

# Enigma of 'Brus' in Mizoram: Displacement, Repatriation and Livelihood

By

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The construction of ethnic identity and perpetuation of ethnic consciousness among various communities of India's Northeast often legitimises the dominant position of some communities in exercising control over resources and accessing government jobs and thereby depriving the marginalised ethnic communities of their basic needs and survival. Territorial concentration and the making of ethnic boundary enable the dominant community to assert their rights over the smaller communities and put a strong demand for the homeland through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). The simmering discontent and recurring tensions between the major and the minor communities often lead to violent conflicts resulting in the displacement of the latter and migration to neighbouring states as refugees. However, the government's failure to ensure safe repatriation for refugees who are fearing retaliation from the majority community hampers the process. The ethnic conflict between the Mizo ethnic majority and Brus minority in Mizoram is a classic example of how assertion and mobilisation of the majority and their access to political power and resource control leads to violent conflict, inhuman displacement and deprivation of the minority from the homeland.

The existing literature on the Brus issue in Mizoram, however, takes a more subjective position and selective understanding. Roluahpuia asserts that the ethnic conflicts between the Mizos and Brus are due to the extremist ethnic mobilisation of the latter. The ongoing process of repatriation of the Brus from neighbouring Tripura without reconciliation would be a short-term solution than an ensuring one.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, Shyamal Bikash Chakma and Suraj Gogoi locate the ethnic animosity between the majority Mizos and minority Brus in the larger context of the domination of influential civil society and culture-religious bodies within organised politics and in the everyday life of the majority Mizos. Putting the issue in the larger context of

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state and minority ethnic communities such as the Hmars and Chakmas, they argue that “the situational identity of Mizos has a dynamic history of constructing an enemy out of the non-Mizos in Mizoram.”<sup>22</sup>

The Brus, officially known as Reangs, are the minority ethnic community inhabited mainly in three major districts of Mizoram—Mamit, Kolasib and Lungeli. The word *Riang* has been used in all government records and publications, but they call themselves *Brus*, which means ‘man’. As a minority ethnic group, the Brus often face stereotyping, discrimination and humiliation from the dominant Mizos, and are forced to live in poor conditions, along with social and economic deprivation. Mizos claim that ‘Mizoram is for the Mizos’ and not for the Reangs, thereby affirming that Reangs are outside the cultural boundary of Mizo ethnic identity. The Mizos consider the Brus not as the original inhabitants of Mizoram, but those who had migrated from the Shah state of Burma and are often called Brus ‘Tuikuk’, a derogatory term. Moreover, they accuse Brus of creating disturbances in the state, which is considered to be relatively peaceful among all states in Northeast India, and even demand the deletion of their names from the state voters’ list.

On the contrary, the Brus claim themselves as the indigenous population in Mizoram. A memorandum submitted to the former Prime Minister I. K. Gujral by the Bru National Union (BNU) contended that the Brus lived in Mizoram before the fourteenth century. They often claim that the 1971 census reported 9,828 Brus in Mizoram. Further, a memorandum submitted by the Bru Students’ Association (BSA) to the chief electoral commissioner in 1997, in New Delhi, pointed out, “historical records proved that the ever-peace loving Bru people have been peacefully living in the state since time immemorial.” The Bru leadership argued that even though the Brus constitute the second largest ethnic community in Mizoram, they were denied all constitutional rights and civic amenities over the years. In 1989, the Reang Peoples Union (RPU) submitted a memorandum to the Government of Mizoram with a three-point demand: *a*) inclusion of Reang programmes in All India Radio, Aizawl; *b*) reservation of jobs for the Reang in government services; and *c*) nomination of Reangs in the Legislative Assembly. It was considered to be the first step towards the political articulation of the Brus in the state.

