**Migration and Identity Crisis of the Brus in Mizoram**

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**Abstract**

*Human migration is the movement of people from one place or region to another with an intention of settling permanently or temporarily in a new location. This movement may take place domestically within a country or internationally from one country to another or even from one continent to another. It can affect economic structure, population density, culture and social practices, politics and identity of the community in some way or the other. Brus are one of the minority tribes in Mizoram. They are mainly found in the western and north-western belts along the Indo-Bangladesh, Mizoram-Tripura and Mizoram-Assam state borders. They are known to have migrated in the present Mizoram from Tripura and Bangladesh during the first half of the twentieth century. Majority of their population are now found in Tripura, a state of India and Bangladesh. This paper deals with the Brus, their migration, settlement, crisis of identity and other relevant issues.*

Key words: Bru, identity, migration, refugee, crisis.

**Who are the Brus?**

The Brus are also known as Riangs or Reangs, but they preferred to be known and usually call themselves as ‘Bru’[[1]](#endnote-1). The term ‘Bru’ literally means ‘A man or human being’[[2]](#endnote-2) while the name of one of the sub-tribes of the Brus, ‘Riang’ is used popularly as an appellation to denote the tribe[[3]](#endnote-3) as Mizos used to be known as Lushais which is a corrupted spelling of *Lusei*, one of the sub-tribes of the Mizos. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the great Mongolian family. Mizos of Mizoram call them as *Tuikuk* which means ‘taking bath in the river or people who live along the river’. Oral history and the old writings of the Mizos showed that the term *Tuikuk* was first used to cover all the tribes and sub-tribes living in the Tripura Kingdom such as Brus (Reangs), Tripuris/Tripuras (Debbarmas), Jamatias, etc. because, when the Mizos entered Tripura in the 17th and the early 18th century[[4]](#endnote-4), the Brus whom they called *Tuikuk* happened to be the first tribes they encountered there. It was only later on, they came to realise that the said other tribes also inhabited Tripura kingdom and the term *Tuikuk* came to be used for the Bru community only. As par the provision of Part XVII of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, the Riang (Bru) tribe is entered as one of the sub-tribes of Kuki tribes in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Mizoram. This happens as the scheduled tribes list for North Cachar Hills District of Assam was adopted in toto for Mizoram in the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971. While the Kukis and Mizos belong to the Kuki-Chin Linguistic group, the Brus belongs to Bodo linguistic group. So, the Brus of Tripura are entered in Sl. No. 16 of Part XV – Tripura of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 as a separate tribe[[5]](#endnote-5). There are 13 different clans of the Brus such as, Molsoi, Tuimui, Msha, Taumayakcho, Apeto, Wairem, Riang or Reang, Meska, Raikchak, Chorkhi, Chongpreng, Nouhkham and Yastam[[6]](#endnote-6). Majority of their community are living in Tripura and Bangladesh today and forms the second largest tribal community in the state of Tripura[[7]](#endnote-7). Some of the Brus claim themselves as descendants of the famous saint *Kashyapa* belonging to *Khshatrias* and *Maladhara jati,* conservative Hindus who use the sacred necklace of basil (tulsi) plants. Some of the historians put them as a clan under the Tripuris though socio-cultural, customs and style of living are a little bit different from that of the Tripuri tribe.

**Bru migration to Tripura**

At present, homeland of the Bru is the state of Tripura and Hill Tracts of Chittagong in Bangladesh. Their history and the place where they came from are murky and shrouded in myths. Since their language, Kau Bru belongs to the Tibeto-Burman dialects, their ancient homeland may be located in the south-west of China and from that place migration took place all through Assam, Burma, Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Tripura and up to Northern Bengal[[8]](#endnote-8). Of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family, there were three groups such as , Naga, Kuki-Chin and Bodo. The Naga and Kuki speakers were driven to the hills and Bodo, which comprises of Kau Bru became the prominent language. It may thus, be assumed that the Brus, leaving their original homeland in China in search of food and fertile lands for cultivation, halted temporarily at different places including the north-west corner of Burma the memory of which is still faintly known. Here, probably, a division took place between the Tripuri and the Bru tribes. From this place, the Brus gradually moved south-westward leaving the Naga Hills and the Manipur Hills to the left toward Arakan; while the Tripuris moved westward and entered Tripura through Assam following a shorter route of migration[[9]](#endnote-9). The Tripuris had already established a strong kingdom when their relative Brus entered Tripura after chasing such a long route of migration all through Burma and Bangladesh. In their course of migration from Arakan of Burma to Tripura, the Brus might have settled in the Myinee or Mayani Hill of Bangladesh, near Rangamati as their folk tale and oral history contain the name of this place. The location of Mayani Hill is always mistaken to be in the Lushai Hills or Mizo Hills among the scholars and the Brus themselves. It can easily be located from the map of Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh till today. Some of the Brus also held that they migrated to this place from Shan state of Burma (Myanmar) some centuries back through Arakan ranges of that country[[10]](#endnote-10) and settled for some time in and around Chittagong in the valley of the Karnaphuli river[[11]](#endnote-11). Their large concentration into two sub-divisions, namely, Kailashahar and Amarpur which have common borders with the Chittagong Hill Tracts also ascertains their entry from that side into Tripura. Their entry to Tripura seems to be during the 14th - 15th century as there were two Bru commanders by name, Ray Kacham and Ray Kachag in the army of Tripura ruler King Dhanya Manikya (1463-1515 A.D). There are 1,88,220 Brus in Tripura according to the general census of 2011.

