

SPECIAL ARTICLE

India's Northeast and Beyond: Refugees and Relationship at the Crossroads of the India-Myanmar Borderland

Pum Khan Pau

*Professor of History & Archaeology
Nagaland University*

Abstract: *India has a long-standing relationship with Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar. With a land border exceeding 1500 km, India's northeast serves as a vital corridor for ethnic, political, economic, and socio-cultural connections between India and Southeast Asia. Historically, both India and Myanmar were once governed together by the British, which strengthened their existing socio-cultural and economic ties through maritime trade. Despite Myanmar's ongoing military regime, India and Myanmar maintain a positive neighbourly relationship in the postcolonial era. However, India's need to foster good relations with Myanmar for its broader Southeast Asia policy is often challenged by Myanmar's unstable political landscape and undemocratic governance. This article is an attempt to revisit the history and ethnicity of the communities living in the India-Myanmar borderland with a focus on the Zo (Chin-Lushai-Kuki) from colonial to postcolonial times. It examines the impact of border-making on their lives and livelihoods, and critically analyze the state's approach towards the 'refugees' vis-à-vis local population approach in light of the recent influx of refugees from Myanmar.*

Keywords: *Northeast India, Myanmar, Zo (Chin-Lushai-Kuki), Refugee, Borderland*

Introduction

India and Myanmar have maintained a history of good neighbourly relations since the precolonial period. The British colonial administration united the two countries until their separation in 1937. Even in postcolonial times, India and Myanmar continue to share political, cultural, economic, and ethnic ties, despite Myanmar's prolonged disruptions of democratic governance due to military regimes. However, this longstanding relationship did not prevent India from taking a strict stance against the influx of Myanmarese refugees. As a non-

signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, India's response to the refugee crisis following Myanmar's 2021 military coup and the political unrest in the aftermath has been rigid, at least officially. However, historically, India has accommodated Pakistani refugees, Sri Lankan refugees, Bangladeshi refugees, Tibetan refugees, Rohingya refugees, Chakma refugees etc. This article dwells on India's dilemma in dealing with the largescale influx of refugees from Myanmar after the military coup in 2021. It examines the history behind how the local populations in India's Northeastern states, particularly Mizoram, showed empathy with the refugees based on their ethnic relationships rather than simply toeing the line of the policy followed by the Indian state.

Historical Background

India's cultural relations with Southeast Asia in general and Burma in particular have a long history. One of the most prominent historians on Burma, G. E. Harvey, wrote: 'The Burmese are a Mongolian race, yet their traditions, instead of harking back to China, refer to India'.¹ The Pyus, for instance, who were culturally distinct from the later-arrival Burmans but who apparently also spoke a Tibeto-Burman language, had contact with Indian culture. Starting perhaps in the 2nd century A.D., and with ever greater profusion and refinement from the 4th century, we find architectural and artistic evidence of Pyu contact with Indian culture, directly via eastern India and Sri Lanka and indirectly perhaps via Buddhist centres in the Chaophraya basin. The Pyu ritual system included elements of Sarvastivadin Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous urn burial.² That the India-Burma cultural and economic relationships in the pre-colonial period were found more prominently through sea routes has been clearly unraveled by Sunil S. Amrith in his recent work, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*. He says 'many forms of connection across the sea outlasted and outlived empires'.³ To the English East India Company, which established its first factory at Syriam in 1647, Burma became strategically important for its economic interest in order to dominate the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.⁴ In fact, Burma became a 'contested' space among the European colonisers since the 18th century. The annexation of Burma by the British through a series of Anglo-Burmese Wars has been debated by scholars/administrators as 'strategic/political',⁵ 'economic' or 'commerce'⁶ or 'local crisis'.⁷

However, the annexation of Burma was also strongly contested by none other than the British colonial officers. J. S. Furnivall described the annexation of Burma as 'the accident of propinquity'.⁸ According to Reginald Craddock, it was 'a political accident'⁹ and to F. S. V. Donnison, it was 'the accident of contiguity'.¹⁰ A recent scholar on Burma describes Burma a 'territorial and administrative appendage to India'. In 1937 when Burma was separated from India it was largely a success of combined colonial-business interests who had lobbied hard for separation from India.¹¹ They argue, 'The Burmans are so different from the peoples of India...They come from a different stock, they

speak a different language, their habits and customs and outlooks are different'.¹² Undoubtedly, there was a business interests behind such campaign.

