

Reang Displacement in Tripura: Causes, Repatriation Attempts and the Transition to Permanent Resettlement

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Abstract: One of the significant instances of internal displacement in Northeast India is the 1997 relocation of the Reang, also referred to the Bru tribe, from Mizoram to Tripura. About 30,000 Reangs were compelled to flee Mizoram and live in relief camps in North Tripura for 23 years as a result of ethnic tensions between the Mizos and the Reangs. The government made multiple attempts to return them to Mizoram between 1997 and 2019, but the number of displaced families remains the same. The Quadripartite Agreement, which was signed in January 2020, marked the transition from repatriation to permanent resettlement in Tripura. The main reasons for the 1997 displacement are examined in this paper, along with the Reangs' political standing in Mizoram and the government's attempts to facilitate their return between 1997 and 2019. It also outlines the main rehabilitation and resettlement policies and addresses the shift from repatriation to permanent resettlement under the 2020 Agreement. This paper uses a qualitative research methodology and is primarily based on secondary data obtained from government reports, policy documents, the Indian Census, newspapers, archives, books, and scholarly journals. It examines the history of the Reang tribe, their displacement, and the government's response using descriptive and historical methods. The study finds out that the socioeconomic marginalization, demands for autonomy, cultural differences, political mobilization, and ethnic violence are some of the factors that contribute to displacement. In 2020, the policy was altered to permanent resettlement in Tripura due to the prolonged displacement and the failure of repatriation attempts. The study highlights the shift from immediate relief and repatriation to long-term focus on rehabilitation and permanent settlement.

Keywords: Reang, Ethnic Conflict, Displacement, Quadripartite Agreement, Resettlement Policies

Introduction

The UN Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement defined “Internally Displaced Persons” (IDPs) as “the persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to leave their homes or place of habitual residences in order to prevent the impact of armed conflict, situation of generalized violence, violence of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not exceeded an internationally recognized borders (United Nations, 1998). They are one of the largest ‘at risk’ populations in the world and emerged as pressing humanitarian, human rights, political and security issues facing the man kind today (Barman, 2009). They often have a limited visibility in public discourse and many a times remain outside the public

consciousness and experience a high degree of alienation, marginalization and exclusion from the large society (Hussain, 2006). Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, erosion, droughts, and climate change, ethnic, religious, and linguistic conflicts, war, and revolutions, development-driven causes and governmental policies, and displacement brought on by migrating communities taking over land are just a few of the various forms of internal displacement that Northeast India has experienced throughout history (Phukan, 2013). The most visible example of internal displacement in Northeast India is the relocation of the Reang (Bru) tribe from Mizoram to Tripura due to ethnic violence and conflict with Mizo communities. The displaced Reang people had to live in relief camps for 23 years before the permanent settlement plan was implemented in January 2020. Many repatriation attempts of families failed, preventing their return and leading to a long-term displacement. An agreement was signed in 2018 and 5,407 families (32,876 members) were identified for repatriation. By November 2019, however, only 328 families (1,369 people) have been repatriated to Mizoram (MHA, 2024). As a result, 30,000 displaced Reangs remained in Tripura for more than 20 years, which led to ongoing issues with livelihood security, rehabilitation, and resettlement. The policy intervention was a quadripartite agreement signed on January 16, 2020, by Mizoram Bru Displaced People Forum (MBDF), the governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Indian government. Through this provision the Reangs were guaranteed with residential land, housing assistance, financial support, monthly cash assistance, and free rations, this agreement allowed eligible Reang families to move permanently to Tripura (MHA, 2022.). The guarantee of long-term resettlement replaced earlier programs by Tripura, Mizoram, and Indian Government that focused on repatriation and temporary relief. In the light of this, the current study examines the causes behind the Reangs displacement in Tripura as well as the solutions implemented. The conditions that led to the displacement, the critical stages of government action, and the transition from relief and repatriation to long-term resettlement and rehabilitation are highlighted.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research method based entirely on secondary data. Data is collected from government reports such as the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Resettlement policies of the quadripartite agreement 2020, the Census of India, newspapers, archival records, books, and academic journals. The study also uses a historical and descriptive research design. Historical Research design, according to William. H. Sewell Jr is a systematic process of inquiry into the past that aims to reconstruct past events, identifying causal relationships and explaining historical changes. It also involves the careful collection, evaluation and interpretation of evidence to develop a nuanced understanding of the past. This study uses a historical research design as it studies the historical context of the Reangs in Mizoram, as well as traces the historical roots that led to the displacement of the Reangs in Tripura. Descriptive Research design concerned with describing the characteristics of a particular individual or a group (Kothari, 2004) The purpose of descriptive research is to provide an accurate description of a situation, identify existing problems, and examine patterns or variations

within a population (Siedlecki, 2020) The objectives of descriptive research design to explain the consequences of the displacement and the major resettlement policy such as the government led repatriation attempt and the rehabilitation and resettlement policies which come under the framework of Quadripartite Agreement of 2020.

