

Ethnicity, Territory and Belonging Amidst a Crisis in the Burma-India Borderlands: Issues and Challenges

Min Thang²⁸

Abstract

In recent political history in the Chin state of Burma, Manipur and Mizoram states in Northeast India have also shared experiences of colonization, conflict, and climate change in the India-Burma border. This paper studies the Chin people, better known as Chin-Kuki-Mizo in colonial vernacular, who are today predominantly found at the India-Burma border. The main purpose of this study is to investigate connected histories, territory, free movement regime (FMR), conflict, and displacement that has overwhelmed the India-Burma borderland. I have chosen this topic because after the ethnic conflict in Manipur state of India between Kuki and Meitei communities, the central government of India suspended FMR, giving rise to issues regarding fencing the Indo-Burma border on 6 February 2024. However, the Mizoram and Nagaland states opposed the Center's decision to fence the Indian-Burma border and scrap FMR with the neighbouring country. This research relies on personal observation and secondary data. The author used qualitative research approaches with case studies on the Chin tribes in the India-Burma border. The objective of this study is to understand ethnicity, territory, and belonging amidst conflict in the Chin state of Burma and how those elements impacted the Manipur crisis in India. The research questions are: Why did the central government of India want to suspend FMR and try to fence the India-Burma border? How will the abolishment of FMR and fencing of India-Burma border affect the Chin tribes in their everyday life, including displacement at the India-Burma border?

Keywords: Chin, Conflict, Displaced Persons, Border Issues, Free Movement Regime

Introduction

Today, the Chins are divided into three countries like Burma, India and Bangladesh. They are traditionally called the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. The author applied the word Chin into three countries, Chin in Burma, Mizo in Mizoram, and Kuki in Bangladesh and Manipur state and other Northeast India. This paper is limited to a study among the Chin people who inhabit in the India-Burma border. It is one of the less developed states in their own respective countries. On 1 February 2021, civil war ignited on the India-Burma borderlands, due to the military coup in Burma. On 3 May 2023, the ethnic conflict in Manipur state of Northeast India began between the Kuki and Meitei communities. To put current social and political issues into perspective, it will be helpful to explore the historical context of colonial rule and record and postcolonial states attempt to control movement of hill peoples in the India-Burma border, a people who are

²⁸ Chiang Mai University, Thailand

often ignored in everyday politics and notions of ethnic identity. Historically, the India-Burma borderland has seen continual movement and a flow of people in their everyday life. However, recent ethnic conflict in the Manipur state between Kuki and Meitei communities caused the central government of India to scrap FMR and try to fence the India-Burma border. Thus, both Nagaland and Mizoram are against the Center’s decision but Chief Minister N Biren Singh, Meitei himself welcomes the Center’s decision.

Introduction of Chin-Kuki-Mizo

The India-Burma border have faced destabilizing and destructive conflicts throughout history. In such context, when it involves an ethnic and political conflict it is very important to study the Chin-Kuki-Mizo family, who are living in the India-Burma borderlands. The Chin have been independently living in the present India-Burma borderlands before the British rule and postcolonial times. They have possessed a distinct identity before India and Burma formed into a nation. However, the Chin people were split into three nations by the British, namely Bangladesh, India, and Burma. The Chin leaders of Burma signed the Panglong Treaty with other ethnic nationalities at Panglong, present-day Shan State, in 1947 in order to obtain independence for Burma from the British. Currently existing states in the India-Burma area are Chin and Mizoram. They have permeable international borders and historical linkages to Bangladesh, India, and Burma in border areas. One of the main access points into Northeast India from Southeast Asia is the border between India and Burma (Lalmalsawma et al., 2023, p. 2).

Mizoram and Chin States are small and ethnically distinct sub-states, which have considerably more in common with each other than with their respective ‘parents’ nations of India and Burma. The Mizo say Indian as “*Vai*” and the Chin say Burmese (Bamar) as “*Kawl*.” The terms “*Vai*” and “*Kawl*” mean outsider/backward people or foreigners. They have strong historical, cultural, and ethnic connections. Historically, the Mizo could not be without Chin and Chin could not be without Mizo. J. Shakespeare rightly said that “The Kukis, Lushais (now Mizos) and Chins are the same race” (Shakespeare, 2008). They are a powerful and independent people. T.H. Lewin also writes that they speak one language and have the same customs. They are known to the Bengali as Kookies (Kuki) and to the Burmese as Chin (Lakher) (Lewin, 1869). Apart from the Chin Hills, they also spread over the Hkamti, Somra Tact and Kale-Kabaw-Myittha plain in Upper Burma. Their kindred tribes, namely Kuki and Mizo in colonial parlance, are also largely found in the Northeast states of Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, Manipur and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where they are known by several tribal and sub-tribal appellations (Pau 2022, p.14).

The India-Burma borderlands have been too often seen only from the perspective of the colonial and postcolonial states, which saw the border as the “outer land limits.” The people living near the border between India and Burma are more similar to each other and the Southeast region than they are to their counterparts on the Indian and Burmese mainland. Colonial and postcolonial borders have had significant impact on the relationships between members of the same ethnic community in the borderlands. Examining the interconnected history of people, culture, and religion in the borderlands is the aim of this study (Pau, 2018,

p.2). The Chin Hills (now Chin state) was annexed and put under control by the British in 1895. The annexation of the Chin came after series of cruel military expeditions and harsh disarmament policy adopted by the British. The Chin Hills Regulation of 1896, which recognized traditional chieftainship, established "indirect rule" in the Chin Hills during British rule (Pau, 2022). Despite having the same ancestry and history, the people currently known as Chin in Burma, Mizo in Mizoram, Kuki in Manipur and other Northeast India, and Kuki-Chin in the Chittagong Hill Tract of Bangladesh were split into several administrative entities under British colonial authority and postcolonial states. Since then, cross-border movement has been commonplace in their daily lives and communities.