Given the historical, cultural and political ties that India shares with Burma, it is essential to highlight the often-overlooked hill tracts that lay between British India and British Burma. Popularly known in colonial parlance as the Chin-Lushai hills, this hill tract in the Indo-Burma frontier had never become a part of the Burman Empire nor was it annexed by Indian rulers. It remained independently governed by local chieftains until the British annexed it into the Indian Empire in the late nineteenth century.

The annexation of Upper Burma in the third and final Anglo-Burmese War (1885-86) has been often mistakenly considered to be the completion of British 'conquest of the whole country including the vast expanse of tribal hills areas all-round the frontier'.¹³ Burma was conquered, indeed. But the Chin-Lushai hills lying between the western border of the former Konbaung dynasty and Bengal remained independent or 'unadministered'. In 1893, a memorandum written by the Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Burma to the Secretary to the Government of India, admitted that the 'hills were never brought under any sort of regular administration by the Burmese government; the Chiefs were practically independent; and it was therefore not considered that the absorption of Upper Burma into British India had involved the incorporation into the British empire of the Chin-Lushai Hills'.¹⁴ It was only after the famous Chin-Lushai Expeditions (1889-92) that the hill tracts had been annexed by the British.

Before the British integrated the so-called 'unadministered' Chin-Lushai hills into the British Indian Empire, the Indo-Burma frontier was home to several indigenous tribes sharing common ancestry, but culturally distinct from the culture that existed in the neighbouring valleys on the east and the west. The British colonial census categorized these groups of tribes as Kuki, Chin, Lushai, etc., and referred to their cultural space as Chin-Lushai land. After the hill tracts were annexed in the late nineteenth century, they were divided into three administrative units: the Chin Hills District was placed under Burma, the South Lushai Hills under Bengal, and North Lushai Hills under Assam. Later on, North and South Lushai Hills were amalgamated into one, under Assam. During the 1890s boundary demarcation, some tribes were allocated to Manipur, while others were divided between the Chin and Lushai Hills. Despite the administrative divisions, the ethnic and cultural ties among these hill tribes remain strong. Historical figures, from Fan Ch'ou in 862 AD to Father Sangermano in 1783 and British military and civil officials like T. A. Trant, A. P. Phayre, B. S. Carey, G. A. Grierson etc. in the 19th century, undoubtedly recognised the ethnic commonality of the indigenous hill tribes who inhabited the Indo-Burma frontier. They referred to them as 'Shou', 'Dzo', 'Zo', 'Yo', 'Jo', believed to be variations of the original term Zo/Zhou. Regardless of spelling, their cultural and ethnic connections are clear. Living in a contiguous geographical space,

their history and ethnicity in the India-Myanmar borderland have largely been overlooked by scholars and politicians. Recognizing these transborder communities today is essential for fostering good neighbourly relations between India and Myanmar.

With the growing importance of borderlands studies in different parts of the world, it is important to look at the India-Myanmar borderland through the lens of borderland studies. Moving beyond state-centric perspective which see the border as a 'fixed' line or 'outer-limit' of political control, one needs to understand to what extent modern political border cut across kinship ties, divided a 'culture area', and dismembered members of the same ethnic community. Recognising this complex historical development on the Indo-Myanmar borderland is key to bringing a more durable relationship between India and Myanmar in the future.

Border, Security, and Refugee Crisis

India shares 1643 kilometers long land border with Myanmar. Four northeastern states which share border with Myanmar are: Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Manipur (398 km), Nagaland (215 km) and Mizoram (510 km). Unlike Myanmar, which has frequently been under military regime, India is a liberal democratic country. In spite of their fundamental differences, India's relations with Myanmar remains intact and keep moving on as both the countries needs each other on several fronts. One of this is on the issue of security in the region. No matter how unstable is the political situation in Myanmar, India tries to maintain good neighbourly relations with her particularly for strategic and security reasons, if not economic.