The Bru political mobilisation began in the mid-1990s. On 15 June 1990, the Reang Democratic Convention Party (RDCP) was formed to safeguard Bru culture, language and custom and ensure their welfare. In July 1993, RDCP demanded separate ADCs. In 1994, the BNU, another political organisation of the Brus, was formed and in its meeting held on 24 September 1997, at Saihapui, a resolution was passed again, demanding the creation of separate autonomous districts for the Brus in Mizoram for the protection of its cultural identity. It needs to be mentioned that Mizoram set up three ADCs for three smaller ethnic communities Chakmas, Lai and Maras. The Chakma ADC was set up in south-western Mizoram bordering Bangladesh, Lai ADC in the southern part of the state and the Mara ADC in the south-eastern corner of Mizoram. The demand for separate ADCs by the Brus was

considered as a demand for the realisation of the goal of self-governance under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. It is a common phenomenon in the Northeast that the minority ethnic community demands autonomy from the dominant ethnic community. The ADCs are not only the territorial space for protecting the communal identity but are also often considered as the protected ethnic enclaves for political avenues. Seyla Benhabib argues that "the ideal of self-governance was increasingly interpreted as the formal equality of citizens who now sought to realise the equal value of their liberty in terms of an equivalent schedule of rights and entitlements."<sup>3</sup>

In 1998, the demand for Bru Autonomous District Council (BADC) was again rejected by the state government and the ethnic organisations in Mizoram. In 1998, Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla declined the demand for BADC, as the Reangs do not inhabit a compact area of Mizoram. Ethnic organisations like Young Mizo Association (YMA) and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), the Mizoram students' body, rejected the demand as they were apprehensive of the further geographical division of the state and threat to their material and political survival. In fact, the government rejected the demand for a separate ADC due to pressure from these ethnic organisations. Even though recognised as citizens, there has not been much political participation of the Brus in the governance of the state. The lack of political representation in the State Legislative Assembly forced them to frequently demand reservations for their community in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly.

The churches in Mizoram often take a hostile attitude towards the cause of Brus, as they practice other religions. The Brus are essentially a non-Christian tribal community which traditionally practised animism, an indigenous faith. Their religious practices are similar to that of the Hindu religion, as they have a significant influence of Vaishnavism. Some of the Brus were converted to Christianity due to the proselytising activities of the Presbyterian Church on the western side and Baptist Church in the southern region. The influence of Christianity has changed their religious life, and some sections got connected due to Mizos. However, the majority of the Brus opposed the Christian values propagated by the YMA. On the other hand, the YMA claimed that the Brus have not assimilated into Mizo culture because of different religious beliefs and practices. It often demanded Mizo names for the children of Brus in an attempt to impose its Christian values on the Brus.

In the mid-1990s, the peaceful call of the Brus for self-determination transformed into an extremist path. In 1996, the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), an armed outfit of the Brus, was formed following violent clashes between ethnic Mizos and Brus in the Mamith sub-division of Mizoram. In 2003, the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM), a breakaway faction of the BNLF, was involved in extortion, abduction of several Mizos and killing of security personnel. However, the Government of Mizoram concluded a Peace Agreement with the Bru armed outfit for laying down arms in July 2005. In 2009, the murder of a Mizo youth by the suspected BNLF rebels further rekindled militant activities in the state. The

Mizos often accused the BNLF of having a link with the extremist organisation of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).

### **Ethnic Clashes and Displacement**

India's Northeast is known for virulent forms of ethnic mobilisation, recurring ethnic violence and internal displacement of many ethnic communities. The animosity between the Mizos and the Brus reached its zenith on 21 October 1997 following the ethnic tensions after the murder of a Mizo forest guard Lalzawmliana in the Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram by suspected BNLF militants. Subsequently, the YMA and MZP, the Mizo youth and student organisations, passed a resolution that all the illegal settlers of Chakmas and Brus should leave Mizoram within one week in general and those within Tuipaibari area within twenty-four hours in particular. In the aftermath of the ethnic tensions, hundreds of Brus took asylum in neighbouring Tripura. In the second spate of violence on 13 November 2009 in the state, a 17-year-old Mizo was allegedly killed by Brus near Bungthuan village, which triggered violence against the Brus. These two tragic incidents forced the Brus to leave their place in Mizoram and settle in refugee camps in the bordering state of Tripura. As a result of these ethnic tensions, in 1997 and 2009, over 30,000 Brus (5000 families) had left and had taken shelter in six camps in north Tripura's Kanchanpur subdivision. In the refugee camps, they lived in psychological trauma and human rights violations without adequate food security, access to education, health, sanitation, safe drinking water, etc. The India Human Rights Report 2006 indicted the YMA for physical attack on Bru minorities in the state.<sup>4</sup> In order to articulate and fulfill their material interests, the Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum (MBDPF) was formed by the Bru refugees in the relief camps in Tripura.