India-Burma Borderlands

Borders, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands are human creations and are historically constructed spatial entities (Pau, 2018, p.3). Border studies have demonstrated the relationship between colonial rule and border making. The colonial state's enforced administrative framework denotes a unique kind of governance. The history of colonialism is inextricably linked to the creation of India-Burma, especially in the hilly areas of both countries. Throughout the colonial era, persistent efforts were undertaken to define and redraw boundaries. Colonial impressions were left on the Chins during this time, as seen by the boundary-drawing and demarcation that led to the creation of the Lushai Hills and Chin Hills (Puia, 2022, p.5).

Large paths of highland country between India and Burma remained outside the scope of imperial surveys and colonial requests after the British took control of Assam in 1826 and upper Burma in 1886. The native communities positioned themselves between the British Empire's Calcutta and Rangoon, and the so-called Chin tribes were among the final rebel groups to fall under British domination. Owing to language similarities and close proximity, their territory was referred to as the "Chin-Lushai country," while the inhabitants were referred to as either the Lushai-Kuki tribe or "Chin-Kuki." Major military operations to the connecting hill tracts between the Lushai Hills, the Chin Hills, and the southern hills of Manipur were always planned in order to leave the strongest lasting effects of British dominance on the local societies. The culmination of these military actions was the Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889–1890, which introduced colonialism to the Lushai people for good (Vumlallian, 2010, p.58). The boundary between the Chin and Lushai Hills was established in 1901, with some minor modifications made under colonial control in 1921 and 1922, respectively. The "traditional" border between India and Burma was confirmed as the international border by the boundary treaty they signed on March 10, 1967 in Rangoon. At the macro-locality level, the international border therefore produced difference or "otherness" (Pau, 2018, p. 9). “This agreement was largely based upon boundaries established by the British over the period of colonial rule, as can be seen in the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the Manipur-Chin Hills boundary (1894), and the Chin-Lushai Hills (1921). The colonial rulers dubbed the communities along the modern India-Burma border the Chin-Kuki and Lushai, and occasionally they were collectively referred to as the Chin. The boundaries of these ethnic groups were strengthened and defined by colonial administrative borders. As a result, the term "Chin" was adopted by the inhabitants of the Chin Hills, Sagaing, Magwe, and tiny communities in Rakhine State, Burma. The people

of Mizoram, Manipur state, Tripura, Assam, and surrounding areas, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts in modern-day Bangladesh, were referred to as Kuki and Mizo” (Puia, 2020, p. 77).

Prior to colonial times, the Chin Hills remained under the direct administration of the Chief Commissioner of Burma. Bertram S. Carey and Captain Rose were appointed as Political Officers. The Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) also divided into two areas. The southern Lushai Hills was placed under Bengal on 1 April 1891, and the Northern Lushai Hills was placed under Assam on June 3, 1890. Captain Herbert Browne was the Chief Commissioner of Assam and exercised general control over all departments with headquarter at Aizawl (Lalthlengliana, 2007, p. 38-39). The British administrative controlled these hills with three different authorities, in the north by Assam (now Mizoram), to the south by Bengal (Bangladesh) and the east (the Chin Hill) by the British Burma. From the beginning, it was desirable for the whole Chinland/Zoland known as “the whole Chin-Lushai” country to be under one authority. Furthermore, a conference was thus convened at Calcutta on 25 January 1892, known as the Chin-Lushai Conference, “to discuss civil and military affairs connected with the control of the Lushai and Chin Hills.” The conference discussed for four days various aspects of the future administration, military control, and the Chin-Lushai country (Lalthlengliana, 2007, p.132-133). The Conference desired to bring the Chin-Lushai under one administration (Puan, 2022, p. 151), but unfortunately, this did not happened until today. However, the Chin people from Burma, India and Bangladesh continue to aspire for the reunification as one nation in the future.

In 1937, the political movement in Burma broke away from British India, dividing the Chinland into two nations: Burma and India. When both India and Burma gained independence, the British government was unable to bring the two portions of the Chin territory back together. Between the areas, they drew an international border. Since then, the territories of the Chin people have remained divided; some now reside in India, while others do so in Burma (Zomi Community USA, 2023, p. 5). The first blow to the Chins' national awareness came with the Chin Hills' independence from the Indian Union. The Chins of the Chin Hills, however, lacked the political maturity to object to this. Additionally, Chin Hills did not have a political party at the time to express their objections. Burma's separation from other regions frequently had an impact on the sociopolitical evolution of the Chin people (Chatterjee, no date, p. 24). When the Burma Act of 1935 separated Burma from British India, the British divided Chin country into two regions without consulting the people who lived there. British Burma assumed control of the eastern portion of Chin country, while British India continued to administer the western portion. Without consulting the people, the western portion of Chin land was partitioned once more after India and Pakistan gained independence from British India in 1947. A portion was annexed by India, while the remaining portion became part of east Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Bawhrin, 2002, p.9).

