

UPROOTED REANGS

STRANGERS IN THEIR MOTHERLAND



SUBRATA KR. DUTTA

Foreword by

SUBIR BHAUMIK

BBC Correspondent



North East India has been a cauldron of different ethnic (tribal) groups since past many centuries. Among these Reangs are scattered over many states, especially in Tripura and Mizoram. The present book relates the story of Reangs, their origin, beliefs, migration, and social change and all the more their agonies for permanent settlement.

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Strangers in Their Motherland



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Foreword

India's northeast is now witnessing the second phase of the ethnic explosion. In the first two decades after independence, those who challenged the Indian control over this far frontier region were generic identities like the Nagas and Mizos. They fought and got - or failed to get - a deal within the Indian system that met - or failed to meet - their aspiration for an acre of green grass they could call their own. But while some of these rebellions continued, a new and more violent - and equally assertive - set of movements rocked the region. These were the movements of the smaller nationalities who were apprehensive of being absorbed by the large generic identities. The movement by the Reangs for their own homeland - in Mizoram or spanning across Mizoram and Tripura - is one such movement. Subrata Dutta's attempt to study the Reang movement is a laudable effort that would help us understand the new dynamics of ethnic politics in India's northeast. A close-up case study like this would go a long way to understand the contours of Northeast's second ethnic explosion - one in which Delhi is no longer as the only enemy and in fact is quite often seen as an ally to help achieve the small homelands these smaller tribes are looking for.

SUBIR BHAUMIK
BBC Eastern India Correspondent

Preface

The contents presented in this book spell out the most horrific story of Reang refugees. They are now homeless people, have been living in refugee camps since couple of years, despite having the status of Indian citizenship and staying for several decades in Mizoram in Northeast India. The aim is to draw lessons from the experiences of Reang refugees who were tortured, whose wives and children were gang raped, relatives were killed and houses were burnt.

This book captures all those communal disturbances faced by Reangs in Mizoram, within their own locality, from their very neighbours—Mizos, in the consequences of severe life threats, quit notices, forcible conversion of religion to disown culture and identity. Reangs didn't get any help from the government or any other organisation in that period of turmoil.

The facts presented in this book are the best examples of discriminations against minority Reang society, their long years of social and economic sufferings. They joined terrorism to combat such practices. The violation of their basic rights and the problems arrived out from there was the reflection of most progressive patterns of the conflict between Mizo and Reang tribes. Majority Mizos set afire at least 1300 Reang houses, damaging another 365 well-built houses and 30 religious temples in around 41 villages in Mizoram. More than 2000 people have died only in refugee camps and many

refugees are still suffering in extreme poverty and health diseases.

Those incidents didn't get much exposure in mainstream media. I have, on various occasions, tried to bring the root causes of hostility of two tribes through various newspapers, but that attempt was not so successful, because of the crisis of space and time within media.

Then the idea came to capture the Reang refugee crisis in a book. Now I realise, my attempt to address the root causes of the conflict has been augured well and rewarded. Back in 1997, while reporting for a leading daily of Northeast, I witnessed this problem during a visit to the only camp sheltering Reangs. I began to introspect Reang refugee problem through a focused-study carried on behalf of Indian Institute of Human Rights, New Delhi. In the course of the study, I gathered crucial facts from various sources, held discussions with the victims, Reang leaders, interviewed several experts of this field and extensively visited various places of Northeast, from the early months of 2002 and during recent years, before publishing this book.

The tribal conflict is flickering more these days because of less attention towards tribal society. They have little voice and choice in functioning of the government, are denied right to resources, right to economy, right to religion and right to join politics. Majority community rules the government, governs state resources and its economy. Over the years, minorities were viewed as the backward people and hence discriminated from the jobs, education, development, health-care and other basic amenities. It, slowly but surely, led to the formation of terrorist organisations. There are more than three dozen terrorist groups active in Northeast of India.

This book focuses on tribal autonomy, inter-community relationship, torture, terrorism, human rights, constitutional safeguards and provisions for the minorities of Northeast India. Apart from all these, a wide range of measures have been discussed in this book to resolve the tribal conflicts of Northeast India.

SUBRATA KUMAR DUTTA

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There are many names don't figure in this book, but their contributions in this book are invaluable. Many Reang leaders who can be named, but for their individual interests, life threats and requests for anonymity, who asked their names not to be mentioned. I would like to thank all those people, Reang leaders and leaders of Mizoram Bru Refugee Committee for sharing their experiences of wrenching.