Although settled in the relief camps outside Mizoram, the MBDPF demanded their participation in the election process in Mizoram and pleaded for the setting up of polling booths in relief camps in Tripura. The YMA protested against allocating polling booths for Bru refugees in Tripura and to permit them to exercise their franchise through postal ballot. In a memorandum submitted to the Union Minister P. Chidambaram in April 2012, the YMA demanded that the 1995 electoral roll be the basis for determining bonafide residents of Mizoram from among the refugees lodged in Tripura camps. According to a news report published in the Assam Tribune on April 5, 2012, in the memorandum, "only names of those refugees enlisted in the 1995 electoral rolls of Mizoram and their descendants be repatriated to their villages. This is because many Reang tribals from neighbouring states and adjoining Bangladesh could have infiltrated into the refugees' camps during the past 12 years." On the contrary, the Brus strongly opposed the demand of considering 1995 as the cut-off year for the repatriation of refugees. The YMA, time and again, urged both the centre and Election Commission of India (ECI) not to allow the Bru voters to cast their votes outside the state, but it proved to be vain.

In 1999, the Delhi High Court allowed the Brus in the relief camps in Tripura to cast their votes in Mizoram election. It needs to be mentioned that the election to the State Assembly in 2013 also witnessed the elections in six Bru relief camps such as Asapara, Naisingpara, Hazacherra, Kakau, Khakchangpara and Hamsapara in North Tripura district, with a combined total strength of an electorate of 11,612. The enthusiasm showed by the refugees in the election was reflected in the high voter turnout of 74.34%. However, the YMA and other organisations in the state opposed the ECI's move to establish poll booths in Tripura for Brus to exercise the vote. In the general election in 2014, the MBDPF demanded to conduct an election in their relief camps in Tripura. However, the ECI's move to allow the Brus in the relief camps in Tripura to vote was strongly opposed by the YMA. The ECI, ultimately, had to succumb to the pressure of the YMA on this issue and the Mizoram Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla announced that the state would exert pressure on the ECI to permanently remove the displaced Brus from the Mizoram electoral roll, if they were reluctant to return to their respective places in Mizoram. Earlier, the ECI allowed the Bru refugees to cast their votes using postal ballots in refugee camps from 1 to 3 April, and around 71% of the refugees cast their votes. The ECI had to reschedule the polling date for the general election from 9 to 11 April, following a state-wide three-day shutdown called by the YMA and other community organisations in protest against the exercise of the right to franchise by the Bru refugees. However, the bandh was called off a few hours after the poll panel rescheduled the polling date and assured that the Bru refugees would not cast their votes from outside in future elections. After calling off the bandh, the YMA and others asserted that they would not accept their election to the Lok Sabha if the Bru votes were counted, which was rejected by three major candidates in the fray in the state. The contention of YMA was that the Brus were not refugees, and they left Mizoram of their own will, and nobody forced them to leave the state. According to YMA, the Brus originally belonged to Tripura; they came to Mizoram and stayed there to seek shelter and peaceful lives and, again, returned to their homeland Tripura on their own.

### **Recurring Repatriation Process**

The continued stay of Bru refugees in the relief camps of Tripura has been a grave concern for the state government for a long time. Clashes between the refugee Brus and the tribal and Bengali communities in Tripura created a law and order problem, thereby causing an internal security crisis in the state. The Tripura government repeatedly raised this issue with the Union government and the Government of Mizoram. On 15 October 2016, clashes erupted, furthering the repatriation process. Bru refugees burned and damaged at least 26 homes of locals at Kanchenpur, forcing the Tripura government to urge the centre to accelerate the process of repatriation. Apart from the law and order problem, the human security of the Bru refugees in the relief camps was a daunting task for the government. Considering the grave situation and under

pressure from the Tripura government, the Union government initiated the repatriation process with the support of the Government of Mizoram.