Colonial policies imposed boundaries, split up land, isolated communities, and declared sovereign power. Tribal communities had no frontiers or bounds prior to the imposition of colonial power. These borders and policies were upheld by postcolonial states at the end of colonial control, upholding "imperial forms of territoriality" (Puia 2021, p.415). However, because of the various state policies of the participating nations, the border impacted the sense of belonging in diverse ways. While Chin is the officially recognized name in Burma, Mizo is

the official identity of Mizoram, India. Moreover, cross-border migrations were still permitted, and there were instances in which social links between ethnic groups were reinforced via marriage, trade, and other daily interactions (Puia, 2020, p. 78).

Rise of Nationalism

The Anglo-Kuki War of 1917–1919 was waged in opposition to British expansionist imperialism and resulted in the subjugation of the Kuki Hills. Before colonial rulers came, Kukis lived rather independently. With no outside help or state to manage them, each village managed its own affairs and was politically and economically independent. (Kipgen and Haokip, 2021, p.1) Political and non-political organizations started to emerge in the late 1920s, coinciding with the growth of nationalism. The first Chin political organization in the Chin Hills was the Chin Hills Union Organization (CHUO), which was established in Mindat in 1928. Likewise, the Young Lushai Association, established in 1935, emerged as “the pioneer body to rouse the political consciousness among educated Mizo” in the Lushai Hills. The 1946 formation of the Lushai Union (later Mizo Union) resulted in a split among its members; one group wanted the Lushai Hills to become part of Burma after its independence, while the other group wanted to stay in India for ten years before deciding on its future status (Pau, 2018, p. 14). The United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) was established as a political organization on July 5, 1947. All Mizo people, including the Kuki-Chin in Bangladesh and the Chin in Burma, were to be united under one goal. The UMFO's members believed that Chins in Burma and Lushais in British India belonged to the same racial stock and that they should be under Burma (Lalshmi, 2010, p. 185). Despite the fact they were living in separate nations, they had a common goal to one day unite as a single country and help one another out when necessary. In 1947, India gained its independence, and the Mizo Union renamed itself as the Young Mizo Association (YMA). It developed into the most influential and long-lasting social network in Mizoram. UMFO promoted a single "Zoram" (Zo Nation) to be made up of these three nations (Joy & Schendel, 2015, p. 248). Today, YMA plays a very significant role in Mizo society.

Following their independence in 1947 from India, 1948 from Burma, and 1971 from Bangladesh, the Chin people have faced discrimination in their various nations. Mainland Indians have referred to the Mizo as sub-nationalism in India. Mainland India has not just oppressed Mizoram but the entire Northeastern regions. The Mizoram people continually live in terror of being assimilated (Lakshmi, 2010, p. 185). Under military control and the central government led by the majority Bamar, the Chin people of Burma continued to face the greatest persecution and discrimination. There was armed conflict shortly after Burma's independence. By the 1960s, a burgeoning movement in the Chin state was being fanned by the suppression of federalist Chin leaders. Ethnic leaders of the Chin people in Mizoram, India, founded the Chin National Front (CNF) in March 1988 with the goal of "restoring democracy and federalism in the Union of Burma" as well as the Chin people's right to self-determination. In response to the CNF, however, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) further militarized Chin state, forcing thousands of Chin people to flee across the border into Mizoram (Physicians for Human Rights, 2011, p. 15).

A famine in 1959 brought on by the bamboo's blossoming badly impacted the Mizoram people. Allegations that the Indian government did not act appropriately in response to food shortages gave rise to an underground statehood movement in Mizoram. The armed conflict between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Indian government in Mizoram lasted for almost 20 years. For the first time in its history, the Indian armed forces responded with airstrikes, bombing its own people. Many Mizo fled to Bangladesh and Burma. In Burma, there were still a lot of Mizo people, particularly in Tahan of Kalay, which is near the Chin Hills in the Sagaing region. A few MNF activists and insurgents sought safety in the Chin state during this period. As the need for inexpensive labor in Mizoram grew in the 1970s, a growing number of Chins from Burma travelled there. Due to their similar ethnicity, the Chin at this time had very few issues and easily assimilated into Mizo society. A deal that promised Mizoram would become a separate state under the Indian federal system brought an end to the dispute between MNF and the Indian government in 1986. Mizoram became a state officially on February 20, 1987. Tension between the populace of Burma and the reigning military government was sharply building during this period, and an uprising happened in 1988 in Burma. Many Chins crossed the border to seek shelter in the state of Mizoram due to rising human rights abuses and conflict in Burma (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 16, Emily, 2023).

In addition, the Kuki from Manipur and the Chin from Burma were involved in a Mizo movement that aimed to establish Greater Mizoram (Haokip, 2023, p. 9). Before the MNF signed a peace accord with the central government of India and Mizoram state was formed in northeast India, Tial Khal, the founder of the CNF, was active in the MNF, an armed resistance group that fought mostly against the Indian government. The Indian government had provided monetary support from Mizoram residents to CNF. Students from the 1988 uprising attended protests alongside other young Chin people. Among them was an organization known as the Burmese Democratic Front (BDF), which was living in a camp for refugees close to Champhai, Mizoram, and was supported by the Indian government (Peter, 2013, p. 57-58).

