

Impression of Myanmar Refugees on Significance of Socio-Cultural Structures in Mizoram: A Short Survey

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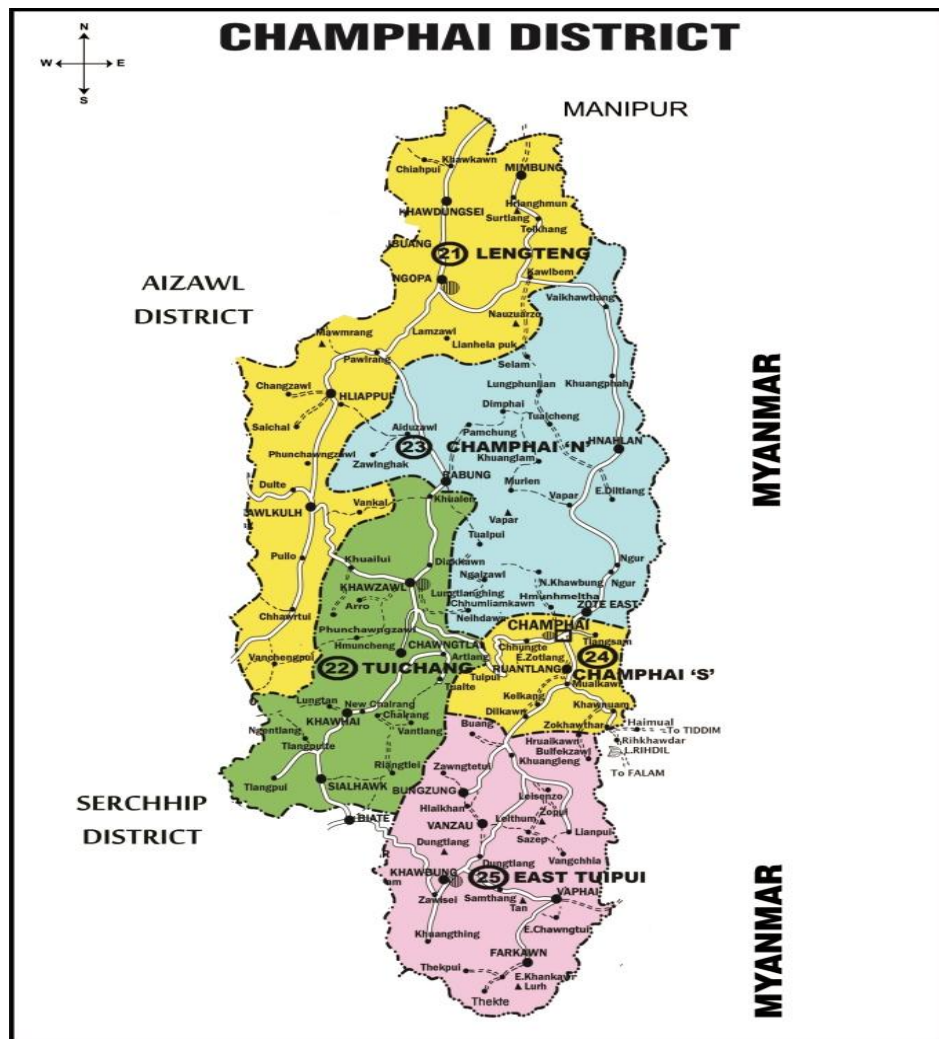
Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of refugees from Myanmar regarding the socio-cultural systems of Mizoram, specifically in the Champhai district, which has experienced significant refugee migration. The short study explores the complex relationship between the refugee communities and the local Mizo population, focusing on aspects such as cultural affinities, governmental schemes, religious influences, and the role of local organizations like the Young Mizo Association in facilitating integration. Using both primary and secondary data, including surveys and interviews, the study assesses how refugees perceive the Mizoram cultural system based on demographic factors such as age, clan, and country of origin. The findings reveal that refugees from Myanmar exhibit more favorable views of local systems, showing the most positive responses, particularly toward denominational influences and governmental administration. The study underscores the importance of clan and origin in shaping refugee attitudes and highlights the role of kinship networks, cultural continuity, and informal community support in facilitating successful integration. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on refugee integration, offering valuable insights for policy-making and social support mechanisms in border regions like Mizoram.