I would specially recall my Kolkata based friend Shri Subhasis Guha. He has shared a great deal of the burden of typing the manuscript. I am very thankful to Shri M.P. Misra of Akansha Publishing House for publishing this book.

SUBRATA KUMAR DUTTA

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1 | Introduction

All people have rights. Human rights in common parlance are the rights of life and dignity; in fact all rights – political, civil, social, cultural and others. These rights are fundamental birth rights which are enjoyed by all without discrimination of religion, caste, language, creed, sex or race. Concern for human rights has emerged as the single most important issue for mankind due to the activities of United Nations and increased awareness about human rights as well as the magnitude of violations of human rights throughout the nation in general and in northeastern states in particular.

The northeastern states are the cauldron of many tribes and autochthones. Though unidentical from each other, those tribal groups have their own language, rituals, customs, beliefs and perception. Religion pervaded in most of the tribal thoughts and values, made the people realizing the role of religion more profoundly. Thus, religion is the single most important aspect of those tribal societies, who live nearer to nature, and whose lives are largely influenced by its overwhelming forces. Religious faith as part of their life is simply interwoven in their socio-religious culture.

An approach towards religion is the expression of their inner realization, somewhat invisible supernatural forces controlling the course of nature, as it influences their minds and thoughts. The religion of northeast can be understood as a cultural imperialism, and in the pretext of cultural region.

Though their identity they interpret through their culture, social values, customs and language in their own way. Each tribal section has its own distinct religious culture and language, which they have retained over ages, uninfluenced by any other cultural trait. But in last couple of decades, it struck up by the influence of outsiders.

Vested Interest Groups

On the other hand, political and religious organisations are striving their goals. In great extent their dignity and rights have been hived off by those vested interest groups, and constantly they used to influence them for their own interests and purposes. In all that the minority tribes found to be in quandary and largely created a kind of vicelike feeling against other community.

Such insidious vested activity has created a messy situation in the whole northeast. Although, it is a difficult task to plug it further. Vested interest groups made their strong roots, making various promises to them for "tribal promotion", which ultimately had no real base in meeting the actual demands of individual and group tribesmen. Gradually this was progressing at a stage that was harming the entire community fabric and relationship.

Worstly suffered minority tribal groups in northeast have no other ways out; often look for some political shelter. The naïve tribes are easily allured by the propagandas of political and religious organisations. The tall promises of economic development, health care, education and employment were offered to them by two organisations, bringing outrageous results at last. The promises they make that hardly perk their confidence up. Extreme perplexity is the ultimate fallout.

That is why dishearten tribes are groping for identity, social, cultural, political and economic rights. The genealogy of human rights is suffered widely in most of the tribal society in northeast, leaving them with a giddy feeling. And, thus the inter- and intra-tribal conflicts and rivalry starts, only when they find the rivals guilty of the waning away fundamental rights. But this inspiration mostly come from political people. Various governments in the states, too, relentlessly adopted wrong policies and steps against minorities. Identity crisis and related issues are solely responsible for this current hostility and

insurgency in northeastern India. This is the most fate and unfortunate story of northeastern tribes.

Various political parties and religious groups are keeping them away from the mainstream of development. Helpless in such a situation, tribes are bound to live in most dilapidated condition. Deprivation is a factor which insisted them to battle. Continuous deprivation of the minority tribes is a cause which ultimately gave birth to 34 terrorist groups, now active in various parts of northeastern region, are fighting their democratic rights.

Tribal Resentment and Discrimination

In the growing terrorism, ethnic clashes, discrimination against minorities, unequal rights in politics and development that fraught with many perils, are escalating relentlessly day by day. We have never seen governments, political parties, religious organisations or any other institutions to combat such problems in northeast. In their hegemony they hardly had any fair approach to establish peace and even no such attempts were taken to bring social harmony.

Resentment within this tribal people is sparkling, because of the growing acrimony and religious antagonism. All round development without any discrimination is unthinkable. On the other hand, the majority community, who is holding the regime power, is also not giving any rapt attention to the development of minorities and even not underpinning their inner realm and democratic rights.