Displacement Issues

The Chin people moved to the Mizoram state in India, which shared a border with the western Burmese state of Chin State. The Chin people have systematically been mistreated by the dictatorship for a long time. Following the coup in 2021, citizens throughout the state adjusted by demonstrating peacefully; nevertheless, the military violently attacked, detained, tortured, and murdered peaceful protestors. With the junta's ruthless killing, torturing, imprisonment, and other abuses of civilians, many young people took up arms in order to protect themselves and others from its attacks (Damian, 2021, pp. 1-2). Chin migration to Mizoram began in the mid-1980s and increased in the early 2000s with the combination of worsening political conditions in Burma and famine in the Chin state. Prior to the 2021 coup, all nine townships in the Chin state came together to form the Chinland Defense Force (CDF) on 4 April 2021 and joined CNF to resist the junta. Thus, junta forces indiscriminately attacked civilians in the Chin state, significantly causing human death and burning of homes. Furthermore, the Chin people crossed the international border for safety. Armed conflicts had a significant human cost in the Chin state of Burma. As a result, over 60,000 Chin people fled to the Indian border. The worst affected areas such as Mindat and Thantlang township faced largescale shelling and arson

attacks from the military regime. In Thantlang, the military torched 1,277 houses, including 12 churches and religious buildings, forcing most of the population of the town to flee in October 2021 (Sang, 2023, p. 13). As many forced displacement situations persisted for protracted periods of time, the proportion of older people in these populations increased. However, the resources and attention of the central government in India and international community was insufficient for the needs and perspectives of Chin people in humanitarian emergencies and neglected the India-Burma borderlands. In parallel, scholarly attention on refugees and forced displacement populations on the India border has relatively been neglected.

India supported pro-democracy parties during the 1988 uprising by giving them material support, establishing camps for refugees in Manipur and Mizoram, and strongly denouncing the junta. Following the coup in 2021, India has stayed silent about the Burmese problem and is interacting with the junta in hopes that it will continue to assist in containing rebels operating along the border (Sreeparna, 2023). Authorities in the Indian border state of Manipur have reportedly started gathering biometric information from thousands of Burmese residents who escaped fighting between armed ethnic groups and the Burmese military, according to an RFA report. Since the end of July 2023, the Indian government has begun gathering biometric data (RFA Burmese, 2023).

As of 2023, India is hosting over 74,600 refugees from Burma, more than an estimated 54,100 of whom arrived since the 2021 coup. Over 40,000 refugees from Burma were living in Mizoram and 8,250 were living in the Manipur state (OCHA, 2023). The Mizo community collective provided support to the Chin refugees as a brotherhood tied by humanity and ethnicity. Many camps set up across the different districts of Mizoram, claiming the same ancestry as the Zo tribe. They were divided by the British rule and as a result were given different names, even postcolonial times. The ethnic ties are strong despite the government of India directing the Mizoram state to send them back to their abusive military government. Although the state government of Mizoram, civil society, and NGOs took the burden of hosting their Chin brothers and sisters from across the border, there was a lack of support from the central government of India, the international community, and agencies. The Chin displaced people needed support and sustainable solutions, and the Chin and Mizo communities both faced pain and agony. On an urgent basis, food, clothing, safe shelter, drinking water and sanitation and women's dignity kits were all needed, as many of the displaced continued to live in camps built by communities with grass roofs and bamboo and plastic walls (Rini, 2023).

Manipur Issues

The State of Manipur is made up of a diverse people. There are two well differentiated groups of people: the hill (Naga-Kuki) and valley (Meitei). They are differentiated not only socially but even territorially. The non-tribal (Meitei) group of the state embraced Hinduism, while a large majority of the tribal (Naga-Kuki) groups embraced Christianity. The Meiteis of the valley sit close to the seat of power at Imphal and enjoy the benefits of royal patronage while exploiting the rich land resources of the valley revealed in their cultural heritage with the dance, drama, music and the worship of Hindu deity (Dikshit & Jutta, 2014, p. 320). The three largest groups are the Nagas (24%), Kuki-Chin (16%) and Meitei (53%). Currently, the Nagas and

Kukis are recognized as “Scheduled Tribes” (ST) under the Indian constitution, recognizing their disadvantaged socio-economic status. However, the Meitei are not recognized as ST. The conflict between the Kuki and Meitei communities started on 3 May 2023 when the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) called to protest a Manipur High Court order, which sought the recommendation of ST status for the Meitei community. The Kuki-Naga community in Manipur feared that granting ST status to the Meiteis would lead to the loss of job opportunities and allow the Meiteis to acquire land in the hills, pushing the Indigenous Peoples out of their traditional homelands (Singe, 2023). In Manipur, the Meitei occupied 10% of the land and hill tribes occupied 90% of the land (Rinku, 2023).

After six months of violence, as of 7 November 2023 the ethnic conflict between the Kuki and Meiteis communities in the Manipur state reported a total death of 180 (Surinder, 2023). On 19 July 2023, a horrific video surfaced of two Kuki women being paraded naked on a road by a group of Meitei men in Manipur on 4 May 2023, which shook the country (Signe, 2023). Many India media and state controlled media (controlled by Meitei groups) stated that one of the key issues in the ongoing conflict in Manipur is the migration of the Kuki-Chin peoples into India from Burma, due to the 2021 coup. The Meiteis have accused these migrants and the suspected “narco-terror network” along the Indo-Burma border of fomenting trouble in the state. The Kukis have blamed the Meiteis and the Chief Minister N Biren Singh, a Meitei himself, used this as pretext for “ethnic cleansing” (Deeptiman, 2023). The separation is even more evident by seeing that the ethnic cleansing operation is complete with the valley having been cleansed of the Kukis and the hills being cleansed of the Meiteis, including government officials and members of the Legislative Assembly (Signe, 2023).

