to a particular community, the MZP, in a statement issued here on 15th September 2015, stated that the students would oppose any move to implement the instruction of the Election Commission²². There is also a view that, the names of those who still refuse to be repatriated should be deleted from the Mizoram voters' list. These according to the Mizoram voters' list, are those who were yet to be repatriated, i.e., 3,455 - 2,594 families from the Mizoram-Tripura border Mamit district, 628 families from Kolasib district on the Mizoram-Assam border and 233 families from Lunglei district on the Mizoram-Bangladesh border²³.

²² Election Commission directive on *Brus* in camps spark protest in Mizoram, News 18, September 15, 2015, available at <http://www.news18.com/news/india/election-commission-directive-on-Brus-in-camps-spark-protest-in-mizoram-1109938.html>, Accessed on May 30, 2017.

²³ "Bru refugees to be removed from Mizoram voter list" Jagran Post, 03 Feb 2015, available at <http://post.jagran.com/bru-refugees-to-be-removed-from-mizoram-voter-list-1422946045>. Accessed on May 30, 2017.

Changing Demands of MBDPF

In 2014, Bruno Msha, General Secretary of MBDPF submitted a 13-point charter of demands to a Ministry of Home Affairs and a representative memorandum containing 10 points. These included the demand of status like Kashmiri Pandits or Tamil refugees, setting up of cluster of villages or at least grouping of 500 families in a cluster with all modern amenities for education, health care and livelihood, security by central paramilitary forces, allotment of lands to all the repatriated tribals, as also ensuring better security and sanitation, health and education as available to the tribals in Mizoram²⁴. On December 1, 2015, Bruno Msha alleged that the Mizoram Government was yet to accept their demands mainly financial support of INR 2,00,000 for each tribal family, free rations for four years, contiguous resettlement of the returnees with adequate security, land titles for the tribal families who are yet to be allotted plots to build houses, and financial aid to purchase about 2.5 acres of farm land for each family²⁵.

During the third meeting of Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) held in New Delhi on November 24th 2016, attended by Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Mizoram, Government of Tripura, MBDPF, Bru Coordination Committee (BCC) and Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA), the MBDPF leaders placed their 8 point charter of demands, these were allotment of 5 hectares of land and a government job to each family, revision of cash assistance of Rs. 80,000, grant of Rs. 5,000 per month for 2 years per family, identification of more than 1000 families, liberty to choose villages for their resettlement, the creation of skill development training for the Bru youths and construction of houses before repatriation begins. Officials of the Mizoram Government ruled out the allotment of 5 hectares of land to each family. It rather agreed to arrange house under their village councils. Freedom to choose the selected villages was

²⁴ Yashswani Sehrawat, "Bru Demand Status Like Kashmiri Pandits or Tamil Refugees" *The Citizen*, August 28, 2014, available at <http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/NewsDetail/index/3/309/Bru-Demand-Status-Like-Kashmiri-Pandits-or-Tamil-Refugees>, Accessed on May 25, 2017.

²⁵ Mizoram Assessment 2016, SATP, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/index.html>, Accessed on May 30, 2017.

rejected and the identification of more than 1000 families was under strict scrutiny. It was a positive development. However, a government job to each family and a grant of Rs. 5,000 per month for 2 years were principally accepted by the MHA. It was also agreed that the birth certificates of those born after 1997 and the population of refugees would be updated²⁶. Meanwhile, the MBDPF has filed a petition in the Supreme Court making several demands while the Bru Displaced Welfare Organisation (BDWO) sent a letter recently to Union Home Minister, saying that no Bru would return to Mizoram until and unless all their demands were conceded to by the Centre and the Mizoram government.

Role of Mizo NGOs and Mizoram Government

Major Non-Government Organizations (NGO) in Mizoram like the Central Committee of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), the Mizoram Upa Pawl (MUP) or Elders Association, the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) or womens federation, and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) or students' federations have been playing an active part in the Bru Refugee issue and are important stakeholders in the state. Due to the opposition from the influential Mizo NGOs including the YMA and the MZP, the government of Mizoram refused to repatriate the *Brus* from the relief camps in Tripura on the ground that not all of them were genuine residents of Mizoram. On 26th April 2005, a MoU was signed between the Government of Mizoram and the BNLFF, an insurgent group. In the MoU, the state of Mizoram admitted its obligation to repatriate and resettle the *Brus* but again questioned the "genuineness" and/or bona fide inhabitant of the *Brus*. The MoU was signed without the consent of *Brus* living in the relief camps²⁷.