The initial attempt to repatriate the Brus to Mizoram started in 1998 when the three-member committee of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), after visiting the Bru refugee camps in Kanchanpur in Tripura, came to the conclusion that the Bru refugees there were the lawful residents of Mizoram and the Government of Mizoram was obliged to take them back following the agreement with the Union Home Minister in November 1997. On 13 January 2005, the Supreme Court issued notices to the Ministry of Home Affairs, ECI and the governments of Mizoram and Tripura on public interest litigation (PIL) seeking resettlement and enrolling of names of displaced Brus in the revised electoral rolls. On 26 April 2005, BNLf signed a peace accord with the Mizoram government, agreeing to disarm the rebels to the peaceful repatriation process. The Ten-Point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the BNLf and the Mizoram government contains provisions for repatriation and resettlement for the Bru refugees by the Mizoram government, development package for the Brus, inclusion of names in the electoral rolls and establishment of central school in Bru-inhabited areas. Further, among other things, the MoU contained provisions, which required complete dissolution of the BNLf, and that the members should live a life of proper citizen. The Government of Mizoram was asked to recall the Bru refugees in six camps at Kailashahar in Unakoti District in Tripura. While the Mizoram government was planning to rehabilitate the Brus in Mamit, Kolashib and Lunglei districts, the repatriation process often encountered hurdles when violence took place. However, the agreement failed to resolve the Bru imbroglio due to the lack of political will of the Government of Mizoram. In November 2010, the ongoing process of repatriation was suspended following protests by the MBDPF.

The Union government announced several times the repatriation of 36,000 tribal refugees back to Mizoram. Moreover, it requested the Mizoram government many times to take the refugees back, but there was no inclination on the part of the state government. In the repatriation process, the Mizoram government did not accept any demand of compensation package for the Brus, land for every family, free ration cards and grouping of villages for their safety. Steps have been taken to complete the repatriation process and as a result of regular follow-ups, 197 families have been repatriated in the sixth batch, including self-repatriation, making a total repatriation of about 1622 Bru families (approximately 8573 people) in 2015. In February 2015, YMA and MZP objected the demand for Kashmiri Pundit-like status by the Bru tribals staying in refugee camps in Tripura. According to them, Brus were not refugees and could never be compared to the Kashmiri Pundits as they left Mizoram and migrated to Tripura to fulfil their political aspirations. However, they welcomed the return of Brus to Mizoram. In April 2016, hundreds of them returned to Mizoram. Although some Bru families returned to Mizoram in 2010, a large number remained in Tripura. In February 2016, the MBDPF submitted a six-page memorandum to the central ministers accusing the Mizoram government of discriminating against them.

In 2011, the YMA and other organisations submitted a joint memorandum to the then Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram to rehabilitate the displaced Mizos. According to the memorandum, more than 80 Mizo families displaced from Tripura's Sakhan Hill range in 1998 after being threatened by Bru militants were to be adequately rehabilitated by the centre. In Roadmap IV, the Mizoram government proposed a total expense of Rs 68 crore for repatriation, of which over Rs 9.7 crore was released by the centre in 2015. In May 2016, the Mizoram government submitted Roadmap V, a detailed plan for repatriation of Brus to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which was approved. Accordingly, over 207,000 Brus, including 11,500 minors belonging to 3,455 families from six relief camps in North Tripura, were repatriated. On 2 November 2016, the first day of the repatriation process, over 40 Bru families came forward for identification at the Kaskau relief camp in North Tripura.<sup>5</sup>

In a written reply to a question, the Minister of State (MoS) for Home Affairs said that "The Ministry of Home Affairs released approximate of Rs 246 crore to Government of Tripura since 1997–98 for the maintenance of Brus lodged in various camps and approximate of Rs 45 crore to Government of Mizoram since 2004–2005 for the disbursement to Bru migrant families for the rehabilitation in Mizoram".<sup>6</sup> On 26 November 2014, in answer to a starred question in Rajya Sabha, Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home Affairs, stated that his ministry has taken measures to repatriate the Bru refugees to their home in Mizoram in a phased manner. The ministry has also extended financial as well as other logical assistance to both the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura. The minister further informed that since the repatriation process started in November 2010, approximately 1210 Reang families (around 5000–6000 people) have been repatriated. He claimed that since 1997 the ministry has been giving grants-in-aid to the Government of Tripura for providing rice, ration, cash dole, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The Ministry of Home Affairs has been extending the following assistance/grants-in-aid to the Government of Tripura since 1997–98 for the maintenance of Bru migrants, sheltered in the relief camps of Tripura, and to the Government of Mizoram since 2004–05 for rehabilitation and resettlement of Brus in Mizoram. Its report claimed that the ministry has been providing each family a housing assistance of Rs 38,500, cash assistance of Rs 41,500, free ration to each adult and minor member for one year, reimbursement of the transportation cost incurred by the Government of Mizoram, and blankets and utensils to each Bru family.<sup>8</sup> Approximately, Rs 308.62 crore has been released to the Government of Tripura and Rs 52.40 crore to the Government of Mizoram as on 31 December 2017.<sup>9</sup> The Bru migrants have been repatriated from Tripura to Mizoram in a phased manner. The repatriation process got disrupted/stopped due to protests by certain Mizo NGOs in 2011, 2012 and 2015. As on 31 December 2017, about 1622 Bru families (approx. 8573 people) have been repatriated and resettled in Mizoram, while 5407 Bru families (32,876 people) have been identified to be repatriated to Mizoram. As per the revised plan submitted by the Government of Mizoram, the repatriation of remaining Bru migrants from Tripura to