**Bru migration to Mizoram**

Literature and records on the time of entry and settlement of the Brus in Mizoram is rare and vague. Little was known even from the writings of the British administrators of the then Lushai Hills except their cautions against the illegal movement and settlement of the Nepalis, Chakmas and Tripuris from Nepal, Bangladesh and Tripura into the Lushai Hills in the 1940s[[12]](#endnote-12). The first settlement of Brus in Mizoram seems to be in the year 1926 under the jurisdiction of Hrangphunga, chief of Serhmun village. Hrangphunga migrated to establish Serhmun village in Hachhek range of western Mizoram from Leithum village of Tripura in the year 1925. When he tried to acquire recognition from the Superintendent of Lushai Hills, he fell short of the minimum required number of 30 households. Knowing this, his elder brother Lalsakeia, chief of Mahmuam[[13]](#endnote-13) village gave some Mizo families of his subjects[[14]](#endnote-14) but still could not make up the required number. He then invited some Brus from Tripura to settle within his jurisdiction and let them established a new village and named it Nghamilui where some Bru families started to settle down. With addition of all these Bru families, he acquired Superintendent’s recognition in the year 1926[[15]](#endnote-15). He was the first Mizo chief known to have invited the Brus into Mizoram. Other Mizo chiefs also did the same in welcoming the Brus and the Chakmas into their jurisdictions for getting more tax and revenues. Chief of Tukkalh (Tuidam) Mr. Lalbuanga also called in some Bru families led by Dumbawma in 1931 and let them established Darlak village in 1936. Son-in-law of Dumbawma later on established Tumpanglui village leaving his in-law family. This was against the will of Lushai Hills Superintendent. The then Superintendent of the Lushai Hills A. MacDonald issued a strong order against this kind of move mentioning the names of six Mizo chiefs and imposed fines of Rs.200/- each to them. Superintendent also gave order that all those Bru settlements to be shifted within the distance of half a mile from the chief’s house before the end of 1945[[16]](#endnote-16). Other information available in this regard shows that Brus entered Mizoram from Tripura during the first half of the 20th century and their migration took place in a larger number as they were treated badly by the then Tripura Maharaja Bir Bikram because of their movement against him under the leadership of Ratanmani Noatia (1892-1943)[[17]](#endnote-17) aggravated by enmity between other two Bru leaders, Rai Debi Singh and Khogendra Rai on the issue of leadership of their community under the Tripura Maha Raja that culminated into migration of hundreds of Brus who called themselves as Swadeshi or *Soinashi* and supported Rai Debi Singh who lost the recognition of the Maharaja[[18]](#endnote-18). Even then, their population was negligible and the general census had no any mention of their community till 1961 in Mizoram.

The influx of Brus from Tripura increased when a large number of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan fled to Tripura from 1947. For resettlement and rehabilitation of these refugees, 6,400 acresof land belonging to the 600 tribal families mostly Brus, was acquired by the Government of Tripura. In 1981-82 the state again acquired 3,697.03 acres of land, of which 1,164.05 acres for plain land Bengali immigrants and 2,532.98 for East Pakistani refugees. With this, the total land used by the state of Tripura for the rehabilitation of refugees was 74,607.03 acres, taken from as much as 22,394 persons. According to one study, the tribal in Tripura lost 20 to 40 per cent of their land. Thus, the real number displaced by it is probably more than 50,000 persons. Through these measures, government of Tripura fulfilled its moral duty of rehabilitating the refugees but in doing so, it ignored the interests and welfare of the tribal communities. Besides this, acquisition of tribal community land for the construction of Dumbur Dam in the early 1970s was the last straw that led to tribal insurgency and a force behind the continuation of huge influx of Reangs in to Mizoram[[19]](#endnote-19).

