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Forced Displacement in North-East India and the Displaced Bru's Case: A Concise Overview

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A B S T R A C T

This study endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of ethnic conflicts and the consequent displacement that has unfolded in North-East India. A particular focus is directed towards the displacement experienced by the Bru community from Mizoram in the wake of the ethnic clashes that transpired in 1997. The region's history is rife with instances of violence, both recent and deeply rooted, leading to significant population displacements. Employing an ethnographic approach, this research delves into the intricate details and complex realities of displacement. By closely examining the lives and experiences of those affected, it aims to unravel the multifaceted dynamics that underpin forced migration in the aftermath of ethnic violence. Through this lens, the study underscores the various perilous aspects of ethnic violence, highlighting how it can swiftly escalate and culminate in massive displacement events.

Keywords: Forced displacement, North-East India, Ethnic conflicts, Bru community and Migration

1. Introduction

This research aims to examine the intricate dynamics of North East India concerning internal displacement, focusing on the case of the Bru/Reang tribes' migration from Mizoram to Tripura during the 1997 ethnic clashes with the Mizo tribes.. NE India's history is marked by complex ethnic violence and demands for autonomous district councils, with colonial boundaries continuing to shape the region's political landscape and administrative structure, impacting the entitlements and aspirations of diverse ethnic groups expressed through their respective leaders. Since Independence, India has witnessed several violent clashes among communities, resulting in large-scale displacements, including the issues of Kashmiri in 1989, the Nellie massacre of 1983 in the Northeast, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, and the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 (Tewari, 2023). Though again, the Indian constitution of Article 21 safeguards the rights to individual life with dignity to each citizen it is observed that the IDPs victim is not given more concerns immediately while instead refugees were hosted and rapidly repatriated. Therefore, since the inception of Independent India, the development process and Resettlement and Rehabilitation Package for the affected victims but the overall effect can be seen in its deficiency (Fernandes, 2000). India has legal provisions for the first two categories of displaced persons, which are covered under The Land Acquisition Act, of 2013, and the Disaster Management Act, of 2005 (Tewari, 2023). However, there is no specific law addressing the third category of displaced persons in the country. Currently, there are seven sub-schemes under the "Relief and Rehabilitation of Migrants and Repatriates" umbrella scheme for 2021-22 to 2025-26, with a total outlay of Rs 1,452 crores, providing financial assistance and other facilities to families affected by terrorist violence, including militancy, insurgency, communal, left-wing extremism violence, and cross-border firing (Tewari, 2023).

2. Methodology

This research was carried out in relief camps situated in the North Tripura district of the Indian state of Tripura, utilizing a qualitative research approach in nature and an ethnography method. In-depth interviews were the primary method for gathering data, involving 91 household informants. Additionally, a few officials and NGO leaders were also interviewed. The intention was not to selectively showcase specific names or case studies; rather, the focus was on a broader representation. To protect privacy and handle the sensitivity of the political context, the identities of those interviewed were kept confidential and referred to as anonymous informants in the paper. The primary data was collected through various means, including observation, interviews, etc. Additionally, secondary sources such as electronic resources, books, newspapers, magazines, journals, articles, research papers, manuscripts, and organizational reports were utilized.

3. Ethnic Conflict, Displacement, and the Bru Community: Unraveling North-East India's Complex Landscape

In north east India, Hussain (2000a) highlights, these inter-ethnic conflicts, coupled with government counterinsurgency operations and secessionist movements, have resulted in significant internal displacement in the region. Despite the creation of some new states, the demand for separate ethnic In