The collected secondary materials are reviewed and interpreted thematically in relation to the objectives of the study. Particular attention is given to four interconnected areas: the historical and political context of displacement, the major factors contributing to the 1997 displacement, the evolution and outcomes of repatriation initiatives, and the transition from repatriation to permanent resettlement. Information which are obtained from different sources is compared to identify recurring patterns, developments, and differences in accounts. This approach allows the study to develop a contextual understanding of the Reang displacement and the changing nature of government responses over time.

Who is the Reang?

The Reang (Bru) is one of the prominent tribes of Northeast India, with the majority living in the State of Tripura, and small populations living in the neighbouring States of Mizoram and Assam (Reang, 2023). The Reang belong to the mongloid group and speak Kau Bru, that is of the Tibeto-Burman language (Grienson, 1967). The term “Bru” has been derived from the word Beraih, which means “wanderer”, which does remind that they had been dependent on jhum (Shifting) cultivation and the term “Reang” is derived from the name of their community leader, Reang Kaskau. (Reang, 2023). The Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, has classified the Reang (Bru) of Tripura as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) due to their pre-agricultural level of technology, extremely low literacy rate, and declining or stagnant population. Part XVII of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 lists the Riang (Bru) tribe, a sub-tribe of the Kuki tribe, as one of Mizoram's Scheduled Tribes. The Bru are also known as "Riang" in the Indian constitution. Although the Tribe is called "Reang," the Reang identified themselves as "Reang" rather than "Riang," and they usually refer to themselves as "Bru" (Lianmawi, 2023).

The Settlement of the Reangs in Mizoram

The historical origin and migration of the Reang in Mizoram are the subject of conflicting narratives. According to Choudhury and Deva, the original homeland of the Reang is said to have been located in the Southwestern China near the headwaters of Yangtse and Hwang Ho River (Choudhury, 1992). According to this account, the Reang subsequently migrated through the Shan State of present-day Myanmar and settle between the Irrawady river and the Chindwin River. From this region, successive groups are believed to have moved towards different parts of northeastern in two groups. One group moved to present day Barrak and Brahmaputra Valley while another moved towards the source region of the Karnaphuli River and areas north

of the Maini River in the Rangamati and Bandarban Hills of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, now in Bangladesh (Chatterjee, 1951). They were the only tribe living in the hills between Kamphuli River and Maini River till the late 14th century (Reang, 2023). The same source state that under their chief Kaskau, a group of Reangs moved from the Chittagong Hill Tracts towards present-day Tripura during the reign of Maharaja Dhanya Manikya (1325–1351 AD). Kamphuli river is presently located in the border parts of the southwestern parts of Lunglei District in Mizoram (Darlong, 2023) so it is believed that the Reang settled in Mizoram during the 14th century. When taken together, these accounts show an early historical presence of the Reangs in and around Tripura, Mizoram, and the Chittagong Hill Tract. Later records show that the Reang had a historical presence in Mizoram; the District Census Handbook of Mizoram (DCO, 2011) states that the Reang arrived in Mizoram around 1600 AD. Mizo scholars such as Liahminthanga and Laltlangliana recognized the Reang tribe's existence as early as 1982 (Darlong, 2023). Furthermore, it is believed that the Reang people in Tripura rebelled against the monarchy led by Maharaja Bir Bikram of Manikya, and that after the rebellion was put down, sections of the population were displaced within Tripura and relocated to neighboring Assam and Mizoram (Darlong, 2023). Hussain has also pointed out that many people, including the Reang, were uprooted during the 1970s construction of the Gomati hydroelectric project (Hussain, 2006). Identifying the demographic history of the Reangs in Mizoram using census data is difficult due to the way the tribe was classified in earlier censuses as Kuki Tribe. According to the Census of India, there were approximately 1,000 Kuki in Mizoram in 1961, including the Reangs. However, their population increase and were roughly 31,092 Kuki in 1991. By 2001, the figure had fallen to 21,040 (Darlong, 2023). However, these figures should not be taken as the estimates of the Reangs population because they were classified under Kuki tribe in Mizoram. The recorded decline in the Kuki population after 1991 coincided with the period of widespread Reangs displacement from Mizoram to Tripura, though it is hard to say how much of the decline can be directly attributed to displacement. Their history in Mizoram was also impacted by migration, political upheaval, socioeconomic changes, and development-related displacement. This historical background is vital in understanding the Reang's subsequent political mobilization, their demands for political representation and autonomy, and their displacement in 1997.