Migration of the Brus into Mizoram also took place from the side of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of modern Bangladesh mostly following the valleys and courses of the rivers such as Kawrpui Lui (Thega), Khawthlang Tuipui (Karnaphuli) and its tributaries like Tuichawng Lui (Chawngpui Lui), Chawngte Lui, etc. There used to be some of Bru villages under jurisdictions of the Mizo chiefs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts during the first half of the 20th century giving tax or revenues to the Mizo chiefs. Some Mizo Christian missionaries also set up mission centres in the 1930s and stayed with them up to the year 1955. Almost all of these Brus had migrated into their adjoining areas of present Mizoram during the period starting from 1940s to 1960s in search of better land for cultivation and better livelihood. Their number could be around 1,000[[20]](#endnote-20).

According to the records of Church Organisations and other agencies in 1981, there were as much as 23,534 souls of Brus with distribution in three districts such as, 19,057 settled in Aizawl district[[21]](#endnote-21), 2,923 and 1,554 settled in Lunglei and Chhimtuipui[[22]](#endnote-22) districts respectively[[23]](#endnote-23). General census does not make any separate category for the Brus. They are grouped as one of the 41 tribes under the category of ‘any Kuki Tribes’[[24]](#endnote-24). Records of general census on the population of ‘any Kuki tribes’ from 1951 to 2011 is as follows, 1951 – 51 people; 1961 – 11,677; 1971 – 7,510; 1981 – 21,065; 1991 – 31,077; 2001 – 21,040; and 2011 – 45,754 souls[[25]](#endnote-25). As stated above, population of ‘any Kuki tribes’ does not represent the Bru population alone but all other mini-minority 40 Kuki tribes in Mizoram including the Brus. However, it may be presumed that Brus are the major contributors of the population of ‘any Kuki tribes’ as the rest are not that much popular in Mizoram.

**Bru home coming to Tripura**

The Brus, being minority community living in Mizoram, were given nominated seats two times in the Legislative Assembly of Union Territory of Mizoram from 1972 to 1986. Political consciousness gradually grew among them that resulted into the formation of Riang Democratic Convention Party (RDCP) on June 15, 1990. On June 15, 1993, RDPC announced its demand for Bru Autonomous District Council in western Mizoram through press release. Coinciding this, a political party named Bru National Union (BNU) was formed. Again, in April 1997, Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) was formed in Mizoram. This BNLF later on resorted to arms and violence against the government and the Mizo people. This movement of the Brus resulted the feeling of suspicion among the Mizos, especially of western belt and made them alert on their activities around them. So, the Bru leaders took different strategy to persuade their people and started ‘Quit Mizoram Movement’ secretly in the month of October, 1997. On October 21, 1997, some BNLF militants shot dead Mr. Lalzawmliana, a Mizo, who was working as a Game Watcher under the department of Environment and Forest posted in Dampa Tiger Reserve. This incident triggered unrest both among the Mizos and the Brus. At the same time, some Bru volunteers secretly travelled in all the Bru inhabited villages and gave ‘Quit Mizoram Notice’ to their people. This order was so strong and compelling that a large number of them fled and migrated to Tripura in a night or so except some families who were bold enough to defy the order and even warning of shunning and expelling from their own community or even threatening of their lives[[26]](#endnote-26). It seems that they hoped to have a concerted and more effective effort in their demand for Autonomous District Council from Tripura, the home of their ancestors where thousands of their brothers and sisters are living. This migration may be called as a ‘Home Coming’ for them as they migrated back from Mizoram to Tripura where they had come from. As on July 15, 2009, the total population of Bru migrants residing in six refugee camps under Kanchanpur Sub-Division of Tripura was 36,569[[27]](#endnote-27) of which some of them are said to have joined the camps from Assam and other parts of Tripura[[28]](#endnote-28).

Many of them have again migrated back and repatriated to Mizoram as a result of negotiation between the government of Mizoram and the Bru leaders with the interference of the central government of India and Tripura; while a number of them are still remaining in the six Tripura camps. As enumerated and recorded by the Home Department, government of Mizoram in the year 2014, there were as much as 37,874 Brus inhabiting four districts such as Mamit, Kolasib, Lunglei and Lawngtlai in Mizoram[[29]](#endnote-29).