the 1960s, the language movement and the Assam Movement targeting foreign nationals (1979–85) caused mass displacements in Assam (Bhaumik, 2005a; Barua, 2005). Notably, the 1983 Assam assembly election witnessed a violent clash between local 'Assamese' and 'Bengali immigrants due to disagreements over the 'cut-off' year for 'deporting foreigners from Assam, resulting in about 3,000 deaths and displacing around 10,000 individuals (Kimura, 2013). Subsequently, the granting of a territorial council to Bodos in 1993 led to further displacement and casualties. In 1997–98, approximately 240,000 people, mainly Bengali Hindus, Muslims, and tribals were displaced as they were considered 'non-Bodos' residing under the territorial council (Bhaumik, 2009b). This resulted in the retaliatory displacement of several Bodo populations. In Meghalaya, tens of thousands of Bengalis fled to West Bengal and other areas in India, adding to the complexity of the displacement situation in the region (ibid.). In Arunachal Pradesh, clashes between the indigenous population and the Chakma and Hajong communities, who arrived from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the 1960s seeking refuge from persecution, have led to significant displacement. Approximately 15,000 and 2,748 families were settled in Lohit, Subansiri, and Tirap districts with support from the central government and North Eastern Frontier Agency. However, their settlement has caused displacement among the indigenous tribes in the state (Bhaumik, 2009b). In Manipur, ethnic conflicts between the Kuki and Naga tribes during the 1990s resulted in thousand deaths and numerous displacements. The Naga-Kuki conflicts were mainly between the 'National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)' and the 'Kuki National Army (KNA)', arising from competition for dominance over the lucrative market and trading spot of Moreh town, situated near the India-Burma border (Bhaumik, 2005a). In Tripura, land alienation of indigenous people has led to several riots and ethnic clashes. The infamous '1980 ethnic clashes' between tribals and Bengalis caused further tensions and unrest in the region (Debbarma, 2008). Additionally, the construction of the Dumbur hydroelectric project in the 1970s resulted in the displacement of around 40,000 people from prime agricultural land, affecting approximately 200,000 people within the state and beyond (Hussain, 2006b).

The case of the Bru Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) highlights the enduring consequences ethnic conflicts on communities, leading to widespread displacement and disruptions in their lives. It emphasizes the complexities involved in resolving such territorial issues and underscores the importance of addressing underlying grievances. In 1997, the conflict between the Bru and Mizo communities in Mizoram escalated, resulting in the displacement of over 30,000 individuals who sought refuge in Tripura following the murder of a Mizo forest guard (Majumdar, 2016). This tragic event on October 21, 1997, served as a primary catalyst for the escalation of ethnic violence during their ADC demands. The ongoing ethnic tensions in Mizoram, along with the Brus' unmet demand for autonomy, have been longstanding issues in the region. The conflict that triggered their 1997 exodus from Mizoram to Tripura arose from their request for a separate Bru autonomous district council, which was not granted during the 1990s. Resolving the conflict between the Bru and Mizo communities necessitates a thorough comprehension of historical occurrences, ethnic dynamics, and the intricate facets of identity and self-governance within North-East India. Through the exploration of these underlying factors and the facilitation of productive discussions and negotiations, enduring harmony and mutual existence can be established between the Bru and Mizo populations. Furthermore, it is imperative to address the predicament faced by internally displaced Bru individuals, ensuring their secure return and reintegration, which plays a pivotal role in cultivating trust and instilling safety among community members. Ultimately the achievement of a sustainable resolution to the Bru-Mizo conflict and the cultivation of lasting peace in the region hinge on the implementation of an inclusive and collaborative strategy, engaging all concerned parties and communities. The process of reintegrating the displaced Bru population into Mizoram earlier was riddled with a multitude of challenges and intricate factors. These encompassed disputes over population figures, hesitancy exhibited by both the displaced community and the Mizos, discord concerning rehabilitation and land distribution, as well as a history marred by violence and mutual distrust. These complexities underscore the vital need to delve into the underlying roots of the conflict and earnestly endeavor to foster authentic reconciliation between the involved communities. This path is essential for achieving a durable and harmonious remedy to the crisis of displacement. To achieve this goal, initiatives for reconciliation should span a range of dimensions, including social, political, economic, and cultural aspects, in order to cultivate a feeling of belonging and harmonious coexistence among both the Bru and Mizo groups. Furthermore, the active engagement of pertinent stakeholders, such as the central and state governments, community leaders, and civil society organizations, becomes pivotal in the pursuit of a comprehensive and sustainable resolution to the complex challenge of displacement

4. Conclusion

To address these intricate dynamics, the relevant authorities must adopt a comprehensive approach that includes promoting inclusive governance and dialogue among various communities. Resolving underlying grievances and safeguarding the rights of diverse ethnic groups should be at the forefront of any solution. Furthermore, efforts to recognize and accommodate the aspirations of different ethnic communities within the framework of the Indian Constitution can foster a sense of inclusivity, thereby mitigating conflicts and displacement. Addressing the underlying grievances, promoting inclusive governance, and safeguarding the rights of diverse ethnic groups remain essential in resolving the complex dynamics of displacement in North-East India. Moreover, the lack of specific laws addressing internally displaced persons in India adds to the complexity of providing adequate relief and rehabilitation to those affected. Overall, addressing the complexities of displacement and territorial autonomy in North-East India requires a delicate balance between recognizing the rights of ethnic groups and ensuring the overall integrity and stability of the nation. Through collaborative efforts, India can strive towards a more peaceful and inclusive future for the region, where the aspirations and entitlements of all communities are respected and protected.

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