Mizoram had to commence in March 2018.<sup>10</sup> The MHA is monitoring the repatriation of Bru migrants at the highest level for completing the process.<sup>11</sup>

### **Stalled Repatriation Process**

The repatriation of displaced Brus from Tripura started in May 2010. Since then, the Government of India has been making sustained efforts to permanently repatriate and rehabilitate these refugees in Mizoram. The Union government has been assisting the two-state governments for taking care of the refugees. It was reported that till 2014, 1622 Bru-Reang families in different batches returned to Mizoram.<sup>12</sup> In June 2018, Bru leaders signed an agreement in Delhi with the centre and the two state governments, providing for the repatriation of Brus to Mizoram. However, most residents of the camps rejected the 'insufficient' terms of the agreement. Only 328 families, comprising 1369 people, returned to Mizoram, rendering the process fruitless.<sup>13</sup> The camp residents said the package did not guarantee their safety in Mizoram and feared a repeat of the violence that had forced them to flee. There had sustained demand from most Bru-Reang families that they may be allowed to settle down in Tripura, considering their apprehensions about their security.

The repatriation process was stalled many times due to either the fear or unwillingness on the part of the Bru refugees or inadequate rehabilitation measures guaranteed by the Government of Mizoram. Despite several initiatives by the Mizoram government to bring them back, the refugees have been reluctant to go back to their villages in Mizoram, fearing their security. They also demanded that repatriation should be followed by protection of their rights, and they should be allowed to resettle in a compact area in the Mamit District for security reasons. Most of the refugees were unwilling to return to their homes in Mizoram without a written assurance from the Mizoram government to provide adequate security. In fact, the fear of insecurity about their life prevented them from repatriating. Over the years, the Brus have been demanding that they should be placed in a certain place in a group and not sent to different dispersed villages. They have demanded that the YMA should not involve in scrutinising the people who were returning with the 1995 electoral roll. However, the YMA's apprehension has been that if the repatriated refugees are placed in one or two villages, they would demand a separate ADC within the state, which is not acceptable in the present condition. Moreover, the YMA alleged that when the Brus left Mizoram, they had driven out some Mizos in the villages of Sakhan Hill Range in Tripura, like Sakhan Tualsen and Upper Dosda, which also contributed to the tension between these two communities. The repatriation process was disrupted/stopped due to protests by the YMA in 2011 and 2012. Often the adamant stand taken by the ethnic organisations such as MZP and YMA against repatriation failed to achieve its goals. In September 2011, the YMA and MZP conducted an identification process to ascertain whether the refugee returnees were from Mizoram, especially in Mamit District and often demanded the deportation of those who were not. The Brus were often

subjected to atrocities in the hands of YMA and MZP. On 8 August 2005, the members of YMA even attacked the refugee camp in Tripura, alleging that the Brus were involved in the abduction of engineer Chaaranjeet Singh and Mizo labourer Zoramsang employed in the Tuiram Hydel Project in the Mamit disaster. It created further hurdles in the process of repatriation.

