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The Displaced Reangs of Hailakandi District

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The Barak Valley of Assam, comprising the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of south Assam has provided shelter to many displaced persons from time to time. These mainly fall into two categories—the displaced from neighbouring Bangladesh who are often termed as ‘refugees’ and second, the displaced from other states of the North Eastern region. Refugees, as we know, are those who cross international borders once displaced and seek shelter in other countries.

Previously, most of the tribes were nomadic due to their agricultural practices of *jhum* (swidden) cultivation and they moved from one place to the other for better and fertile cultivable land. Prior to 1937, the Kuki-chin tribes were living together in the Indian subcontinent. In 1937, Chin Hills and upper Chindwin were separated from India and became a part of Burma. Again, when India was partitioned in 1947, Chittagong Hill Tracts, a predominantly tribal area, was transferred to East Pakistan and after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, became a part of it. The tribes that are numerically small often align themselves with the larger neighbouring tribes (Sen 1992: 3–4).

As stated earlier, Barak Valley has provided shelter to many displaced persons and ethnic groups from time to time. In fact, in this Valley, there is a considerable tribal population representing various ethnic groups like the Reangs, the Tipras, the Mizos and others.

Most of these tribes fall within the category of IDPs as they were displaced from their lands like Mizoram and Tripura and were compelled to go to other states of this region. In this paper, an attempt has been made to reflect briefly on the displacement of a very small ethnic group, that is the Reangs from Mizoram, as a good number of Reangs took shelter in the Assam–Mizoram border in the southern-most part of Hailakandi district of Assam in 1997.

The displacement of the Reangs is mainly the result of the ethnic clash with the dominant Mizos in Mizoram. Reangs are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe of Mizoram. They comprise of a population of around 85,000 concentrated in 75 villages in the western part of Aizawl district and some villages of Lunglei and Chintuipui districts of Mizoram. Their percentage of literacy was not even one per cent till 1998 and 80 per cent of them are daily wage earners. (Akhil Bharatiya Vanabasi Kalyan Ashram 1998: 3). Most of the Reangs follow their tribal indigenous faith, which is based on some sort of Hinduism, and some of them are converted to Christianity. On the other hand, the Mizos are by and large an educated and developed community accounting for about 550,000 people (one lakh = 100,000) (Ibid). They are Christians. Racially, the Reangs and the Mizos are different from each other. Mizos belong to the Mongolian race of Chinkuki group. On the other hand, the Reangs belong to the Bodo racial group and their dialect is akin to that of the Tripuris.

The Mizos maintain that ‘Mizoram is for the Mizos’ and not for the Reangs. The Mizos, backed by the Church and the militant Mizo Students Association (Mizo Zirlai Pawl) have threatened the Reangs that they should conform to the general cultural and religious standards followed in the state. They even demand the change of the names of their (Reangs’) children to conform to the Mizo style of naming. This situation has been going on since the state of Mizoram was formed in 1987. The Reangs did not take too kindly to this and offended the Mizos by forming some associations to protect and promote their ethnic identity, language and culture. In fact, an identity awareness has emerged in the minds of some youths of the Reang community.

In Mizoram, there are three districts, namely Aizawl, Lunglei and Chintuipui. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India,

Mizoram has three district councils. These are the Chakma District Council, the Lai District Council and the Mara District Council under Chintuipui administrative district. The Sixth Schedule spells out the concept of self-management in different spheres for the autonomous district councils. The district council can safeguard the customs, traditions and so on to protect the interests of the Scheduled Tribes living within the jurisdiction of autonomous district councils. There is no autonomous district council explicitly safeguarding the interests of Reangs of Mizoram (Bhattacharjee 2001: 64).

So in order to protect, develop and uplift the Reangs, the Bru (Reang) National Union (BNU) was formed in 1994. At a meeting held on 23 and 24 September 1997 at Suipuilui village of Mamit sub-division of Aizawl, it was demanded by the Reangs that an autonomous district council be set up to protect their cultural identity. They also demanded the reservation of three seats for them in the State Assembly. This infuriated the chauvinistic sections of the Mizos who felt that the Reangs are not only occupying their areas but are also trying to extend their domination (Ibid.: 66). The majority Mizos—particularly their student wings—answered the Reangs' assertion by murder, physical violence, torching their houses, destroying their religious places and looting their ancestral homes. At that critical juncture, they had no other alternative but to take shelter in Hailakandi district of Assam and Kanchanpur sub-division of Tripura.

According to the official reports of the district administration of Hailakandi, many groups of displaced Reangs arrived at Hailakandi across the Assam–Mizoram border on 13 October 1997. Their number was 2,475.¹ It was observed that their condition was pathetic and most of them were suffering from malaria and other epidemic diseases. There was no immediate relief distribution by the government. Many of them died due to starvation. The relief was received only as late as July 1998. After that, the supply of rice and salt was discontinued and the Reangs had to fend for themselves for their survival. They depended on nearby forests while eking out a living for themselves.

On the other hand, the district administration of Hailakandi had requested the Mizoram government to take back the Reangs

from Hailakandi district and also to provide relief materials for them. But the Deputy Commissioner of Aizawl did not respond at all and there was no serious step taken from the side of the Government of Mizoram to take back the displaced Reangs and to provide relief to them. The District Administration of Hailakandi also did not encourage the displaced Reangs to stay put in the district as it would mean the destruction of the forest areas.²

Besides this, the groups of Mizo youth accompanied by armed Mizo policemen came down to the nearest Assam village—Gutghuti where the Reangs had taken shelter. Six women who had migrated to Assam were tortured by the miscreants on 28 November 1997 (Bhattacharjee 2001: 80). The Mizos even demanded that all the forest villages of southern-most part of Hailakandi district of Assam form part of Mizoram. Under such miserable conditions, most of them left Hailakandi district and moved towards Kanchanpur sub-division of Tripura. Still some Reangs are living in the remaining huts of southern Hailakandi towards the Assam–Mizoram border and they are not willing to return to their homes as they think that the situation in Mizoram does not permit them to cross over there. Since they live in remote villages beyond the gaze of the administration, and the authorities have little knowledge about their living, they are not getting even the basic amenities of life. The local Reangs of this district are sympathetic towards them and are ready to fight for their cause for getting justice.³ Now they are attracting little attention of the media, NGOs as well as international agencies.

The problems faced by the Reangs might be acute but it is not impossible to solve them. In fact, the Reangs lack political power to establish a ring of security around themselves. Ethnic, religious, political and cultural domination by the majority Mizos coupled with the lack of economic opportunities are responsible for the present travails faced by the Reangs.

The state of Mizoram where the Reangs lived for long, must seek the solution within the state itself. The compositeness of a state is universal and it is to be respected. In fact, the Reang issue should be taken as the problem of an unprivileged group and it deserves due consideration from the Central Government. The Government of India and the State Government of Mizoram should create suitable

conditions while providing adequate security to the Reangs. The Government of Mizoram should also create a sense of confidence in the minds of the Reang people so that they can return to their home villages in Mizoram. In fact, the demand of the Reang people at present is the return to their villages but ultimately the issue is linked to their political emancipation. Besides, the NGOs and human rights activists should spread the messages of the displaced Reangs to national and international platforms so that any further displacement may be contained in an effective manner by the government which is under pressure from distinct quarters.

NOTES

1. Records of the Hailakandi district administration.
2. Interviews with the local residents.
3. Interview with R.C. Malakar, Circle Officer, Katlicherra, Hailakandi.

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