

# India: In Mizoram, a refugee crisis highlights Mizo tribal affinities and hostility

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**Shared Zo identity has Mizos extending hospitality to Chin and Kuki-Chin refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh. More remarkable is that Chakmas, mistreated by the Mizo majority in Mizoram, have welcomed Kuki-Chin refugees too**

The refugee crisis in the Indian state of Mizoram is rapidly worsening as Chin and Kuki-Chin refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar are forced to flee ongoing military operations and seek refuge across the Indian border. This presents us with a democratic paradox for both state and society.

On 10 March 2021, India's home ministry wrote to the chief secretaries of the border states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh to "take appropriate action as per law to check illegal influx from Myanmar into India." It also reminded the states that, since India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, they have no power to grant "refugee status to any foreigner." The letter termed the movement of refugees due to the political coup in Myanmar as an "illegal influx of foreigners," thereby making its position clear on refugees from Myanmar.

From Bangladesh, Kuki-Chin refugees are being impelled into Mizoram due to an ongoing crackdown by Bangladesh forces against the Kuki-Chin National Army in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Mizoram's chief minister, Zoramthanga, who is also the chief of the state's ruling Mizo National Front, deemed the directive from the ministry "not acceptable" to Mizoram. In a letter addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Zoramthanga noted: "I understand that there are certain foreign policy issues where India needs to proceed cautiously. However, we cannot ignore this humanitarian crisis." K Vanlalvena, a member of India's upper house from Zoramthanga's party, added that the refugees from Myanmar are like "family" and can't be asked to leave when facing such a humanitarian crisis.

Zoramthanga also said that the Chin community across the Myanmar border share ethnic ties and close contact with the Mizo people, and that those ties are older than the Indian nation-state itself. This history features in the memorandum submitted to the British colonial government and India's constituent assembly by the Mizo Union in 1947, via the advisory subcommittee for Mizo territorial unity and integrity. The memorandum states, "The Mizos are a numerous family of tribes, closely knitted together by common tradition, custom, culture, mode of living, language and rites."

The Mizos' decision to extend hospitality to Chin and Kuki-Chin refugees, in defiance of the home ministry directive, has its roots in history and a shared Zo identity. However, their treatment of minorities within the state of Mizoram, particularly the Chakmas—the largest minority ethnic group in Mizoram, who have been discriminated against—reveals the state and society's double standards regarding the treatment of minorities.

## Becoming Zo

Like the Rohingya, who have fled Myanmar at different points to escape prosecution, particularly after the military operation against them in 2016 and 2017, other minorities from Myanmar have also fled seeking refuge. In India, the influx intensifies especially after the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, which precipitated a crackdown on political outfits and ethnic communities opposed to the regime. One such group is the Chin, who share similar ethnicity with the Zo people of Mizoram. In Myanmar, the Chins are a very diverse group, and can be further divided into six major tribes and 63 sub-tribe groups. Human Rights Watch aptly describes the Chin people of Myanmar as a “forgotten people”, “unsafe in Burma and “unprotected in India”.

The Chins of Myanmar are a persecuted minority subject to various abuses, including forced labour, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, extrajudicial killing, rape, torture and attacks on religious freedom. Many Chins have migrated to Mizoram due to worsening conditions in Myanmar, with the first wave of migration starting in 1988. But they have faced discrimination, lack of job opportunities and affordable education, and forced deportation by local groups like the Young Mizo Association, as Human Rights Watch has reported. These forced deportations have resulted in returnees facing arrests, imprisonment, torture and even death in Myanmar.

An estimated 40,000 Myanmar refugees from the Chin ethnic group are currently being granted asylum in Mizoram. The refugees from Myanmar have spread out across Mizoram, mostly in Mizo-dominated areas, some living with their relatives and others in rented homes.

Like the Rohingya, who have fled Myanmar at different points to escape prosecution, particularly after the military operation against them in 2016 and 2017, other minorities from Myanmar have also fled seeking refuge.

“This is not the first time the Chin refugees came,” the activist and researcher Paritosh Chakma said. “They came in the 1990s too. There were reports from human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch about their condition. They said that they faced discrimination in Mizoram, even from the Mizos. But I think they have a strong kinship bond.” They are not unwelcome in Mizoram, Paritosh added, but even so, “there is also a philosophy that ‘Mizoram belongs to Mizos’.”

After Mizoram was granted statehood, in 1987, there were suggestions to abolish the Chakma autonomous councils, which today administer territories in the south of Mizoram. In response, then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, reminded the Mizo leadership and society to treat the state’s minorities well. The journalist Subir Bhaumik writes in *Troubled Periphery* that “Rajiv Gandhi told a rally in Aizawl that if the Mizos expect justice from India as a small minority, they must safeguard the interests of still smaller groups like the Chakmas.” But the notion of Mizoram as an exclusive land for Mizos survives in various forms.

The first World Zomi Convention, held in May 1988 in Champhai near the Mizoram-Myanmar border, aimed to unite the various Chin tribes. Participants included representatives of the Zomi National Congress and the People Conference Party of Mizoram, as well as people from Lamka (Manipur), Ngaihban (Haflong), Zampui/Sakhan, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Arakan (Myanmar) and the Chin Hills. They reached an agreement to collectively identify themselves as Zo and formed the Zo Reunification Organisation (ZoRO), which became an international NGO in 1999. ZoRO’s goal is to promote the unification and shared awareness of Zo tribes.

In recent years, there has been an attempt to homogenise the Mizos – even though there is a history of tribes such as the Mara and Lai seeking autonomy within Mizoram despite being Mizos. “Chakma, Mara and Lai were given autonomy at the same time Mizoram was granted statehood,” Shyamal

Chakma, a doctoral candidate at SOAS in London, said. “It shows that Mizoram has problems with both inclusion and exclusion.”