In spite of the Supreme Court's directive on the repatriation of the displaced people, the repatriation policy has not been followed by an inclusive settlement policy. The MBDPF demanded the state government fully implement the rehabilitation package before the refugees move to Mizoram. Earlier, it had submitted a 14 point-demand to the MHA. The demands included, among other things, allotting five hectare land to each family, undertaking special development plan for the backward tribals and providing adequate security to the repatriated refugees. Repatriation should be followed by the whole-hearted policy on land, health, education, employment and housing, which are considered as the basic entitlement for other 'primary goods' (in Rawlsian conception).<sup>14</sup> In fact, the lack of an adequate rehabilitation package for the repatriated refugees would denigrate them into the status of denizens. Denizens have duties but weak entitlements. Turner defined a "denizen" as a person who has "a legal right of residence (by virtue of a visa or work permit) in a given territory, but who has limited rights to welfare and political participation such as the rights to vote".<sup>15</sup> Denizens are 'subjects' or second-class citizens for whom the electoral representation is often denied along with any political engagement.

The repatriation process was stalled due to the lack of local integration of repatriated Brus with local Mizos. It needs to be mentioned that a successful repatriation and rehabilitation process depends on local integration with the host communities. The repatriation process often faced problems of integration of the repatriated Brus. A process of local integration should have followed the process of repatriation and resettlement, wherein the repatriated become full members of their host community. Lucy Hovil talks about two levels of local integration—de facto and de jure integration. According to her, "De facto integration is an informal process that takes place primarily at a local level, whereby refugee individuals or groups negotiate belonging in the locality in which they are living. Integration takes place on a spectrum and can function on multiple levels—whether economic, social, cultural, and, at times, political—and is strongly context specific."<sup>16</sup> Hovil says that "the relationship between refugees and the host population (often including local government officials) is key to their ability to integrate locally: for instance, their legitimacy to live in the area might be built on localised understandings of belonging that transcend national identities, or through recognition of refugees as a potential asset."<sup>17</sup> The "de jure local integration, on the other hand, is primarily about national belonging (despite the misleading notion of 'local'). It is represented by the formal process of obtaining new citizenship and is an overtly political process. This acquisition of a new national identity represents, at least in theory, the gateway to rights as citizens of that state."<sup>18</sup> The government often evades this approach. As Hovil states "...formal citizenship does not necessary translate into inclusion for

former refugees: the legitimacy to belong is a far more complex process. On the one hand, local belonging is unstable without national recognition; localised forms of integration have the potential to be undermined should external circumstances change. On the other, national citizenship holds little promise if individuals and groups fail to be accepted within a particular locality."<sup>19</sup>

Repatriation is a process of reasserting the bond between citizens and state and bringing back to visibility from exile. It needs building a trust between state and people. Any kind of repatriation involves security, land, livelihoods and resources. Roluahpuia asserts that "attempts at repatriation, without reconciliation, will provide a best short-term solution."<sup>20</sup> He says that as long as the memory of conflict continues to linger on even after the end of the conflict, repatriation would be a futile exercise. However, the reconciliation often undermined the material conditions for the security of the returning Mizos and the basic entitlements provided to them in the repatriated areas. He says that "the delay in repatriation has only widened the differences between the Brus and the Mizos at large."<sup>21</sup> Others argue that the problems lie with the assertion of identity by the Mizo ethnic majority, who deprived the Bru minority.<sup>22</sup> It is argued that "... the Reangs lack the political power to establish a ring of security around themselves. Ethnic, religious, political and cultural domination by the majority Mizos coupled with the lack of economic opportunities are responsible for the present travails faced by the Reangs."<sup>23</sup>

### **The Quadripartite Agreement, 2020**

The quadripartite agreement signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Bru community's representative have been described as a historical initiative to end the 23-year-old Bru refugee crisis in Tripura and Mizoram. The agreement was signed on 16 January 2020 in a meeting presided over by Amit Shah, the Union Minister of Home Affairs, in the presence of the chief ministers of Mizoram and Tripura and the chairman of North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), Himanta Biswa Sarma. It allowed the Brus to stay back in Tripura, among other things. The agreement came after almost eight repatriation attempts over the last decade to send back the Brus to their homeland in Mizoram. Although the repatriation process was initiated during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regimes at the centre, it got accelerated during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime since 2014. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took much interest in the repatriation process during the first tenure of the NDA government as part of its larger political agenda in the Northeast. The repatriation process got a conducive atmosphere when the BJP and the Mizo National Front (MNF), the NEDA partner, came to power in Tripura and Mizoram, respectively.

While Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister, described the agreement as to the 'historic' resolution of the Bru refugee crisis,<sup>24</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted it as 'a special day' for the Brus.<sup>25</sup> The agreement was hailed by the chief ministers of Tripura and Mizoram, major political parties

and ethnic organisations of the Mizoram. It promised to give a 40 x 30 sq.ft residential plot to each of the displaced families and Rs 1.5 lakh aid to build their house, in addition to the aid under earlier agreement of a fixed deposit of Rs 4 lakh, Rs 5000 cash aid per month for two years and free ration for two years. Besides providing the cash assistance through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), the Central Government would implement a special development project for the resettled Brus in Tripura. The physical verification to identify beneficiaries would be carried out within 15 days of the signing of the deal. The land for resettlement would be identified within 60 days, and the land for allotment would be identified within 150 days. As per the agreement, the Government of Tripura would provide the land required for resettlement. The quadripartite agreement to end the more than two-decade-old Bru refugee problem was signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Bru communities' representatives under the initiative of the BJP-led NDA government at the centre. However, by allowing the Bru refugees to stay back in Tripura, the agreement does not solve the problem in its comprehensiveness.

Unlike the previous agreements, which emphasised on the issue of repatriation of the displaced Brus and their resettlement in Mizoram, the current one more or less reflects the sentiments of the Brus. On many occasions, the vast majority of the Brus were reluctant to resettle in Mizoram, fearing the attack against them by the host Mizo communities, though both the union and state governments assured them of safeguards. The present one is considered to be more practical as it aggresses on formal resettlement in the refugees' camps in Tripura. From the side of the Mizo organisations, the agreement is more or less acceptable as it is not infringing their ethnic interest in Mizoram. However, the real testing point for the success of the agreement depends on resolving the apprehension of the host community in Tripura. Perhaps that can be resolved through the politics involved in the conclusion of the agreement.

### **Hindutva Mobilisation of the Brus**

As stated earlier, the Brus are the minority ethnic tribal community in Mizoram, which originally believed in the spiritual essence of animism. While some converted to Christianity, a vast majority still maintains their distinct religious and cultural identity. Although their practices are more close to Hinduism, they are not considered to be Hindus. However, in the largely Christian-dominated state of Mizoram, with greater proselytisation efforts, the Hindutva groups have penetrated among the Brus. They are taking up the issues of marginalisation of Brus at home in their political agenda. The Hindutva forces are appropriating the cause of the Bru tribals as neo-Hindu converts. The Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA), an RSS affiliate in tribal areas, moved into the area in solidarity with the Brus against the persecution from the Christian Mizos and to spread the faith. Earlier too, the RSS accused foreign missionaries of converting Hindu Reangs to Christianity with the help of the police. In April 1998, the RSS Conclave in

Bangalore adopted a resolution condemning the attack on Brus by the Christian Mizos. Even the RSS leaders, under the banner of the ABVKA, urged the Union government to set up ADC for Brus in Mizoram. However, on 9 April 1998, Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla cautioned the RSS to refrain from instigating the Bru community in Mizoram and claimed that the ethnic upsurge in 1997 among the Brus was the handiwork of the RSS. He categorically asserted that "there had been no repercussions against them by the Mizos and not anyone forcibly converted into Christianity."<sup>26</sup> Even in the refugee camps in Tripura, the ABVKA was active in providing relief to Brus and declaring them as Hindus. For the BJP, which has minimal base in Mizoram, the Bru issue is a religious issue and not ethnic issue for its political mobilisation. On 16 December 2011, in an article, in *Sammada*, Ram Madhav wrote, "Reangs are the victims of religious persecution from the majority Mizos."<sup>27</sup>

The eagerness on the part of the BJP to resolve the Bru issue and the quadripartite agreement, signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura and the representative of the Bru communities, has to be seen in the larger context of furthering the political agenda of the BJP in Northeast Region. The recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) too has immense political significance and adds to the context. In fact, while the BJP government in Tripura allowed the Brus to settle in the state, their settlement was facilitated by the government led by the MNF, an ally of NEDA, in Mizoram. The BJP government at the centre had a hard bargain with these two statements to settle the Bru crisis, which was shuttling between the states government of Mizoram and Tripura for the last two decades. However, only time will tell how the agreement would reap political harvest for the BJP in Tripura and rest of Northeast India. Moreover, the continued legal resettlement of the Brus in Tripura depends on its local integration with other communities such as the dominant Bengalis and the indigenous tribal minority population, and also the material conditions provided by the state.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Roluahpuia, "The Bru Conundrum in Northeast India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 17 (April 28, 2018): 16–18.