**Crisis of identity among the Brus**

When the smaller numbers of elements are mixed with the larger ones, the smaller ones usually tend to be losing their characters and identities more than the larger ones. Likewise, when people of smaller group moved and mingled with the larger community, the smaller community always witnessed and suffered crisis of identity and fear of assimilation in the hands of the larger ones. This also happens among the Brus not only in Mizoram, but also throughout their historic journey passing through different states and communities. When people migrate from one community or culture to another, they carry on their beliefs, culture, traditions, knowledge, etc. with them. On settling down in the new environment, their identity is likely to change that may possibly have two ways of reaction; one being positive, encouraging people to achieve more degree of belongingness to the new set of environment and culture while the other being negative with fear of change and assimilation of their formal identities and culture. When there is fear of assimilation and change in culture, crisis of identity comes up.

Identity simply means the state of being identical or quality of being the same among members of a group that sets apart from others. Ethnic identity depends upon the cultural or physical criteria which set the groups apart. Racial identity refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on the perception that the individual shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group.[[30]](#endnote-30) Crisis may be understood as a point of time that would assure of any affair or course of action to go on, or be modified or terminate. It is the decisive moment or turning point when identity of the community is at stake. In this regards, the Brus of Mizoram are raising different kinds of identity crises such as, religious belief and forced conversion, deprivation of political rights and social practices, forced change of names into Mizo way of doing, etc[[31]](#endnote-31). These so called crises being raised by the Brus are not the outcomes of ethnic conflicts between the Mizos and the Brus. They are rather the by-products of westernisation and modernisation of society. Change of religious beliefs or conversion among the Mizos or the Brus is based solely on personal choice and it is more so in the way of Christian mission in Mizoram. One can contest or caste his or her vote irrespective of race, caste or creed in the whole of Mizoram and many of the Brus are participating in the elections both as candidates and voters at the local and the state levels. Traditional social practices and the way of doings are being shunned by most of the tribes as a result of westernisation and modernisation without any coercion. Naming of children and change of name seems too small to be debated. As the Christian Mizos adopted biblical names and the names of the people who preached that religion to them, the Christian Brus are doing the same. This practice has become international now.

In the modern globalised information communication technology driven society, no community can live in an isolated island-like country. As we are living in a global village, it is desirable that each and every community must learn how to live a friendly life with mutual respect on our differences and work together for inclusive development. Brus in general are still living in a state of backwardness whether it is in Mizoram or in Tripura in comparison to other communities with which they are living. This largely contributes for their resentment against the state government. Since most of them are settling in the border and far-flung remote areas of the state, it is always difficult to provide them with civic amenities and all weather approach roads for the government. Migration and moving here and there is still a common phenomenon among many of them. At the time of harvesting or even before, many of them would leave their homes and settle in their jhum huts and consume whatever they produced in their jhum-lands. This and other social stigmas should be put to an end as it retards and cripples their socio-economic development whether it is in education, health sector and other developmental programmes things could not be achieved as expected[[32]](#endnote-32). State government, other stakeholders and leaders of the Bru community themselves are more or less equally responsible for their uplift and inclusive development. For the development of those living in the remote border areas, funding under Border Area Development Project of government of India could prove to be very useful if it is utilised as given in its guidelines. This needs a careful review for its more effective utilisation. In regard to repatriation of refugees from Tripura, time should be chosen and decided based on occupational practices of majority of them. As most of the Brus are still depending on shifting cultivation, it would be more convenient and effective to choose the period between harvesting and clearing of land for cultivation purposes. A good number of repatriated Brus are rendered as landless labourers since most of their lands had been sold to other people while leaving Mizoram for Tripura. This problem also needs to be looked into and some measures should be taken to provide them with arable land. Emphasis needs to be given towards awareness of importance of health, education and developing a permanent, settled social life to make all kinds of developmental schemes and programmes successful and more effective. There have also been a number of well-educated youth with exposers to different places of the country among the Bru community itself today. These educated Brus must come up to take initiatives for their socio-economic and political development with cooperative and optimistic mindset towards the state’s apparatus that would prove to be quite beneficial for the settlement of their issues as well as for the achievement of peace and tranquillity in the state.