Since many decades, strong majority groups continue to bash small populated tribal groups. Along with that political leaders have a strong role to support such activity. For less opportunity in the states they languish under extreme poverty. These non-vicissitudes thinking, within the majority group, has largely forced the minority to take the path of democratic struggle. Encountering such discrimination may not be possible for small tribal groups, with their limited capacity, they can only churn out the idea of forming armed militant groups, as a measure to fight the discrimination, as they can only think of.

Consequently, more than 34 armed militants groups have made their strong base in northeast, operating since past several decades. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), formerly Bodo Security Force (BSF), in Assam,

United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), in Karbi Anglong District of Assam, *Karbi National Volunteers* (KNV), *Karbi Peoples Front* (KPF), and *Dimasa Howla Dorga* (DHD), *Bodo Liberation Tigers* (BLT), NSCN (IM), NSCN (K) in Nagaland, *All Tripura Tiger Force* (ATTF) in Tripura, *Bru National Liberation Front* (BNLF) in Mizoram, few among them are fighting for their democratic rights. But, in common, it is the cause of “racial discrimination” and failure of exercising their “democratic rights”.

More often the inter-community clashes which perpetuate, suddenly attack the villagers, destroying life and property. In internal community clashes in northeast, an estimated 157,000 persons of various ethnicities were displaced by the end of the 2003.¹

Mass Influx

Northeast, a geographically and politically isolated area of India, is home to many “tribal” groups. Once sparsely populated, in recent decades northeast India’s population has swelled with the arrival of millions of Bengali Hindus and Muslims from Bangladesh and from India’s West Bengal state.

Population growth led to competition for land and jobs and unnecessary tensions grew within ethnic minority groups, as well as in-between migrants and ethnic groups. Those communal tensions gave rise to ethnic and politically based insurgencies that have battled the Indian armed forces, attacked each other, and turned on civilian populations belonging to rival ethnic group(s). The violence has caused widespread population displacement.

Though internal displacement in those areas is a fairly recent phenomenon, the origin of the conflicts that have induced displacement go back decades. Over the past 150 years, the northeast’s population swelled from around 1 million to more than 20 million. In response to labour shortages in the nineteenth century, British administrators encouraged migration from East Bengal, and between 1947 and the present, hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking Hindus streamed into the northeast from what is now known as Bangladesh.²

Threatened by the mass influx of “outsiders,” members of some indigenous groups established militant, secessionist organisations.

In the effort to establish their ethnic supremacy in certain areas, insurgents have attacked villages, massacred residents, and burned houses to compel other ethnic groups to vacate disputed territory, leaving the latter little choice but to move into ill-equipped and inadequately defended displacement camps.³

Refugees in India

By the end of 2001, some 500,000 people were internally displaced in India because of political violence, including about 350,000 Kashmiris and an estimated 157,000 others in northeast India. More than 345,000 refugees were living in India, including as many as 144,000 from Sri Lanka, 110,000 from China (Tibet), 52,000 from Myanmar, 15,000 from Bhutan, 12,000 from Afghanistan, an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 from Bangladesh, and nearly 300 from other countries. An estimated 40,000 Afghans have been living in India in refugee-like conditions.⁴

India is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and does not have national legislation regarding refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is present in India, but the government permits the agency access only to refugees living in urban centers and does not formally recognise UNHCR grants of refugee status. However, in recent years, a number of Indian court rulings have advanced the protection of refugees whom the government had considered to be economic migrants.

Migrants to Eastern India

Throughout northeast, conditions of the displaced remained poor during 2001 to 2003. Violence and displacement continued in some areas, and no intergovernmental or international organisations were present to help. Many of the displaced lived in public buildings and makeshift shelters, with little health care and no access to formal education. State officials and local NGOs provided some food aid, but the assistance often arrived sporadically, mostly insufficient. In spite of the Indian government’s efforts to provide cash assistance and food aid to many of the displaced people often goes to wrong people.

Most asylum seekers fled to the eastern Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura, while others going to Assam and Meghalaya.

Numbers were difficult to obtain, and they are the regular migrants to India almost on daily, the Bangladeshi Hindus and Muslims infiltrate in India through various borders of eastern India and took shelter in India either in relatives' house or mingle with town or city population.