For over many decades, India's insurgencies problem in the northeastern sector has been one of the reasons why she has to engage with Myanmar. What this paper concerns more is what is happening in the Northeastern states on the backdrop of the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, which has left so many people seeking refuge in different parts of the world, including India. The Spring Revolution, as the anti-Military regime movement has been popularly known, faced fierce military crackdown from the Tatmadaw. The junta killed protesters, forcefully disappeared hundreds of people, tortured and raped people in custody over the next several months.¹⁵ The army destroyed homes, cut off essential services, and shot at fleeing civilians.¹⁶ Trapped amidst the conflict, people sought refuge in neighbouring Thailand and India. In India, refugees primarily crossed into Manipur and Mizoram not only due to their porous borders with Myanmar but more importantly because of the ethnic affinity the people share beyond border. As a result of the Spring Revolution, many Myanmarese sought refuge in neighbouring countries, the bulk of which came to Mizoram.

The bulk of Myanmar refugees largely belonging to ethnic Chins, Kachins, and Karens came to the border states of Mizoram and Manipur. Reports

highlighted that the impact of the Myanmar military operations was most strongly felt in Chin State, Sagaing, and Kachin State, which house the armed groups that were fighting the military junta for the longest time. As a result, maximum displacement took place in these regions. Mizoram was the first state to receive refugees. Refugees, mainly from Chin-Kuki or Zo ethnic groups, also crossed over to Manipur through the 398 km-long border.

According to UNHCR's latest data as of May 31, 2024, India alone hosted 90,700 Myanmar refugees.¹⁷ Earlier, on June 19, 2023, UNHCR reported an influx of 'Myanmar refugees' to the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram post-February 1, 2021, reaching 54,300. The Ciau corridor in Champhai district of Mizoram is one of the most prominent destinations for people from Myanmar. The numbers keeps fluctuating depending on the intensity of clashes between the PDFs and the Junta forces in the border areas.

In Mizoram, the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA) also maintained a proper record of refugees entering Mizoram based on the data of the District Level Committee reports. The latest report on Myanmar refugees in Mizoram as of September 28, 2024, according to the Central Young Mizo Association (CYMA) record, is 33712, which includes male, female, and children.¹⁸

In Manipur, with the influx of refugees continuing despite strict restrictions, the Chief Minister of Manipur reported to the Assembly in February 2024 that "6746 Illegal Myanmar were detected and 259 were pushed back to the native place. After verification, biometrics were taken up and are kept in temporary shelter". And the rest are being housed in temporary shelters to prevent them from mixing with the general public. As per the instruction of the MHA, the government of Manipur started capturing biographic and biometric details of 'illegal migrants'.¹⁹ In Kamjong district alone official report says that biometrics of 5000 Myanmar nationals have been recorded.²⁰

The Indian State and its Response

India's reaction to the influx of refugees from Myanmar was issued immediately in February 2021, asking the Assam Rifles to stay alert and work towards preventing any possible movement of refugees from Myanmar to India. However, the Indian government promptly acted upon by issuing a communique on March 10, 2021. An advisory issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to the chief secretaries of four northeastern states, such as Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, and the Director General of Assam Rifles, stated, 'As you are aware, there is a probability of a large-scale illegal influx into Indian territory through the Indo-Myanmar border due to current internal situation in Myanmar'.²¹ It further stated, 'Now, it has been reported that an illegal influx from Myanmar has started. Attention is invited to MHA letter no. 24013/29/Misc12017-CSR III (i) Dtd. 08.08.2017 addressed to Chief Secretaries of all State Governments and Union Territory (UT) Administrations wherein instructions were issued to sensitize all law

enforcement and intelligence agencies for taking prompt steps in identifying the illegal migrants and initiate the deportation processes expeditiously and, without delay'. The letter stated Foreigners Division, MHA had also issued instructions to Chief Secretaries Vide letter no 25022/63/ 2017-F. IV Dtd. 28 02.2018 advising them to sensitize the law enforcement and intelligence agencies for taking appropriate prompt steps for identifying illegal migrants, their restrictions to specific locations as per provisions of law, capturing their biographic and biometrics particulars, cancellation of fake Indian documents and legal proceedings including initiation of deportation proceedings as per provisions of law. Further, it is reiterated that State Governments and UT Administrations have no powers to grant 'refugee' status to any foreigner and India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol. It further stated, 'In view of above, you are requested to take appropriate action as per law to check illegal influx from Myanmar into India'.²²

The advisory came in the aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 which not only shattered the people's dream of harvesting their democratic rights and peaceful coexistence in Myanmar but also drove the country towards unprecedented political turmoil and revolution.