The violence has affected all communities in the state. Around 200 people have been killed and more than 70,000 people have been displaced, including at least 10,000 children. There are more than 4,694 civilian properties that have been destroyed. The capital, Imphal, has been cleansed of the Kukis, and the second largest town of Churhandpur has been cleansed of the Meitei. Approximately 5,600 weapons and 650,000 rounds of ammunition went missing from the State Armories. Both Kuki and Meitei communities have been armed to the teeth with weapons from various insurgent groups (Signe, 2023). Manipur Chief minister N. Biren Singh said that the state has requested the Centre to permanently freeze the FMR between India and Burma that allows people residing near the international border to travel 16 km into each other’s territories without any document (The Times of India, 2023).

Free Movement Regime Issues

The India-Burma border is unfenced, and individuals on both sides have familial and ethnic connections leading to the establishment of the FMR in the 1970s. The 1,643 km long Indo-Burma border, which passes through Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, currently has FMR and is guarded by Assam Rifles. It was implemented in 2018 as part of India’s Act East policy, an effort to boost the region’s economy by boosting India’s trade with Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and other Asian nations. It is a regime that has allowed tribes on both sides to travel without any visa restrictions, maintain their age-old ties, and engage in barter trade. People coming from Burma particularly look for employment

opportunities in India, as well as better education facilities. With many of the hill tribes sharing ethnicities, it is also a regime that has kept their cultural connections alive (Neeraj, 2024).

The ethnic conflict in Manipur between Kuki and Meitei community in Northeast India, resulted in the Indian central government abolishing the FMR along the Burma border on 2 January 2024 (Neeraj, 2024). Within the FMR framework, every member of hill tribes, whether a citizen of India or Burma could cross over by presenting a border pass with a one-year validity. The government deployed military forces, causing an “exchange of populations” between communities. The displaced seeking refuge in relief camps and neighboring states raised concerns of a potential civil war (Shashank, 2024). The Center is in talks with Burma authorities to end the free movement of people and goods on the porous 1,643 km-long India-Burma border. The FMR is started in Manipur state of India-Burma border by the central government India, and it is try to complete within four and half years (Namrata, 2024). This will affect both sides of the local people, especially the Chin people in their own land in their everyday life.

Local People Opposed Center Abolish of FMR and Border Fencing

Right after the Center announced to abolish FMR and install a border fence, the Zo Reunification Organization (ZORO) and local NGOs in Mizoram strongly opposed the idea that would divide the Zofate (Zo people) residing on both sides. ZORO urged the Government of India to reconsider its decision to terminate the connections of the Zo people living on the international border areas of India and Burma. Zo unification meant bringing all ethnic communities, Mizos of Mizoram, Kuki of Manipur, Chins of Burma and Bangladesh, under one administrative umbrella. The hilly area of Manipur adjoining Mizoram is inhabited by the Zo community who share the same culture, religion, tradition and ancestry. Following ethnic conflict violence in Manipur, over 13,000 people from the Kuki community in Manipur have taken shelter in Mizoram. The majority of those who reached Mizoram belonged to the Chin community from Burma, who share ancestry, ethnicity, and culture with the Mizos of Mizoram (Bikash, 2024).

The Mizoram Assembly on 28 February 2024 adopted a resolution opposing the Center’s decision to fence the Indian-Burma border and scrap the FMR with its neighboring country. The resolution, moved by Home Minister K Sapdanga, urged the Center to reconsider its decision. It urged the Union government to instead take steps to ensure the Zo ethnic people, “who have been divided in different countries, are unified under one administrative unit.” While moving the resolution, Sapdanga said the Zo ethnic people, who have inhabited Mizoram and the Chin Hills of Burma for centuries and once lived together under their own administration, have been geographically divided when the British occupied the region. “The Zo ethnic people cannot accept the India-Burma border, which has been imposed on them by the British. They have been dreaming of reunification under one administrative unit someday” (The Times of India, 2024). The Mizo people held demonstrations, and a few months later, on 1 March 2024, the Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) passed a resolution against scrapping the FMR and fencing the India-Burma border areas (Nagaland Post, 2024)

The resolution was against the Center’s decision to fence the border and end the over seven-decade old bilateral FMR between the two countries (Times of India, 2024). The Nagaland assembly state requested the Center The Nagaland assembly state it would request the Center “to reconsider its decision and abandon plans of suspending the FMR and fencing along the Indo-Burma border.” The resolution says that “these measures will seriously disrupt the age-old historical, social, tribal and economic ties of the Naga people living on both sides of the international border” (Times of India, 2024). On the other hand, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh welcomed the Center’s decision. Manipur, in his budget speech on 28 February 2024, stated that “from major policy decisions like the discontinuation of the FMR, border fencing to improving the infrastructure and equipment of our security forces, we have left no stone unturned to ensure our state’s security” (The Times of India, 2024). There will be social and political impacts on the Chin people in the borderland regarding their ethnicity, border issues, political, conflict, displacement and everyday life.