In Assam, Santhal, Bengali, and Nepali communities have been attacked by militant members of the Bodo tribe, who seek to claim majority status in the Bodo Autonomous Council area of western Assam, which was delineated in a 1993 agreement with the central government. Bodo resentment inflamed because of mass influx of outsiders - which turned Bodos into minorities in some areas of their homeland. Over 200,000 Internal Displacement Peoples (IDPs) now live in 78 relief camps in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts of Assam. Conditions are very critical.⁵

Conditions of Displaced People

Few temporary sheds of polythene and aluminium sheets are made for their shelter. People sleep on the ground on makeshift beds of bamboo; and there is a lack of clean drinking water; and diseases such as malaria, jaundice, dysentery, diarrhoea and influenza often pose a serious threat. Groups of five to six people are forced to share essentials. To supplement food rations, which are adequate for at most 10 days a month, they are compelled to consume snails, insects and wild plants. Pregnant women, children, and the elderly suffer the highest health risks in the camps. Over the past couple of years, camps have been attacked repeatedly, leaving several dead and dozens injured.

Displaced Bengalis in Tripura are living in similar conditions. In response to the Bengalis' rapid attainment of majority status in the state, tribal militant groups such as the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) have sought to establish autonomous areas by attacking Bengali communities. Bengalis are thus forced to flee to displacement camps which are poorly defended, as evidenced by the slaying of 32 people in a 1997 attack.

The official and much disputed figure of displacement in Tripura is about 28,000 people, mainly Bengalis. In Tripura it is estimated

that at least 80,000 Bengalis have been uprooted from their home since the Left Front came to power in 1993.⁶ More than 1500 non-tribal families were rendered homeless in 2000 as a result of attack by the tribal insurgent groups. Estimates of internally displaced in north Tripura vary, but Mizoram human rights groups estimated earlier that some 41,000 Reangs are being sheltered in 6 camps in north Tripura.⁷

Conflicts between Groups

In spite of government efforts to quell the long running Naga dispute, renewed strife between the Nagas and the Kukis in Manipur has resulted in the death of over 1,000 people since 1992 and found in large-scale population movements. Additional tribal tensions reinforce instability in the state. Kukis and Paites have clashed since 1997 and friction persists between the Nagas and Meiteis. Violent conflicts between these groups has reportedly left 50,000 people homeless as entire villages were burned to the ground.⁸ Militants have also burned granaries, putting thousands of people at risk of famine and starvation. Eleven thousand people now live in displacement camps and the government of neighbouring Mizoram has restricted the displaced from crossing into its territory.⁹

Ethnic conflicts in Assam state have left about 5,000 people dead since 1978. Clashes between Bodos and Senthals continued even in the year 2001, resulting in 40 deaths. In early June, 2001 the region's minister blamed the deaths of ten forestry workers by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland general strike to protest the continuing presence of the Chakmas, whom they still view as refugees from Bangladesh despite the ruling of India's Supreme Court that the Chakmas are Indian citizens. The All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union called the strike to put pressure on the provincial issue and to deport the Chakmas.

In Mizoram, fearing persecution from the ethnic majority Mizos, around 52,000¹⁰ Reang tribals fled from their homes during 1997, sheltered in north Tripura, bordering villages of Assam and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. In order to accelerate the repatriation process, the Tripura government discontinued food rations and medical services in some camps, causing at least 2000 people starve to death. These IDPs died as a result of poor shelter and dirty

water, and many reportedly became seriously sick. Additionally, displacement camps are susceptible to attacks and mismanagement. More than 31,000 Reangs (6,956 families) remained displaced in six camps in northern Tripura, they fled from neighbouring Mizoram in 1997 following attacks by majority Mizos. In August 2000, the Mizoram Chief Minister agreed to facilitate the return of the Reangs to Mizoram. By the end of 2004, the government failed to progress their repatriation.

Disagreement between the Governments

Disagreement between the state governments of Tripura and Mizoram on the number of internally displaced formerly living in Mizoram hinders a solution for the internally displaced population presently living in camps.

“The Mizoram state government claims to have completed the process of identifying the “legal” Reang residents of Mizoram and have placed the figure at a little over 10,000. With this, the Mizoram administration has literally rubbished the claims made by Tripura that over 31,000 Reangs living in the northern refugee camps belonged to the state. The announcement could have far reaching effects on the demographic profile of the region as Mizoram can now refuse entry to over 20,000 Reangs (Brus) who were claiming to be residents of the state. Placing the Reangs under two categories, the state administration claimed that while 10,142 refugees now languishing in Tripura refugee camps were the original residents of Mizoram, the rest had come from Assam, and parts of Tripura itself.