Religious Angle

The Bharatiya Janata Party had contended in 1999 that the *Brus* were being persecuted because a large number of them were Hindus. This claim was refuted

²⁶ "Ice seems to melt over Brue Repatriation "The Senital, December 02, 2016, available at <http://www.sentinelassam.com/cachar/story.php?sec=2&subsec=12&id=290143&dtP=2016-12-03&ppr=1>, Accessed on May 25, 2017.

²⁷ India Human Rights Report 2008, Mizoram, available at <https://www.achrweb.org/reports/india/AR08/mizoram.html>, Accessed on May 30, 2017.

by the then Chief Minister of Mizoram Lal Thanhawla who maintained that the *Brus* have traditionally followed an animistic religion, worshipping rivers and trees. Over the years, a large number of them have converted to Christianity²⁸. However, on January 5th 2017, a Tripura based organization going by the name of Bru Hindu Joint Coordination Committee wrote to the Union Home Ministry asking it to "safeguard the Hindu religion or indigenous faith of the Bru community in Mizoram. The letter stated that many people who had converted to Christianity had "returned back to their original religion" in the camps in Tripura. In the camps in Tripura. In the letter, they apprised that the religion of Bru is Hindu and they claimed that some of the Bru people of Mizoram had converted to Christianity willingly and some forcefully. They intimated that Bru people are unable to perform puja freely inside Mizoram due to restrictions and obstructions by the Mizo people. They also mentioned that the repatriation plans prepared by the Government of Mizoram were unsafe and insecure for the Bru Hindus.

Demand of Tripura Government

The Tripura Government alleged that there were several initiatives to repatriate the refugees from Tripura to Mizoram but those had failed due to lack of proper political will of both the central and the state governments. Only sporadic repatriation of about 5,000 Reang tribal refugees, locally called Bru, have returned to their homes in the past three-and-a-half years. The Tripura government alleges that it has been repeatedly asking the central government to repatriate the refugees to Mizoram, but the response especially, from Mizoram is very poor²⁹. Amidst all this, the conditions of these refugees remain worrisome. Tripura Government needs to help in improving conditions of the Bru refugees in the relief camps till repatriation take place.

²⁸ Syed Sajjad Ali, "Return of Bru tribal refugees to Mizoram still uncertain" *The Hindu*, October 31, 2015, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/return-of-bru-tribal-refugees-to-mizoram-still-uncertain/article7824806.ece>, accessed on August 31, 2017 .

²⁹ "Tripura seeks Centre's intervention to repatriate Bru refugees to Mizoram" *Shillong Times*, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/08/03/tripura-seeks-centres-intervention-to-repatriate-bru-refugees-to-mizoram/>, Accessed on May 25, 2017.

Resolution Mechanism and Recommendations

Proactive Role of Joint Monitoring Group

The JMG, headed by the Union Home Secretary was formed to resolve the issue of repatriation of the Bru refugees in 2016. The meeting is generally chaired by a Special Secretary (Internal Secretary) in the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and attended by officials of Mizoram and Tripura government, representatives of MBDPF, the BCC) and the central committee of the YMA, On February 13, 2017, the meeting of the JMG was "inconclusive" as the MBDPF urged that all their demands be fulfilled by the Centre and Mizoram Government before repatriation.³⁰ JMG is an important platform wherein all stakeholders participate and discuss the issue of repatriation of Bru refugees. So far, meetings held by the JMG have had only partial success. It should continue its efforts for a time bound solution and firm implementation. The Supreme Court Bench also directed that the meetings by the JMG on the issue of rehabilitation and repatriation of Bru refugees should continue.³¹

Monitoring of the Supreme Court Directions

The Supreme Court of India has been actively monitoring the issue of Bru. While hearing a plea seeking rehabilitation and repatriation of Bru refugees in March 2017, the apex court asked that the Bru refugees who are lodged in relief camps located in Tripura should be allowed to return to their native state voluntarily. A bench directed that such Bru families that were displaced to Tripura and desiring to return to Mizoram voluntarily, shall be allowed to do so on their own will and such of the families, which want such rehabilitation, will be provided the necessary pre-requisites as has been given to others who have been rehabilitated". Earlier, the Supreme Court in February 2017 had directed to

³⁰'Meeting of JMG to discuss Bru repatriation inconclusive', Outlook, 13 February 2017, available at <http://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/meeting-of-jmg-to-discuss-bru-repatriation-inconclusive/987443>, Accessed on May 15, 2017.

maintain status quo on shifting back the displaced families to Mizoram³². Regular monitoring and directions by the apex court of India will certainly give the necessary impetus for repatriation of the *Brus* back to Mizoram.