Crisis Become Political Unity

The political crisis has witnessed a surge of political unification among the Chin people in the borderland. They are assisting and understanding each other more than before, supported by strong solidarity and humanitarian response from the people of Mizoram. The response of the central government and the local people bear significance in creating understanding of Mizo’s perception of border and belonging.

The Government of India issued a directive to seal the borders and send refugees back by tightening the border control. The Government of Mizoram has opened its borders and doors to the people fleeing the violence. In his letter to the Prime Minister of India, Pu Zoramthanga, the former Chief Minister of Mizoram, notes that deportation of the refugees is not acceptable to Mizoram (Puia, 2022, p. 12).

On 16 March 2021, a Mizo member of parliament requested that the Ministry of Home Affairs change its policy on refugees, stating the people of Mizoram would not accept the deportation of refugees “until the restoration of peace and normalcy in Burma” reasoning that “they are our brothers,” and “sending them back would mean killing them” (June, 2023, p. 12). Since July 2023, the Indian government has been collecting biometric data from Burmese refugees in the Indian border region, especially in Manipur. Refugees from Burma are required to record their fingerprints, eyes, face and voice (RFA, 2023). Mizoram state and district political officials from multiple parties are supportive of the refugees from Burma. The Mizo National Front (MNF), Zoramthanga, had urged the Central Government to treat people fleeing from Burma as refugees and not as undocumented aliens. Currently, the Mizoram government allows Chin and other refugee children in India to be enrolled in school (Chin Association of Maryland, 2023, p. 12).

The Chin-Mizo has often been tied to identity discourses and the assertion of a pan-ethnic identity, which emphasizes the shared cultural origins of the two communities. Pan-ethnic identities have been asserted under various labels such as Chin-Kuki-Mizo (as Zo). The most influential pan-identity movement in Mizoram is Zo, which includes residents of Mizoram, Chin state, and Sagaing region in Burma; Assam, Manipur and Tripura in India; and the

Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Mizo and Chin identity discourses reject identification as Indian or Burmese, and the Chin and Mizo identities are both defined in distinction from their states of citizenship, India and Burma (McConnachie, n.d., p. 6). The Indian government's stance on its border and national security for its citizens, therefore, leads to reluctance to accept Burmese refugees in their own land. The perspective of the Mizo, including the state government, shows the idea of identity and belonging, as the Chin-Mizo share a blood relation. The Chin-Kuki-Mizo have long aspired reunification and live under one administration as Zoram (Zo nation) (Puia, 2022, p. 13).

The MNF movement and the leaders of Mizo demanded independence from the central government of India for the Mizo inhabited areas, including Chin Hills. However, later this led to granting of statehood of Mizoram in 1986 by the central government of India (Puia, 2022, p. 14).

After the ethnic conflict in Minapur, on 5 May 2023, the 10 Kuki MLAs in Manipur state submitted a representation to the Hon'ble Home Minister of India with the demand for separate administration, expressing a strong desire to create a Kukiland or Zo country, comprising parts of India, Burma and Bangladesh (Rinku, 2023). Current Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma recently met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar where Burmese refugees are residing in Mizoram. The Chief Minister also expressed his wish for a Greater Mizoram as part of Akhand Bharat. Lalduhoma further stated people on both sides of the border share the desire is to come under one administration, and that the refugees seeking shelter inside Mizoram are not treated differently but as brothers and sisters (Bikash, 2024). It is time for the Center government to understand the importance of engaging with border people and supporting them.

Conclusion

The India-Burma border was created by humans, especially during colonial times. It has continued to be used in post-colonial times without consulting the inhabitants of the border regions. They are divided into separate administrations, laws and orders of different countries but they don't see each other as strangers due to their shared blood tied. Ethnic territorial movements started within a decade after independence of India and Burma from colonial rule (and some even before). Cross-border movement in the India-Bangladesh and the India-Burma borderlands were common in the everyday lives of the communities.

They were not only movement of insurgent groups and their support, but also of the common people who were forced to flee violence perpetrated by either the Indian army/Burmese Army or armed resistance groups. During the height of the Mizo movement in the then Lushai/Mizo Hills people from this hill flee to others neighboring hills to escape torture and violence by the Indian army forces and at the same time Chin people flee to other sides to escape torture and violence from Burmese army forces where their ethnic tribes are largely resides in border regions (Haokip, 2023, p. 2). Indian and Burmese authorities have discriminated its own citizens especially minority groups including Chin-Kuki-Mizo. In reality, India most of Northeast India are isolated by the mainland India because they are historically, physically, and culturally different from mainland India. At the same time in Burma majority of Bamar

and military have controlled the country and discriminated the Chin and non-Bamar nationalities.

The cross-border movement in these regions was not limited to insurgent groups and their supporters but also included ordinary people forced to flee violence inflicted by either the Indian or Burmese armies, as well as armed resistance groups. During the peak of the Mizo movement in the then Lushai/Mizo Hills, residents fled to neighboring hills to escape torture and violence by Indian army forces, while Chin people crossed to other areas to avoid persecution by Burmese army forces. These ethnic communities, largely residing in the border regions, faced severe repression (Haokip, 2023, p. 2). Both Indian and Burmese authorities have discriminated against their own citizens, particularly minority groups such as the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. In practice, much of Northeast India remains isolated from mainland India due to historical, geographical, and cultural differences. Similarly, in Burma, the majority Bamar population and the military have dominated the country, marginalizing Chin and other non-Bamar ethnic groups.

