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## Myanmar blind spot in Manipur

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The 2021 coup in Myanmar triggered a refugee influx into India. The problem has been framed in Manipur in incendiary language, with tragic consequences



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WHILE THERE HAS been extensive coverage of the violence in Manipur, it betrays a blind spot in Indian public discourse. It is usually in denial about the spillover effects of refugee flows on the country's internal political stability. This was the case with the refugee flow from the civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 that led to the liberation of Bangladesh. A similar dynamic is now playing out in Manipur.

A major obstacle to foreseeing the potential harmful effects of the refugee flow from East Pakistan was the triumphalist national mood that accompanied the birth of Bangladesh. The break-up of Pakistan brought geopolitical advantages to India; and at a time when secular ideals dominated our public sphere, the effective repudiation of the two-nation theory that was the basis for the Partition of 1947 became an occasion for national rejoicing. With the hindsight of five decades, however, it becomes apparent that the effects of the refugee flow were disastrous for northeast India, especially for the political stability of Assam. (see 'The refugees of 1971', IE, December 15, 2021).

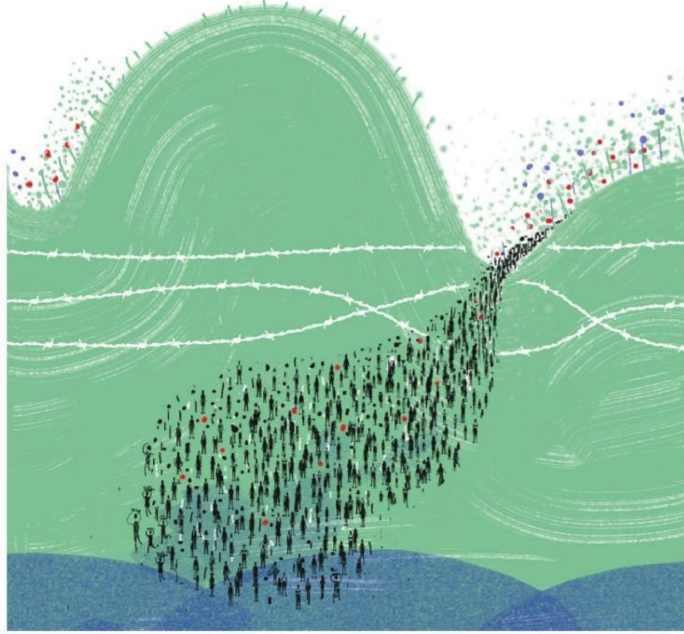
Making sense of the current wave of refugees requires recalling another Partition that receives almost no attention in India — the separation of Burma from India in 1937. The 1930 report of the Simon Commission that advocated this separation asserted that "the Burmese live in a country which geographically is quite distinct from India" and that the "people of Burma are entirely different from the peoples of India". The report, however, said very similar things about the "backward tracts" of the colonial province of Assam that constitute large parts of today's northeast India.

Viewed from the borderlands between the two countries, the separation of Burma from India, writes historian Bérénice Guyot-Réard, "ran against the grain of a fluid, connected, and dynamic human landscape" of the Patkai hills. For the Naga, Zo and Kachin people that live on both sides of those hills, the separation of Burma from India, she writes, "resembled a partition".

One large and loose assemblage of peoples inhabiting this transborder region is the Kuki-Mizo-Chin group of people. Today, they live in most of the states of northeast India — most significantly in Manipur and Mizoram — the Chin Hills of Myanmar, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. In recent years, the collective name "Zo" has won some acceptance.

No matter what term one chooses to describe this group, one crucial lesson that emerges from their postcolonial history is the importance of their transnational links. For instance, the Mizo uprising from 1966 to 1988 was not limited to the territory of what is now the state of Mizoram. Many Chins from Burma (Myanmar) joined the Mizo National Front (MNF) as did many Kukis of Manipur. Mizo guerilla fighters sought refuge among their ethnic kinfolk in both Burma and East Pakistan. Indeed, the headquarters of the MNF was in the Lushai (or Mizo) village of Mahmuam in the Sajek region of present-day Bangladesh's Rangamati district.

Since the February 2021 coup, the Chin state, which sits directly on the border with Mizoram, has been a significant battleground



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between the junta and the forces of opposition. There have been clashes between the regime and the Chin National Army — the armed wing of the Chin National Front (CNF). The Myanmar junta has launched military campaigns in the Chin state. During one of those campaigns, houses and churches were burned down in the town of Thantlang displacing the town's entire population. When the military regime declared martial law in 37 townships in February of this year, seven Chin townships were included.

These events have had significant humanitarian consequences across the border in India. The independent news media outlet *The Irrawaddy* reported that the number of refugees fleeing the fighting and crossing over to India, had reached 50,698 by August 24, 2022. Over four-fifths of them were Chins, whom Mizos and Kukis regard as their ethnic kin.

Mizoram's warm welcome to these refugees in defiance of New Delhi's orders has received widespread attention in India and abroad. Not only did the state government machinery swing into action to aid them, civil society organisations such as the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and church groups were actively involved in providing food and shelter to the refugees. This response can only be described as an example of grassroots — and not state-centred — humanitarianism.

To say that the Chin refugees have received a dramatically different reception in the neighbouring state of Manipur would be an understatement. While this is not the time for apportioning blame for what happened in Manipur, one aspect of the controversy over the influx of Myanmar nationals de-

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One key effect of the social, economic, and governmental disruption in Myanmar since the coup of February 2021 is the expansion of the cultivation of opium poppy. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, its cultivation increased significantly in 2022 and opiates accounted for a larger share of the national economy than in the previous year. Its report cites satellite imagery data showing high poppy cultivation density in a mountain area in the Chin State close to the international border with India. It is only to be expected that some of this opium cultivation would accompany the refugee influx to India as many in Manipur have suggested. But the demagogic language of "narco-terrorism" in which the problem has been framed in Manipur may have been a product of a politically engineered moral panic that overstates the problem.

There is a lot to be said for the grass roots humanitarianism evident in Mizoram. But the media and governmental inattention to the underlying refugee issue — and the complications that arise from the presence of ethnic kin inside the country — allowed an alternative framing of the issue to develop in Manipur. If we were to imagine the Indian government permitting UN agencies to operate in northeast India, and the Myanmar refugees being able to register with the UNHCR for protection, it is extremely unlikely that the problem of the influx would have been framed in such an incendiary manner in Manipur with such horrific consequences.

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