According to a state government report, while 8,396 Reangs were the residents of the Aizawl district, 1,746 belonging to the southern district of Lunglei. It claimed that the list prepared by the administration was based on records and not interviews. “Therefore, any Reang who could produce sufficient documentary evidence on his citizenship would be added to the list,” the report said, adding that the administration had exhausted all means of identifying more people.¹¹

The Indian government’s response to displaced persons from Kashmir has been significantly different from its response to displaced persons in the northeast. From Babyal’s point of view, that the Indian

government spends 26 million rupees (U.S. \$597,000) per month just on financial and food aid for the displaced. In Jammu and Kashmir alone, that has totaled some 2,741 million rupees (U.S. \$62.9 million) since 1990. He claimed that the government has spent another 200 million rupees (U.S. \$4.6 million) on compensation for displaced persons whose homes were burned down. The Jammu and Kashmir state government’s policy toward the displaced is shaped by a high-level committee chaired by the revenue minister. He noted that the state government works in collaboration with the national government, “but as far as implementation of policy, the primary responsibility is with the state.”¹²

Minority Discrimination

Adivasi which means an original residents of India and in northeast it refers to original tribal groups. Over 70 million people belong to *adivasi* tribal people in India, also known as scheduled tribes are commonly known as *adivasis*.

After independence in 1947, special provisions were enacted to protect the rights of *adivasis* including enacting special regulations to protect *adivasi* areas from encroachment by non-*adivasis* which included restrictions on purchase and transfer of land. *Adivasis* are also granted protection under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Many areas inhabited by *adivasi* people in north-east were granted special status under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution.

Most common in the friction between two groups is on community rights of *adivasis*. There is a great interest on land and resources has produced much complexity in the whole problem. A major issue of concern has been illegal encroachment by non-tribal landowners onto land traditionally owned by tribals.

Adivasis often do not possess land records and much of their land is communally owned, thereby facilitating challenges to land ownership. In many areas, the authorities have failed to act to prevent processes of dispossession and to enforce legislation designed to protect the rights of members of scheduled tribes.

In addition, as *adivasis* have traditionally inhabited many of the areas of India which are rich in forest resources has seen the process

of declaration of reserve forests, has led to widespread displacement of *adivasis* who are reported to constitute between 40 and 50% of the displaced population".¹³

The unequal tribal /non-tribal and inter-tribal power relations have also played a major role in most of the conflicts. Northeast India is rather a geographically and politically isolated area of India. Once known simply as Assam, today the northeast is divided into seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura.

In contrast to the main land of India, much of the northeast is sparsely populated. It is also ethnically more diverse: of the 430 recognized "tribes" in India, some 200 made their home in the northeast. An estimated 25 percent of the northeast's 31 million inhabitants are members of tribal groups. Also unlike the rest of India where tension between Hindus and Muslims is one of the prevailing socio-political dynamics, in some cases religion, culture, language and political powers are also the certain factors in ethnic conflicts in the northeast.¹⁴ For example, Reangs and Mizos who have clashed in Mizoram are Hindus and Christians. Christian dominance on Hindu Reangs was a factor of the conflict. It is true on the other part of state government policies considered Hindu Bengalis as "refugees" from Bangladesh, while Muslim Bengalis as "economic migrants".

Social Ostracism

Diversity causes tensions within the region. Out of India's 67.76 million tribal population, 8.14 million live in its seven states. Some such as the Bodos are plain tribals while most are hill tribes. A few such as the Aka of Arunachal Pradesh are small in number while others such as Bodos, Dimasas, Garos, Khasis and Mizos are numerous. In three states they are more than 80 per cent and in one, two-thirds. But they are very few in the populous states of Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The Bodo-Kachari, a third of the tribals in the northeast, are only 3.7 per cent of Assam's 20 million population.

In Tripura the tribal population have declined from 56 per cent in the fifties to 30 per cent today. The 45 lakh [4.5 million] *adivasis*, whose forefathers were brought by the British in the 19th century

from Jharkand to work in the tea gardens, are considered foreigners. Most tribes oppose their inclusion in the Schedule for fear that they will compete for the few jobs available.

Four states have tribals as their political leaders. But the towns where economic decisions are made are dominated by non-tribals, mostly from outsiders. As such emerge the unequal tribal-non-tribal and inter-tribal power relations and conflicts with the tinge of religious or cultural or economic or political autonomy.