1. A joint Memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of Mizoram by Bru National Union, Bru Welfare Committee, Bru Social Cultural Association and Bru Students’ Association on May 29, 1997 contains their prayer for recognition of the nomenclature ‘Bru’ in lieu of ‘Riang’ that is mentioned in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Mizoram. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jagadish Gan Choudhury, *The Reangs of Tripura*, Print Best, Agartala. 2011. p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bibhas Kanti Kilikdar, *Customery Laws and Practices – The Riangs of Tripura*, Caxton Printers, Agartala. 1998 (reprint 2017). p.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. C. Chawngkunga, *Important Documents of Mizoram*, RTM Press, Aizawl. 1998. p.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lalhriatpuia, *Case Study of the Reang (Bru) Migrants Issue*, (unpublished research paper), Aizawl. 2017. p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lincoln Riang, *Education Among the Riang of Tripura: Issues and Perspectives*, in Gautam Kumar Bera et al., Tribal Development in Tripura (eds), EBH Publishers (India), Guwahati. 2009. p.50. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gautam Kumar Bera, Introduction*,* in Gautam Kumar Bera et al. (ed), *Tribal Development in Tripura*, EBH Publishers (India), Guwahati. 2009. p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Manoshi Das and Sriparna Chakraborty, Socio-Economic Status of Riang in Tripura: An Empirical Study, in Gautam Kumar Bera et al. (eds), *Tribal Development in Tripura*, EBH Publishers (India), Guwahati. 2009. p.63&65. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jagadish Gan Choudhury, *Ibid,* pp.9 &11. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Mizoram Tribal Research Institute, *A Brief Account of Riang in Mizoram*, United Press, Aizawl. 1986. p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bibhas Kanti Kilikdar, *Ibid,* p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Mizoram Tribal Research Institute , *The Lushai Hills District Cover by A.G McCall*, Allied Publisher Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi. 1980 (reprint 2008). pp.72&73. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. A village in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Great grandfather of the author of this paper was also among those who then migrated to Hrangphunga’s Serhmun village from Mahmuam. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Vanpuilala, Tuidam, son of Lalsakeia, Mahmuam chief. Interviewed on February 15, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Order No.4123-58 g of 6.12.1044, dated 5.12.1944. Issued by A. MacDonald, the then Superintendent of Lushai Hills. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jagadish Gan Choudhury, *Ibid,* p.85. and Mizoram Tribal Research Institute, *Riang Chanchin* (Mizo), K.T Printers, Aizawl. 1996. p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. C.Chawngkunga and C. Dothansanga, *Mizorama Tuikuk (Reang/Bru) Chanchin* (Mizo), Lengchhawn Press. Aizawl. 2014. pp.60-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Lalhriatpuia*, Ibid*, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Laldova, *Ka Nu An Hekna Zozai Che Hi*, LV Art, Aizawl.2012. pp.79-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Undivided Aizawl district that comprised of the present Aizawl, Champhai, Kolasib, Mamit and Serchhip districts. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Undivided Lawngltai and Saiha districts, then Chhimtuipui district. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mizoram Tribal Research Institute, *A Brief Account of Riang in Mizoram,* United Press. Aizawl. 1986. p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Any Kuki Tribes includes - Biate, Biete, Changsan, Chongloi, Doungel, Gamalhou, Gangte, Guite, Hanneng, Haokip, Haupit, Haolai, Hengna, Hongsungh, Hrangkhawl, Rangkhol, Jongbe, Khawchung, Khawthlang, Khothalong, Khelma, Kholhou, Kipgen, Kuki, Lengthang, Lhangum, Lhoujem, Lhouvun, Lungpheng, Mangkel, Misao, Riang, Sairhem, Selnam, Singson, Sithlou, Sukte, Thado, Thangngeu, Uibuh and Vaiphei. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Records of Directorate of Census Operations, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Mizoram. Aizawl. Dated 10th November, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Mr. Zoduha, a Riang Ex-MLA of Mizoram confessed himself that he was expelled by BNLF from Riang community as he was reluctant to finance them and refused to flee to Tripu ra and he adopted a Mizo clan by name Ralte on November 31, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Government of Tripura, Office of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Kanchanpur, *Statement Showing total population of Reang Migrants,* Lett. No. F.6(21)/SDM/KCP/REF/2009-10, the 15th July, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Mr. Elvis Chokhy, then Chairman of Mizoram Bru Displaced People Forum (MBDPF) expressed his concern for verification of those who joined refugee camp from Assam at the joint meeting of Hachhek Constituency Joint Action Committee and Bru refugee camp leaders held on 12.2.2010 at PWD Inspection Bungalow, Kanhmun Mizoram-Tripura border. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Home Department, Government of Mizoram, *Details of total population of Reang (Bru) Reciding in the State of Mizoram – reg.,* Letter No. D-32020/13/2013-HM, Dated Aizawl, the 23rd December, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Dinesh Bhugra, Migration, Distress and Cultural Identity, in *British Medical Bulletin*, Vol. 69, British Council. 2004. p.133. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Subrata KR. Dutta, *Uprooted Reangs: Strangers in Their Motherland*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi. 2005. pp.10-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Interview of SSA Cluster Coordinator who is in-charge of a number of Riang villages expressed his concern for this that at the time and after harvestings, a larger number of students would be out of school due to this temporary migration to jum-lands. Date of interview November 2, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)