Freedom Movements along the borderland

The Burma government took conscious decision when it framed the Burma Passport Rules which was issued on January 10, 1948. The Burma Passport Rules recognised the transnationality of the indigenous hill tribes of the India-Burma borderland by giving exemption from entry in Burma without a passport:

"Indigenous nationals of those countries, whose land borders are coterminous with the border of the Union, entering the Union by land who are members of hill tribes inhabiting areas adjacent to the land border, provided that this exemption shall not apply to any such person who proceeds into the Union beyond twenty-five miles from the land border."²³

Similar exemption had been given by the Indian Passport Rules which was revised in 1950-51. Though originally issued in 1921, the revised Rules clearly stated:

"As a result of the revision of the Indian Passport Rules, the free movement between India and Burma of members of Indian and Burmese hill tribes living in the territories adjacent to the Indo-Burmese land frontier who habitually travel between these countries, was hampered. In order to remove this difficulty and since member of Indian hill tribes entering Burma by land who do not proceed beyond 25 miles from the land border are exempt from the provisions of the Burma Passport Rules, similar exemption has been granted to members of hill tribes entering India by land."²⁴

The government of India maintained the Free Movement Regime upto 25 miles (40 Km) till 1968. However, it was revised and reduced it to 16 Km in 2004. In its 2011-12 annual report, the MHA observed that the FMR makes the

international border extremely porous, and the hilly and inhospitable terrain provides cover for the activities of various Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs). 'The unfenced Indo-Myanmar border with FMR is thus being exploited by various IIGs', the report said.²⁵

In 2018, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the Agreement between India and Myanmar on Land Border Crossing, which is a re-affirmation of the existing relationships with regard to border crossing.

"The Agreement will facilitate regulation and harmonization of already existing free movement rights for people ordinarily residing in the border areas of both countries. It will also facilitate movement of people on the basis of valid passports and visas which will enhance economic and social interaction between the two countries. The Agreement is an enabling arrangement for movement of people across India-Myanmar border. It is expected to provide connectivity and enhance interaction of the people of North Eastern States of India with the people of Myanmar. The Agreement would give a boost to the economy of the North East and allow us to leverage our geographical connections with Myanmar to boost trade and people to people ties. The Agreement will safeguard the traditional rights of the largely tribal communities residing along the border which are accustomed to free movement across the land border."²⁶

The announcement for the immediate suspension of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in the India-Myanmar borderland by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah on February 8, 2024 was shocking to the borderland people. Under the FMR, any member of a 'hill tribe', who is a citizen of either India or Myanmar, and who resides within 16 km of the border on either side, can cross on the production of a border pass, usually valid for a year, and can stay up to two weeks per visit. Mr Shah posted on X:

"It is Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Ji's resolve to secure our borders. MHA has decided that the FMR between India and Myanmar be scrapped to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's North Eastern States bordering Myanmar. Since the Ministry of External Affairs is currently in the process of scrapping it, MHA has recommended the immediate suspension of the FMR."²⁷

So, when Free Movement Regime (FMR) was suspended on February 8, 2024, there were mix reactions from border states of Northeast India. While Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh welcome the Centre government's decision, Mizoram and Nagaland took a firm stand to resist such move and appealed to the centre to reconsider its decision. Prema Khandu, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh says the scrapping of the FMR 'holds immense significance for our

internal security and demographic integrity of the North Eastern States. The historic decision to fence the border will help curb illegal immigration and strengthen internal security'. The Chief Minister of Manipur Biren Singh also termed the decision of the step taken by the government a 'historic decision in curbing illegal immigration and strengthening our internal security'.²⁸

However, there was strong reaction from other states to reconsider the decision of scrapping of the FMR. The 14th Nagaland Legislative Assembly passed a resolution on the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Indo-Myanmar Border at the Assembly Secretariat, Kohima on March 1, 2024. Deputy Chief Minister, Yanthungo Patton, introduced the resolution on the floor of the house which was moved for consideration and adoption by the August House. It says, 'this House, hereby, resolves to request the Government of India to reconsider its decision, and to abandon the plan of suspending the FMR and fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border. The House also resolves to request the Government of India to work out regulations for movement of people across the borders in close consultation with the people inhabiting the border areas, and for suitably bringing in the village council authorities concerned in the entire system of regulations'.²⁹

In the same tune, the Mizoram Assembly, on February 28, 2024, adopted a resolution opposing the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the neighbouring country. The resolution, moved by Home Minister K Sapdanga, urged the Centre to reconsider its decision. It urged the Union government to instead take steps to ensure that Zo ethnic people, 'who have been divided in different countries, are unified under one administrative unit'.³⁰