However, Mizoram stand out as a peaceful and developed state, unlike the Chin in Burma, Chin-Kuki in Bangladesh and Kuki in Manipur who remain less developed and isolated in their respective places. This is one of the reasons why conflict and migration from Chin state, Manipur, and Bangladesh to Mizoram persist until today. Historically, the Mizos are youngest among the ethnic family, but their action and responsibilities resemble those of an elder. Today, the Mizo language is widely used by Chin-Kuki-Mizo in Mizoram and other part of Northeast India, the Chin Hills of Burma, and the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh as a medium of communication among themselves and with the Mizos. This shows that they share growing awareness of political crisis and a sense of unity and support as brother and sisters. In Chin State, language is a significant problem; because of political unrest in the state, many fled to Mizoram, where they learn Mizo language. In the future, the Mizo language is likely to be used as a common language by the entire Chin-Kuki-Mizo family, promoting more unity and deeper understanding among the Chin groups.

The abolishment of the FMR and fencing of border will affect local people in relation to their land, friendships, history, culture, customs, economic, and everyday life. Those engaged in daily work and cultivation on both sides will be directly influenced by this. Mizoram is dependent on trade from Burma; thus, many Mizo businesses will face impacts. When the central government announced the abolishment of FMR and fencing border, on 16 May 2024, a peaceful demonstration was organized in Zokhawthar bordering Burma, and many people from both sides expressed their views in social media. Due to the 2021 coup and ongoing civil war in Burma, many Chin people fled to Mizoram for safety, where they were welcomed by the Mizo and given land to build camps, being treated as their brother and sister. In times of hardship and difficulties, the Mizo people have supported their brothers and sisters from Burma, Bangladesh, and Manipur.

They have provided and support as much as possible, even though the state is poor and has limited resources, and lacks of support from the central government and international community for the displaced people. NGOs in India also have limited funds, and it is difficult for them to address the refugee crisis in Mizoram. For this reason, the central government must

understand the situation of the borderland people and abstain from abolishing the FMR and fencing the border. The Chin people from these states are distinct from their states of citizenship, India and Burma. Indian and Burmese are considered foreigners and they are called “*Vai*” and “*Kawl*” in Mizoram and Chin State, respectively.

The central government of India's decision to abolish the FMR is unacceptable to the Chin from India and Burma. It will affect the idea of a future Greater Chinland (Zo nation). The fencing of border between India-Burma is strongly opposed by the Chin from both sides. The colonial and imperial Indian and Burma authorities continue trying to colonize Chin land through oppressive top-down politics, suppressing and uprooting the Chin people, their land, history, culture and identity in various ways. The central government of India must reconsider decisions related to the FMR issues and refrain from fencing the Indo-Burma border.

References

- Banerjee, S. (2023). *India's connectivity projects with Myanmar post-coup: A stocktaking* (ORF Issue Brief No. 617). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-connectivity-projects-with-myanmar-post-coup/>
- Bawhrin, T. (2002). *The impact of missionary Christianity on the Chins*. India: Thlaawr Bawihrin.
- Bhatia, L. (2010). *Education and society in a changing Mizoram: The practice of pedagogy*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Chatterjee, S. (n.d.). *Making of Mizoram: Role of Laldenga* (Vol. 1). New Delhi: M D Publication Pvt Ltd.
- Chauhan, N. (2024, January 3). Govt may end 'free movement' along India-Myanmar border. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-may-end-free-movement-along-india-myanmar-border-101704219327574.html>
- Chin Association of Maryland. (2023). *Chin refugees in India's Mizoram state helping the refugees and supporting the local communities welcoming them*. Ellicott City.
- Dikshit, K. R., & Dikshit, J. K. (2014). *North-East India: Land, people and economy*. New York: Springer.
- Fishbein, E. (2023, March 15). In India's Mizoram, ethnic ties drive response to Chin conflict. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/in-indias-mizoram-ethnic-ties-drive-response-to-chin-conflict/>
- Haokip, T. (2023). Home and belonging in Northeast India: Ethnic territoriality, conflict and citizenship in the India-Myanmar borderlands. In A. Ranjan & D. Chattoraj (Eds.), *Migration and the search for a home in Eastern South Asia*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Haokip, T. (2023). Territoriality, conflict and citizenship in the India-Myanmar borderlands. *The Journal of Indian and Asia Studies*, 4(1), 1-21.
- Human Rights Watch. (2009). *"We are like forgotten people": The Chin people of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, unprotected in India*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Kaur, S. (2023, November 7). Meitei Christians caught in middle of Manipur violence. *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/november/meitei-christians-kuki-manipur-violence-india-persecution.html>
- Khumukcham, R. (2023, July 1). Some facts on the Manipur violence since 3rd May 2023: Towards balancing the opinions shared in media. *Imphal Times*. <https://www.imphaltimes.com/guest-column/some-facts-on-the-manipur-violence-since-3rd-may-2023-towards-balancing-the-opinions-shared-in-media/>