<sup>2</sup>Shyamal Bikash Chakma and Suraj Gogoi, "The Bru-Mizo Conflict in Mizoram," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 44 (November 3, 2018): 59.

<sup>3</sup>Seyla Benhabib, "Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship," *Political Science and Politics* 38, no.4 (October 2005): 673–77.

<sup>4</sup>Suhas Chakma (ed.), "India Human Rights Report 2006" (New Delhi: Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2007): 134, [https://archive.crin.org/en/docs/India\\_HR\\_2006.pdf](https://archive.crin.org/en/docs/India_HR_2006.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>"Mizoram Government Has Submitted Roadmap V, for Repatriation of Brus," *The Economic Times*, May 18, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/mizoram-government-has-submitted-roadmap-v-for-repatriation-of-brus/articleshow/52327002.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>6</sup>*Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 54*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, July 22, 2015, <https://www.mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2015-pdfs/ls-210715/54.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>"Mizoram Submits Bru Repatriation Plan to Centre," *The Hindu*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Mizoram-submits-Bru-repatriation-plan-to-centre/article14327222.ece>.

<sup>8</sup>"*Annual Report 2015–16*," Department of Internal Security, States, Home, Jammu & Kashmir Affairs and Border Management, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed on September 20, 2021. <https://www.mha.gov.in/document/annual-reports/annual-report-ministry-of-home-affairs-2015-2016>.

<sup>9</sup>"*Annual Report 2017-18*," Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed on September 25, 2021, p.26, [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport\\_17\\_18.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport_17_18.pdf).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 26.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>"Shri Amit Shah Presides Over Signing of Historic Agreement to End the Bru-Reang Refugee Crisis," Press Information Bureau, Government of India, accessed on September 25, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1599633>.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>John Rawls in his conception of justice as fairness asserts that a just society would be realised through the provision of the distribution of primary goods. The primary goods include basic rights and liberties and self-respect, freedom of movement and free choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities, income and wealth. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup>Denizenship emerges from the erosion of social citizenship, even though political citizenship is offered. The Brus are entitled to have voting rights but denied social entitlement; this is often described as 'denizens'. See Bryan S. Turner, "We Are All Denizens Now: On the Erosion of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies*, 20, nos. 6–7 (2016): 682.

<sup>16</sup>Lucy Hovil, "Local Integration," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds. Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 488–98.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 489.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 489.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 489.

<sup>20</sup>Roluahpuia, "The Bru Conundrum," 16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>22</sup>Chakma and Gogoi, "The Bru-Mizo Conflict," 59–61.

<sup>23</sup>Abdul Mannan Mazumdar and Bonali Bhattacharjee, "The Displaced Reangs of Hailakandi District," in *Blisters on Their Feet: Tales of Internally Displaced Persons in India's North East*, ed. Samir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), 197.

<sup>24</sup>"Explained: What Is the Agreement to Settle Bru Refugees in Tripura?" *The Indian Express*, January 20, 2020.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/understanding-the-bru-refugees-settlement-mizoram-tripura-6224956/>.

<sup>25</sup>"PM Modi welcomes agreement to permanently settle Bru-Reang refugees in Tripura," *Business Standard*, 16 January 2020. <https://www.business->

standard.com/article/pti-stories/pm-modi-welcomes-agreement-to-permanently-settle-bru-reang-refugees-in-tripura-120011601609\_1.html.

<sup>26</sup>"Target Northeast: How RSS Plans to Make Region Saffron," *The Hindustan Times*, December 15, 2014. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/target-northeast-how-rss-plans-to-make-region-saffron/story-YZGPkOBXb6tS301BvpunpJ.html>.

<sup>27</sup>Vishwa Samvada Kendra, "Ram Madhav writes- Reangs – victims of Religious Persecution in Mizoram", Samvada, October 16, 2011. <https://samvada.org/ram-madhav-writes-reangs-victims-of-religious-persecution-in-mizoram/> Accessed on September 20, 2021.