A coordination committee of five non-government organisation from Mizoram such as the Central Young Mizo Association, the Mizo Upa Pawl (association of senior citizens), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuikhawm Pawl (women's federation), Mizo Zirlai Pawl, and Mizo Students' Union, also strongly opposed the scrapping of FMR. The committee stated:

"Being a signatory of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, we believe that our country (India) would have taken measures to assert the rights of indigenous peoples who are divided by international border, as stated in Article 36 of this declaration," the NGO Coordination Committee said in a memorandum to Mr. Shah on February 13. But we are astonished by the government of India's decision to scrap the FMR as well as its attempt to fence the border instead of maintaining and developing relations between the peoples living on both sides of the border."³¹

Besides, very strong opposition was also expressed by ZO Reunification Organisation (ZORO), Zo United and others.

Conclusion

The reaction of the Indian state clearly reflects Anthony Giddens views of the state as a 'power container',³² which controls access to territory through boundary restrictions.³³ For the state, border served as markers of the actual power that states wielded over their own societies.³⁴ As a 'symbol', boundaries are mediums and instruments of social control and the communication and construction of meanings and identities.³⁵ In this context, India's response to Myanmar refugees as given in the MHA advisories to the Northeastern states was not surprising. However, it is also important to understand how the traditional perspective on border and boundaries have changed with the emergence of borderlands studies. Contemporary views on borders and borderlands have greatly changed from traditional conceptual narrative as the study has also expanded from geographers, historians, and economists to include anthropologists, ethnologists, political scientists, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists.³⁶

The Indo-Myanmar borderlands have been too often seen only from the perspective of the colonial and postcolonial states which see the border as the 'outer land limits'.³⁷ But thanks to recent scholarships that seek to overcome this prejudice or limitation by examining the historical connectivity of the region within, without, and beyond.³⁸ The emergence of Zomia, coined by Willem van Schendel, as a culturally distinct area comprising upland/highland of Northeast India and Southeast Asia against lowland civilization³⁹ has set a new paradigm and perspective of area study beyond border.

To be more particular, the erstwhile Chin-Lushai hill tracts, which is now separated by an international boundary that divided them into Burma and India was a 'culture area' wherein several tribal realms of dominance were existed. It was the British rulers who recognised the ethnic affinity and cultural similarity of the hill tribes living in these hill tracts or 'culture area'. According to Kroeber, 'A culture area was a geographical region in which a given culture set a pattern of elements that was reflected by surrounding cultures to diminishing degrees, ascertainable by counting, as one reached the boundaries of the area where the influences of other patterns took over'.⁴⁰ Edward Sapir defines culture areas as 'groups of geographically contiguous tribes that exhibit so many cultural traits in common as to contrast with other such groups'.⁴¹ The tribes inhabiting the Chin-Lushai hills, whether they were known by such names as Chin, Kuki, Lushai etc., during colonial period, not only have cultural similarity, ethnic affinity, linguistically belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman family, and live in a contiguous geographical region, but also have shared myths of origin, myth of the loss of scripts, myth of life after death etc. Therefore, it is important that one takes into consideration the historical and political division of these ethnic community by the colonial and postcolonial states in order to understand the relationship that existed beyond the present political boundary. This is something which the current Indian government

seemed to undermined. A brief review of the policy followed by the colonial and postcolonial state towards the India-Myanmar frontier/borderland communities will be helpful here.

Recent influx of Myanmarese refugees in India elicited contrasting responses from the Indian state and the local population. The situation in the India-Myanmar borderland is viewed through a dual lens: a state-centric perspective focusing on security, demographics, crime, political implications, and adherence to existing refugee policies; and a society-centric viewpoint considering historical, cultural, and social ties that transcend contemporary borders. While the Indian state emphasises security and policy framework, societal responses highlight shared heritage and cultural affinities across colonial and postcolonial boundaries. In states like Mizoram and Manipur, India's strict approach towards Myanmarese refugees is evident through advisories from the Ministry of Home Affairs. India, not party to the UNHCR Refugee Convention, does not have a legal obligation to grant asylum to those fleeing political unrest in Myanmar. Consequently, India's policy revolves around identifying and deporting illegal immigrants⁴² while fortifying the border with Myanmar.

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