Minority discrimination has taken a messy shape in the northeast. It delineates clear social strata, assigning highly structured political, economic, and social roles to each and every majority groups. Members of the majority group are expected to fulfill a specific level of interests in order to secure all resources available to them. While, minorities are viewed as separate or lower part of the system. Despite longstanding efforts to eliminate the discriminatory aspects in society, the practice remains widespread.

The practice of discrimination was maintained over many years, and still remains an important aspect of life. Many rural tribes work as agricultural labourers and majority of them are bonded labourers. They are among the poorest of citizens, generally do not own land, and often are illiterate. They face significant discrimination despite statutory protective provisions, and often are deprived of equal facilities for education and development as majority people have. In addition they face segregation in politics and jobs. Minority tribes tend to be malnourished, lack access to health care, work in poor conditions and face continuing and severe social ostracism.

It is reported that crimes committed by majority groups against minority, often go unpunished, either because of the authorities do act in favour such cases or because the fear of losing the regime power. However, in recent years, groups resort violence to protect tribal autonomy and rights.

In the provision of the Constitution our President of India has the authority to identify historically disadvantaged peoples and tribals. And can protect their rights taking appropriate action and providing them special benefits from special development funds, and special training programmes.

Low caste Hindus converted to Christianity marginally gain supports from Christian missionaries' action programmes and others, who are unwilling to convert, are suffering a lot. In some states, government jobs are reserved for majority people alienating minorities.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 lists new offenses against disadvantaged persons and provides stiffer penalties for offenders. However, this act has had only a modest effect in curbing abuse. The NCRB reported that 25,638 crimes against scheduled castes and 4,276 crimes against scheduled tribes were recorded in 1998. This compares with 27,944 crimes against scheduled castes and 4,644 crimes against scheduled tribes recorded by the NCRB in 1997. However, human rights NGOs allege that violence against minority actually is on the increase.¹⁵

Minority Reangs

The Brus (Reangs) as the minority tribal group in Mizoram suffered the similar cause. They are the worstly suffered tribal group of northeast in ill-assorted government policies. The majority Mizos as well as Mizoram government have denied their social, political, cultural and economic rights. At one point of time they were forced to convert their religion. They were not allowed to follow their religious beliefs and rituals. They have no equal rights in the state, even were prevented to participate in development, in education, and in politics. This all had a discernible impact on Reang society. Comparing to Mizo society the development in Reang society remains tardy. Political parties especially state leaders timed the benefits of Reang struggle. Christian missionary, despite its strong influence on tribal group of northeast, harps on the class and religion elements in development. Mizo Christians are getting every facility from the Christian missionaries, while non-Christians have rare opportunity to ameliorate their social conditions, because of the less number of NGOs and other missionary assistance.

Reangs (Brus) are the pro-Hindus and lack equal rights in Mizo-Christian dominated society. When Reangs clamoured their political, cultural and economic rights in Mizoram, they coupled with life threats, their houses were torched, girls and women were gang raped, and were finally tossed out of Mizorm state by majority Mizos.

In Mizo religious bigotry, the question of Reang rights and autonomy is still baffling. Uncertainty is hovering around, no one is sure about it, when they will be repatriated in Mizoram from the refugee camps of Tripura. It is a sticky example of how minority tribal rights have been denied in Mizo dominated society. By and large, it is the common cause of many minority tribal groups in northeast, who suffer in majority yoke.

The knowledge of the similarities and differences among various tribal groups is one key to understand the cause of their rights violated. The rights of northeastern tribals and its violations must be considered as interrelated if we are truly to understand the tribal crisis. There is no doubt that the best predictions of some kinds of violation of human rights are merely the social exceptions of tribal society. Think about your own rights; what the facilities you have? What the political, social, cultural and economic rights you enjoy? Has anyone discriminated you in getting school and college education, and is anyone disturbing in your free exercise of your culture and religion? Are not you free to talk in your mother tongue? What would have happened to you if you were forcedly denied to access all these rights? What will you do to get all your these rights? Had not you occupied the better position than those of tribal groups in northeast? Would not you fight for the causes of your own rights, if denied? But we all always portrayed the better democratic rights through the constitutional framework. External factors act to determine the tribal rights at all levels of development may have negatively influenced some tribal sections or certain tribal groups.