Causes of the Displacement of the Reang Tribe in Tripura

Examining the historical socioeconomic and political circumstances that shaped the Reang's circumstances in Mizoram is essential to understanding the factors that led to the tribe's 1997 relocation from Mizoram to Tripura. The reang in Mizoram lived in approximately 120 villages, with the majority concentrated in the western part of Aizawl District, which borders Tripura, and the northern part of Mizoram, which borders Assam. Smaller settlements spread toward Lunglei in the southwestern part of the state, near the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Dutta, 2005). Despite their large presence in Mizoram, the Reang still face socioeconomic and political disadvantages. One notable aspect of the Reang experience in Mizoram was socioeconomic

marginalization. The Reang, one of Mizoram's poorest tribes, see themselves at the bottom of the state hierarchy because they believe their neighboring communities are prosperous (Bhattacharjee, 1995). Reang villages' primary sources of income were land, forests, and water, all of which were underdeveloped. According to Dutta, the Reang had an extremely low literacy rate, with approximately 80% earning a daily wage. These conditions increased economic vulnerability and restricted access to opportunities for social and economic advancement (Dutta, 2005). Religious and cultural differences were also part of the larger social context in which tensions arose. While some Reang practiced Hinduism, the Mizo community, along with the Lai, Mara, and Hmar tribes, are predominantly Christian, resulting in a clear religious and ethnic divide (Chakma and Gogoi 2018, Darlong, 2025). Political representation was another significant concern for the Reang community. During the period when Mizoram was a Union Territory, the Reang had limited political representation. V. Lalnunzira became the first nominated MLA from the Reang community who served from 1979 to 1984 while Mizoram was still a Union Territory. However, after Mizoram attained statehood in 1987, the Reang community no longer had an MLA representing its interests in the State Legislative Assembly (Lianmawi, 2023). The lack of direct political representation contributed to concerns about the community's ability to express its political, socio-economic and cultural interests in the state political system. The demand for an Autonomous District Council (ADC) thus became an important manifestation of these political concerns. The Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule provides for the formation of Autonomous District Councils as institutional mechanisms for the protection and administration of tribal communities in parts of Northeast India (Haokip, 2023). Mizoram had already established three Autonomous District Councils like Mara, Lai and Chakma Autonomous District Councils in 1972. The Reang also demanded a separate ADC in this case as a means to preserve their cultural identity, promote socio-economic progress and improve political representation. The demand for the ADC was therefore part of the wider political struggle of the Reang to achieve institutional recognition and greater engagement on issues affecting their community. Since the late 1980s, political mobilization of the Reangs has become more organized. The Reang People Union (RPU) was formed in 1989 to take up the demand of a separate ADC, which was an important step in the Reang community's political assertion (Bijukumar, 2020). The Reang Democratic Convention Party (RDCP) was formed on June 15, 1990 with the purpose of protecting Reang culture, language and customs and enhancing the community's welfare (Bijukumar, 2020). The party started participating in the state elections to satisfy the demand of Autonomous District Council. In the 1992 Lai Autonomous District Council Election, one Reang leader was elected and the other failed to get elected. Hence there is little hope that their political development will speed up. But before 1993 Assembly election, they joined hands with the Chakma state unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party and fielded eight candidates. This move of Chakma and Reang further reduced their political clout and did not fulfil the demand of Autonomous District Council (Dutta, 2005). The Reang leaders adopted a resolution during their meeting in Saihapui on September 24, 1997. The Reang leader makes a

number of demands, including the establishment of independent autonomous district councils, the re-registration of voter lists following the omission of 20,000 Reang names in the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the acquisition of at least three MLA seats, and the official registration of their ST category as "Bru" rather than "Riang." But it was a huge failure because Mizo organizations like the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and a student group called Milo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) protested the Reang primary demand for an ADC. (Darlong, 2023; Bijukumar, 2021). The demand turned very worse when a Mizo forest guard was killed by the militants called Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) in 1997, the armed outfit that was raised since 1996. The incident of death of Mizo Forest guard caused a major ethnic violence and displacement of Reang who fled to Tripura (Darlong, 2023). Hence, it is not possible to blame one factor for the displacement of the Reang in 1997. Rather, it developed through the interaction of socio-economic marginalisation, limited political representation, demands for political autonomy, cultural concerns, opposition to Reang political mobilisation, and the eventual escalation of armed and ethnic violence. The demand for a separate ADC was an important component of the political mobilisation of the Reang, but the available evidence suggests that it was the combination of unresolved political demands and increasing ethnic tensions, followed by the escalation of violence in 1997, that created the immediate conditions for displacement. The 1997 displacement can thus be understood as the culmination of a progressively deteriorating socio-political situation rather than as the consequence of a single political demand. Long-standing socio-economic disadvantages and limited political representation provided the broader context for Reang political mobilisation, while the demand for an ADC became a central expression of their political aspirations. The opposition to these demands and the subsequent escalation of violence transformed political contestation into a wider security and displacement crisis, resulting in the movement of the Reang population from Mizoram to Tripura in 1997.