Shyamal expanded on the Mizo social structure. “It is a very elitist society,” he said. “It is also Brahminical, in a way. The Lals and Puis are like Brahmins of the Mizo society, who try to mobilise, impose and carry forward the notion of being Mizo. They try to show that they are very homogenous, but in reality it is also a very heterogeneous society.”

### **“Mizoram for Mizos”**

The Chakmas in Mizoram with a population of around 100,000, have been discriminated against in Mizoram and elsewhere. They are also seen as non-indigenous by the majority of Christian Mizos because the majority of Chakmas are Buddhists. Chakmas are concentrated especially in the south of Mizoram, bordering the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh to the West and the Chin and Arakan provinces of Myanmar to the East. They are often treated as non-citizens and have faced the cancellation of trade licenses, denial of their right to employment, deletion of names from electoral rolls, the withdrawal of healthcare and educational facilities since the 1980s, and other forms of persecution. In the past few years, many medical students belonging to the Chakma community have also been refused admission to educational institutions in Mizoram. The Mizoram (Selection of Candidates for Higher Technical Courses) (Amendment) Rules 2021 are one example of legal discrimination against Chakmas, and include an attempt to declare them non-tribals.

“The Chakmas live in fear within Mizoram,” Paritosh Chakma explained. “If any Chakma flees from Bangladesh and enters Mizoram today, I don’t think Chakmas will be treated similarly” to how Kuki-Chin refugees, considered part of the Zo peoples, are.

“Despite such humanitarianism and goodwill by Chakmas, Mizo groups such as the Young Mizo Association and Mizo Zirlai Pawl have raised slogans calling Chakmas illegal foreigners and demanding that they be pushed out of Mizoram.”

Since 2015, the denial of admission to Chakma students who clear medical entrance exams has been routine. Earlier this year, an interim order by the Guwahati High Court directed the Mizoram government to provisionally admit three Chakma students to medical school and allow them to attend MBBS classes. The order also stated that “enormous prejudice would be caused” to the students if their admission was blocked. In February, Mizo Zirlai Pawl, a Mizo student organisation, [protested](#) against the selection of three non-Mizo candidates for government jobs and demanded the removal of the official responsible. The primary question raised was how non-indigenous people could be given jobs in Mizoram.

The terms of indigeneity were defined recently in the Mizoram (Selection of Candidates for Higher Technical Courses) (Amendment) Rules 2021. These clearly distinguish Mizos from non-Mizos and discriminate between them in terms of the eligibility criteria for candidates. The rules state that students have to complete their final years of schooling in Mizoram to apply for technical-education seats, but this rule is not extended to Mizos, who are defined as “those who are Zo-ethnic indigenous people of the state of Mizoram and have been residing permanently in the State.” In plain terms, if a non-Mizo—say, a Chakma—has attended their last years of schooling in Delhi, for instance, they will not qualify for technical-education seats, in MBBS and other courses, under the Mizoram quota. But if any Mizo student applies having completed their schooling outside Mizoram, they can still access these seats. This small but significant rule encapsulates the “Mizoram for Mizos” philosophy.

### **Bridging divides**

Various Mizo civil-society bodies have extended humanitarian aid to Kuki-Chin refugees from Bangladesh—but, notably, so have Chakma organisations such as the Central Young Chakma Association. Jyoti Bikash Chakma, the group’s current president, said that it and other organisations have offered help and given rice, clothes and other items to refugees. Most refugees belong to the Bawm community from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The Mizoram government sanctioned INR 30 lakh for the rehabilitation of refugees from the Chittagong Hill tracts who now reside in the following villages: Parva III, Vathuampui, Mautlang, Chamdur P-1, Hmawngbu, Bungtlang South, Hruitezawl and Humunnuam. These areas fall under Chakma Autonomous District Council and Lawngtlai District of Mizoram. Zoramthanga’s statements, outlined earlier, suggest a disagreement between the state and central governments regarding Chin refugees.

“We can clearly see a conflict between the state and centre on the issue of refugees,” Dilip Chakma, a lawyer and activist, said. “Even when the burning of Hindu gods and the Indian flag took place in Mizoram a couple of years ago, the issue did not escalate. I think they (the centre) understand the historical sensitivity of this area and bear with it. They have been very tolerant with the state of Mizoram.”

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Dilip Chakma justified the extension of asylum to the Bawm community despite his community, the Chakmas, being exposed to discrimination as non-Mizos. He noted that “as human beings, when it is related to refugees and their persecution, one cannot have double standards. We have to be always welcoming of them. In human rights parlance, a selective extension of humanitarian aid on ethnicity or religion is not acceptable.”

Despite such humanitarianism and goodwill by Chakmas, Mizo groups such as the Young Mizo Association and Mizo Zirlai Pawl have raised slogans calling Chakmas illegal foreigners and demanding that they be pushed out of Mizoram. Vanlalvena, the same parliamentarian who described refugees from Myanmar as “family”, described Chakmas as “alien” to the state in a letter to the union home minister, Amit Shah, earlier this year.

“We are trying to help them,” Jyoti Bikash said of the refugees in the Chakma Autonomous District, yet the targeting of Chakmas never stops. He added that only the Chakmas and the Brus, another minority community “are seen as *hnam dang*, or ‘other tribes’.”

Years ago, Sneha Kumar Chakma, a prominent Chakma leader, aptly captures their plight. He writes, “years of genocide have desensitised us.” On the contrary, despite their pain, injustice and suffering, Chakmas are political and sensitive people. Their hospitality towards the Kuki Chin refugees shows that hope and humanity are not lost on them.

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