These are the factors that forced most of the minority tribal groups in northeastern states to live in most dilapidated condition. This book will focus on the solution of the root causes of perpetuating violence amongst different tribal groups in northeast. Why do communal violence and terrorism take place within the northeastern states? How and why Reang tribes of Mizoram were uprooted and taken shelter in Tripura refugee camps? How the continuous discrimination against tribes has been affecting the community relationship? With what strategies the problem of internal displacement people (IDPs) can be manifested and how the refugees can be dealt with? How will you deal with repatriation process? Why the tribal rights and interests are

necessarily to be protected? Answers to all these questions will concern us in the next few chapters.

Nature of the Reang Problem

The unequal tribal/non-tribal and inter-tribal power relations have played a major role in most of the conflicts in northeastern states of India. Self-determination, religious and cultural rights, economic empowerment, language and ethnic identity are some of the major determining factors in the ethnic conflicts in the northeast. Since long northeast remained a geographically and politically isolated area in which people did not have equal share in politics, economy and other development with the rest of the country.

Ethnically more diverse, northeast states withstanding of 200 recognised tribes made it their home. Tensions rife in economic backwardness, discrimination and unequal civil and political rights and suppression of religion and culture. Such causes are the major source of the conflicts between Reangs and Mizos.

With that diversified culture and geographical entity of 200 tribal groups and some 175 different languages – northeast tribes are more concerned about their own distinct identity, separate language and autonomy. In search of their political autonomy and separate homeland Reang minority fell in victims in Mizo resorted violence. Mizos, to achieve full economic and political power in the state, have tried to rearrange the electoral balance by ethnically clenching their areas from Reang ethnic group, sometime targeting Reang communities which are actually be numerous in population.

In pursuance of political agendas, the state leaders in the ruling government had reportedly been supportive to majority Mizos. What is more worrisome is that the politico-religious organisations found to be responsible in the whole acrimony. Widespread discrimination is there even in providing development aids and social services to other religious group. Which some take the shape of communal violence.

The Reang (Bru) problem surfaced only when they propelled their democratic rights. With their unfulfilled demands, Reangs People Union (RPU), initially approached to the state government of

Mizoram with three points demands for including Reang programs in All India Radio, Aizwal; reservation of jobs for the Reangs in government services; and nomination of Reang representatives in the Legislative Assembly.

After 1990, Reang Democratic Convention started functioning for the preservation of Bru culture, customs, language and other socio-economic uplift in Mizoram. But the demands of the Reang autonomy, separate language and political representation could not get a place in Mizo society, that alternatively gave a feeling that Reangs are turning towards a separatist movement and this could pose a greater threat to Mizo society. Although, government opposed all. Reangs have not received any opportunity to exercise their fundamental rights in the state.

Being the minority in numbers they were oppressed by majority Mizo people. State government, instead of protecting their interests, disallowed their political, social, cultural and economic rights. Did nothing in fear of losing majority Mizo support. The lives of Reangs were trifle different in their homeland when government denied doing anything in their favour. The Mizo government, under the patronage of state Chief Minister, who in his political wit wandered into majority population and worked only for the well being of Mizo society and in rare occasion he served for Chakmas and Maras. That infuriated Reangs but they continued their peaceful struggle for their democratic rights.

In that stark controversy, Mizo youths (under various banners) started to prevent Reang demands and imposed peer pressure upon the Mizoram government not to grant the Reang demands. Many years passed in that un-dismissal dispute, Reangs finally became the targeted audience in Mizo society. On the other hand, political parties started reaping the huge benefit, by making Reang autonomy a major political issue. The pro-Hindu fundamentalist leaders actively supported the Reang movement in Mizoram. Taken them with Chakmas for joining this movement under same political banner. Mizo organisations strongly refuted this movement and branded Chakmas as “foreigners from Bangladesh” and Reangs as “outsiders from Tripura and Assam”.

The Mizo organisations had made up their mind to toss out the Reangs with systemic plans and programmes. But it was not difficult



too. To fulfill the Mizo agenda, they systematically cleansed the Reangs from Mizoram by nefarious activities. First, they started attacking on women and young Reang girls, forcing the Reangs to give up their Hindu religion and some of them were asked to convert into Christianity. Reangs who denied conversion had suffered in many deadly attacks, sometime torching their houses, ravishing women and young girls. Many were beaten to death and forced them to leave Mizoram. In most of the Reang villages in Mizoram, those innocent tribesmen had suffered in that Mizo mob attacks and no one seriously came forward to help.