- Kipgen, N., & Haokip, D. L. (Eds.). (2021). Introduction. In N. Kipgen & D. L. Haokip (Eds.), *Against the empire: Polity, economy and culture during the Anglo-Kuki war, 1917-1919* (pp. 1-12). New York: Routledge.
- Lalthlengliana, C. (2007). *The Lushai hills: Annexation, resistance and pacification (1886-1898)*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- Leth, S. (2023, December 21). Understanding the complex conflict unfolding in Manipur. *IWGIA*. <https://www.iwgia.org/en/news/5329-understanding-complex-conflict-unfolding-manipur.html>
- Lewin, T. H. (1869). *The hill tracts of Chittagong and the dwellers therein; with comparative vocabulary of the hill dialects*. Calcutta: Bengal Printing Company, Limited.
- Lilly, D. (2021, June). *The UN's response to the human rights crisis after the coup in Myanmar: Destined to fail?* International Peace Institute.
- McConnachie, K. (n.d.). *Boundaries and belonging in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands: Chin refugees in Mizoram*. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/196592364.pdf>
- Nagaland Post. (2024, March 2). *Nagaland Legislative Assembly opposes scrapping of Free Movement Regime, border fencing, appeals GoI to reconsider decision*. Retrieved from <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/2024/03/02/nagaland-legislative-assembly-opposes-scrapping-of-free-movement-regime-border-fencing-appeals-goi-to-reconsider-decision/>
- OCHA. (2023). *ACAPS briefing note: India-Myanmar refugees* (28 July). Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/acaps-briefing-note-india-myanmar-refugees-28-july-2023>
- Lalmalsawma, P., Pachuau, J. L. K., & van Schendel, M. (2023). Malaria hotspots and climate change trends in the hyper-endemic malaria settings of Mizoram along the India-Bangladesh borders. *Scientific Reports*.
- Pachuau, J. L. K., & van Schendel, M. (2015). *The camera as witness: A social history of Mizoram, Northeast India*. Delhi: Cambridge House.
- Pandey, S. (2024, January 3). India government to scrap Free Movement Regime between Myanmar and conflict-ridden Northeast: Local reports. *Jurist*. <https://www.jurist.org/news/2024/01/india-government-to-scrap-free-movement-regime-between-myanmar-and-conflict-ridden-northeast-local-reports/#:~:text=The%20Indian%20government%20is%20planning,reports%20from%20local%20news%20sources>
- Pau, P. K. (2020). *Indo-Burma frontier and the making of the Chin Hills: Empire and resistance*. London: Routledge.
- Pau, P. K. (2018). Transborder people, connected history: Border and relationships in the Indo-Burma borderlands. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 35(2), 1-21.

- Pau, P. K. (2022). War within a war: Labour corps and local response in Chin Hills during the First World War. *Small Wars and Insurgencies*.
- Physicians for Human Rights. (2011). *Life under the junta: Evidence of crimes against humanity in Burma's Chin State* (January).
- Puia, R. (2020). Whose border is it anyway? Control, contestation, and confluence in Indo-Myanmar borderlands. *Contemporary South Asia*, 28 (1), 74-85, DOI: 10.1080/09584935.2019.1701631
- Puia, R. (2021). Unsettled autonomy: Ethnicity, tribes, and subnational politics in Mizoram, Northeast India. *Nations and Nationalism*. Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Puia, R. (2022). Border nation, indigenous peoples, state, and the border in Indo-Myanmar borderlands. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2022.2076250
- Ralte, R., & Gathia, S. V. (2023, August 23). Myanmar refugees survive because of ethnic bonds. *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmar-refugees-survive-because-of-ethnic-bonds.html>
- RFA Burmese. (2023, August 11). Indian authorities collect biometric data from Myanmar refugees. *BenarNews*. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/manipura-myanmar-refugees-biometric-data-collected-08112023165316.html>
- Sang, J. N. (2023). *Resistance and the cost of the coup in Chin State, Myanmar*.
- Shakespeare, J. (2008). *The Lushei Kuki clans*. Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute. (Original work published 1908)
- Singh, B. (2024, January 6). ZO Reunification Organization opposes abolishment of FMR, installation of India-Myanmar border fence. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/zo-reunification-organization-opposes-abolishment-of-fmr-installation-of-indo-myanmar-border-fence/articleshow/106599729.cms?from=mdr>
- Swift, P. (2013). *Understanding Chin political participation in Myanmar* [Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison].
- The Times of India. (2023, September 24). Biren: Urged center to freeze free movement pact with Myanmar. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/biren-urged-centre-to-freeze-free-movement-pact-with-myanmar/articleshow/103898372.cms>
- The Times of India. (2024, March 2). After Mizoram, Nagaland adopts resolution against suspension of FMR (Free Movement Regime). *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/nagaland-joins-mizoram-in-opposing-suspension-of-fmr/articleshow/108153023.cms>

The Times of India. (2024, February 28). Mizoram Assembly adopts resolution against Center’s decision to fence India-Myanmar border. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/mizoram-assembly-adopts-resolution-against-centres-decision-to-fence-india-myanmar-border/articleshow/108076664.cms>

Tiwary, D. (2023, July 31). The ‘freed movement regime’ along the India-Myanmar border, and why it has complicated the volatile situation in Manipur. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/free-movement-regime-india-myanmar-border-manipur-migration-explained-8865348/>

Vumlallian Zou, D. (2010). A historical study of the ‘Zo’ struggle. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(14), 58.

Zomi Community USA, Inc. (2023, June). *Report on the Zomi-Myanmar refugees in Malaysia and India*.

.