Flexible and Accommodative Approach of the Stakeholders

As per the schedule, repatriation of Bru refugees was supposed to begin from December 2016, but it was later deferred and is yet to commence. It is only due to the inflexibility shown by the stakeholders, that the process of repatriation had been delayed. The stakeholders in the *Brus* problem are the Government of India, State Government of Mizoram and Tripura, leaders of Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum and Mizo NGOs.³³ The changing demands of the MBDPF and a rigid stance by the Mizoram Government and Mizo NGOs have resulted in a deadlock. It is important that all the stake holders exhibit flexible, accommodative and positive approach for the resolution of this long outstanding issue. A strong will of the Centre and the State Government of Mizoram and Tripura is essential to find an amicable solution.

Improvement of Living Conditions of *Brus* in Relief Camps

The conditions of the *Brus* at relief camps continues to be pathetic even after twenty years which is termed as 'ridiculous' by the Supreme Court of India. Terming the conditions of the *Brus* as disturbing, a bench of the Apex Court had said, "*Is this how you treat the people of this country. The government cannot say 'I don't want to improve the condition in the camp, because, if it is done, they will never leave'. Can you say, tomorrow I am going to throw them in gutter?*"³⁴. It is essential that Centre and State Governments take genuine steps to improve their living conditions. The residents of these camps should be entitled to work under

³² "SC for voluntary shifting of Bru refugees to Mizoram" India today, March 28, 2017, available at ndiatoday.intoday.in/story/sc-for-voluntary-shifting-of-bru-refugees-to-mizoram/1/915015.html, Accessed on May 25, 2017.

³³ Bru refugee return still uncertain "Tripurainfo, Feb 15, 2017, available at <http://tripurainfo.com/pgDetailsNews.aspx?WhatId=24882>, Accessed on May 25, 2017.

³⁴ Soibam Rocky Singh, "SC criticises Government sops for Mizoram's Bru refugees" Hindustan Times, available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/sc-criticises-Government-sops-for-mizoram-s-bru-refugees/story-aCqVt3kT0AvavvvCmZh4cM.html> accessed on July 18, 2017.

the MGNREGA and given farmland to earn a livelihood. Government of India should make concerted efforts in close coordination with the state governments of both Mizoram and Tripura to improve the health, hygiene and living conditions of the *Brus* till they are repatriated to Mizoram. Pending their repatriation, *Brus'* status in the relief camps in Tripura should be akin to other internally displaced people like the Kashmiri Pandits and even the Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu in the past. Some other measures like census to ascertain the exact numbers of *Brus* in these camps and to update the electoral list concurrently; provisioning of habitat for the *Brus* with proper sanitisation, food and shelter; opening of Bank accounts to ensure relief fund reaches them directly not through local bodies and providing them guaranteed work through, MNREGA in Tripura till issue is resolved.

Conclusion

It is sad that Indian citizens are staying as IDPs in their own country since 1997. The state highlights the commitment deficit of all the stakeholders i.e. Government of India, State Government of Mizoram and Tripura; and also the leaders of MBDPF. This issue needs to be considered sympathetically with a time bound plan for repatriation and rehabilitation of displaced *Brus* which is necessary for lasting peace in Tripura and Mizoram. Contentious issues such as the compensation package, security, identification, repatriation, rehabilitation in cluster villages need to be deliberated upon by all parties to find a mutually acceptable, pragmatic and an amicable solution. A strong political will and an equally strong commitment of all stakeholders are essential to address the issues involved. Above all, the displaced *Brus* and the people representing them need to understand that all their demands cannot be fully accepted due to the issues involved and they need to be more realistic in their demands if they desire an early and fruitful repatriation .

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