Government was very skeptical to save their life and property. Those were the most sombre days that the Reangs had ever faced in their lives and it witnessed many such violations of human rights in Mizoram. Those random attacks ultimately forced the Reangs to flee from Mizoram with a population around 52,000. They sheltered in different states, few in Assam, some migrated to Bangladesh and Myanmar and a larger population took shelter in Tripura.

Many of the Reangs refugees became symptomatic at the time when they lost their daily food and solace. All of them became very weak, mentally and physically, finding no one to come around for help. Poverty and squalor immediately became a part of their daily life, until when started living in refugee camps. Green forests, tree leaves, cattle and snakes were their only source of livelihood and passing an animal-like life. Their lives subverted into permanent hunger and misery. That all continued up to two years initially after taking shelter in Assam and Tripura. Many Reangs who fled to refugee camps died of various diseases, without food, drinking water and medical help. National Human Rights Commission when recognised them refugees, they started receiving grants from central government. But that was too late. The initiative of the central government has lured Reang refugees, but that was not the permanent solution in protecting the lives and safeguarding their minimum basic needs.

Refugee leaders claimed that central grants did not reach to them regularly and sometime that grants siphoned out by local political leaders and government officials. Living in refugee camps is just among many of the insurmountable barriers. Concern was expressed that Tripura government is not willing to give any shelter to Reang refugees, thereby violating the basic rights of refugees.

Reangs are the citizens of this country. And even after the directives of central government their repatriation has not yet started. They are unlawfully detained in refugee camps, and languishing under extreme depression and misery, since last six years. The need of the hour is to overcome the present situation. If their rights are denied they may provoke a counter-movement against that government discrimination.

Government policies of IDPs and repatriation should not be meddled with politics and the vested interest groups only followed their political agendas. But the real problem lies on: will the Reangs be repatriated in Mizoram? Or, will they be settled down in Tripura along with already existing Reang tribes? The numbers mentioned by the Mizoram government that only a small portion of the Reang refugees were the citizens of Mizoram, that would not buttress the present argument on the Reang repatriation in Mizoram. The most bizarre aspect is that their quick repatriation is possible only when central government and NHRC take stern steps against Mizoram government or if they suggest their resettlement in Tripura. Next few chapters will glean and examine this situation more vividly.

NOTES

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15. Amnesty International reports, India.

The suffering of the Reangs in Mizoram epitomises the absolute lack of tolerance of the majority communities in the North East India towards their own minorities. Subrata Dutta's study on the Reangs of Mizoram highlights the plight of one of the most oppressed communities whose rights have been ignored by the powerful students unions of the North East. The plight of the Reangs challenges the dominant groups of the North East about the notions and practices of democracy, good governance and rule of law.

—**Suhas Chakma,**

Director, Asian Centre for Human Rights, New Delhi

Northeast India has been the potent hub of ethnic violence of worst type since long. Subrata Dutta has carried out a systematic investigation of the process of displacement of Reang community. He has presented many crucial facts of the tribal conflict, which many other would be scared of even mentioning. Many more such investigation would be required to analyse and understand the dynamics of the conflict in Northeast. His suggestions had to be considered seriously.

—**Prof. B.K. Kuthiala**

Dean, Faculty of Media Studies, Haryana.

Secretary, Council for International Affairs and Human Rights, New Delhi.

The Reang people of Northeast India are being uprooted from their homes by the majority community. This ethnic cleansing goes on silently, and the cry of the victims seldom reaches the people of the other side of the country. Subrata has studied the problem in depth and risked his life in collecting first hand information on specific cases of human rights violation. This book will evince adequately his objective mindset.

—**Dr. Partha Chatterjee**

Senior Journalist and Ex. President, Kolkata Press Club.

The Northeast of India is an extremely volatile area and it is a difficult job to detect the various pressures and pulls that go to make its politics and society. Subrata has done splendid job. A detailed study of the various tribes in the Northeast—and the roots of extremism—is long overdue. I am sure this book will clarify many hidden aspects.

—**Prof. Buroshiva Dasgupta**

Professor of Communication, MIC, Karnataka and Ex. Editor of Financial Express.

This is one of the most informative books I have read on Northeast. I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in the study or development of the region. One can actually feel the resonance and vibrance of the culture as one reads through.

—**Sunny Thomas**

Senior Journalist, and Principal, Delhi School of Journalism.

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