Policy Responses for the displacement of the Reang in Tripura

The displacement of the Reang tribe from Mizoram to Tripura generate multiple policy responses from the Central government, Mizoram Government and Tripura Government. The paper mainly studies the repatriation attempt by the government along with the permanent resettlement policies sign in the year 2020. Right after the displacement of the Reang in Tripura on October 1997, the initial repatriation attempt started in the year 1998, when the National Human Rights commission observed the relief camp in Kanchanpur Tripura. The Mizoram Government was bound by the agreement to facilitate their return following the agreement made with the union home minister in November 1997 become a pivotal juncture (Bijukumar, 2021). In 2001 the second repatriation attempt was made with a tripartite agreement between engaged Mizoram, Tripura, the central government, and the Bru leaders (Darlong, 2025) Again On 26 April 2005, BNLF formalized a peace agreement from the Mizoram government which contains provisions for repatriation and resettlement for the displaced Reang but fail to resolve owing to the absence of the political will by the Mizoram Government

(Bijukumar,2021) However the repartition process was deferred until 2009 and some portion of the family return to Mizoram however because of security concerns and inadequate amenities hindered more extensive repatriation (Darlong, 2025).The repratation of the Reang again started in the year 2010 and the government of India make an efforts to permanently repatriate the Reang in Mizoram (Bijukumar, 2021). And by 2014, it was reported that 1622 Bru-Reang families returned to Mizoram in different batches (Press Information). In June 2018, the leaders of the Bru signed an agreement in Delhi with the Center and the State government of Mizoram for repatriation of the Reang to Mizoram. Due to the inadequate 'terms of the agreement only 328 families comprising 1369 people returned to Mizoram (ibid). With no solution in sight, most of the Reang refugees sought permanent settlement in Tripura.

A landmark development came with the Quadripartite Agreement of January 2020, signed between the Government of India, the Governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum (MBDPF). The agreement granted the Reangs the right to permanently resettle in Tripura in four district of Gomati, Dhalai, North Tripura and South Tripura in 12 selected Location. The population comprises of 37,584 out of 6935 families. (The Hindu, 2024). It provides a ₹600 crore rehabilitation package and each family was promised 0.03 acres of land for housing, ₹1.5 lakh for house construction, a one-time ₹4 lakh cash benefit, ₹5,000 monthly assistance for two years, and free rations for the same period. Infrastructure development including roads, deep tube wells, schools, health sub-centres, and solar-powered lights was also pledged (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020; The Hindu, 2024). However, despite this framework, the implementation of the agreement has faced persistent obstacles. The allocation of land initially promised within two months remains incomplete in several districts, including Dhalai and North Tripura (People Democracy, 2020). An estimated 2,000 families in Dhalai district have not received their monthly stipend for over a year, deepening economic distress (The Times of India, 2023). The Reang in Tripura was also anxious due to lack of "jhum" land and work opportunities (The Indian Express, 2024). Local resistance has further complicated the resettlement process. Groups such as the Nagarik Suraksha Manch and the Mizo Convention of Jampui Hills have organized rallies, hunger strikes, and blockades opposing the settlement of Reangs in Tripura, citing demographic imbalance and security concerns. These protests have at times escalated tensions and disrupted the relocation of Reang families, particularly in the Kanchanpur subdivision (People's Democracy, 2020).

Conclusion

The Reang's 1997 relocation from Mizoram to Tripura exemplifies a protracted displacement scenario influenced by the interplay of socioeconomic marginalization, political underrepresentation, demands for political autonomy, ethnic tensions, and an increase in violence. The study displays that ethnic conflict is insufficient to explain the displacement. A significant component of the larger socio-political context was the

Reang's political mobilization and demand for an Autonomous District Council; however, the escalation of violence in 1997 turned these tensions into a widespread displacement.

The subsequent history of the displaced Reang demonstrates the difficulties involved in achieving repatriation after prolonged ethnic conflict. Despite repeated government initiatives between 1998 and 2019, only a few numbers of families returned to Mizoram. The inability to achieve large-scale repatriation eventually contributed to a policy shift towards permanent resettlement in Tripura through the Quadripartite Agreement of 2020.

The 2020 agreement therefore represents an important transition in the policy response to Reang displacement, from temporary relief and repeated repatriation attempts towards rehabilitation and permanent settlement. Simultaneously, the continuing challenges identified in the study show that resettlement is not simply a matter of providing land and financial assistance. The availability of employment opportunities, basic infrastructure, prompt delivery of government assistance, and the social acceptance of the resettled population all affect the long-term results of resettlement. Therefore, the Reang's experience serves as an example of how displacement can develop from an immediate result of ethnic violence into a protracted socioeconomic and political issue necessitating ongoing rehabilitation and resettlement efforts.

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