Keywords: Refugee Perceptions, Socio-Cultural Systems, Mizoram, Cultural Integration, Clan Affiliation

INTRODUCTION

This short study has been taken from an ICSSR project titled as “Memorializing Origin Myths: Post-memory and Identity Formation in Mizoram”. This survey, conducted in 2024 is an excerpt from a larger study which involved a collection of data from refugees currently living in three districts of Mizoram namely, Aizawl, Champhai and Lawngtlai. This article mainly focuses on Champhai district which borders Myanmar and has been receiving and housing refugees in their thousands since February 2021. They mostly represent multiple Chin tribes who speak varied languages.



<https://electionchamphai.mizoram.gov.in/page/district-map> (accessed 14th February, 2024)

Like all bordering regions of conflict, the Mizoram - Myanmar border has seen a mingling and merging of refugees and local Mizos alike. Because the Chin refugees are historically seen as chhul khat chhuak or 'coming from the same womb', many traditions, customs and folkways are similar. The migration trail of present day Mizos of Mizoram have traced their ancestry to Myanmar and hence share similar traits of customs and rituals also. It is no wonder then that, although many refugees are housed in camps across the state, many refugees find distant relatives to live with. On the other hand, although many local Mizos consider influx of refugees as helping their brethren in time of need, the political and social implications of difference and perception of similarities has come to be blurred. Within the borders of Mizoram, many refugees are often expected to blend into local Mizo social structures, learn and speak local languages for ease of communication. Many of the refugees themselves often guide and advice their own communities to abide by local rules and social practices so as to not disturb local systems in place. This balance of refugee-local relationship is a sensitive one.

This study hence, aims to observe how the refugee populations, who have come through the Champhai border perceive the socio-cultural systems in Mizoram. This short survey furthermore looks into how refugees have gauged their reception while studying the impressions they have on the role of aspects like religion and governmental schemes and intervention during their time spent within the state. Three tables of comparisons based on age (Table 1), clan (Table 2), and a comparison with refugees from

Bangladesh (Table 3) have been included in this article to show the impressions of refugees to as close to ground reality as possible.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding how refugees perceive their host societies is an important part of refugee studies. While policies, laws, and humanitarian assistance are often discussed, it is equally essential to listen to how refugees themselves interpret their new environments - what they feel welcomed by, what challenges them, and what helps them adjust.

McConnachie (2018) presents an interesting ethnographic study on Chin refugees in Mizoram, highlighting the dilemma of "being both brothers and foreigners." Despite ethnic affinities with the Mizos, Chin refugees remain legally excluded due to India's lack of a national refugee framework. The study emphasizes how border regimes disrupt cultural kinship, forcing Chin communities to negotiate belonging in informal ways, often through shared church networks and informal labor markets.

India's refugee policy dilemma, particularly the contrast between Mizoram and Manipur, is further explored in a recent study by Khai (2024), Published in Discover Public Health, the research investigates how decentralized refugee governance affects the protection and dignity of Myanmar refugees as of 2023, India has received over 78,000 Myanmar refugees, prompting varied responses from its border states. While Mizoram adopted a humanitarian approach by offering aid through state and community collaboration, Manipur aligned with the central government's restrictive policy, leading to arrests and deportations. It finds that Mizoram's strong civil society led by the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and church institutions plays a vital role in ensuring humanitarian reception and socio-cultural assimilation, without formal recognition.

In a broader analysis of refugee protection across Indian states, Mathur (2023) outlines how reception varies dramatically. Mizoram is identified as one of the few states actively resisting national directives by hosting over 30,000 Myanmar refugees, often within Mizo households rather than formal camps. The study underlines that kinship and cultural affinity act as powerful informal protection mechanisms, especially in the absence of legal frameworks.

Mahmoudi (1992) examines how Tibetan refugees in India have successfully adjusted to a new cultural environment through strong community institutions in religion, education, and governance. Their model of integration demonstrates how organized social structures can aid refugee adaptation. The study underscores the importance of cultural continuity and institutional support in facilitating long-term resettlement.

Sapam and Jijina (2020) explore the lived experiences of Tibetan refugee youth in India who migrated as unaccompanied minors. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study reveals emotional, cultural, and political struggles tied to identity, loneliness, and cultural preservation. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience through Buddhist spirituality, community bonding, faith in the Dalai Lama, and social media use. Their hardships fostered personal growth, self-reliance, and a sense of collective purpose. The findings underscore the need for culturally adjusted psychosocial support. This research highlights the complex adaptation processes of young refugees growing up without family support in exile.

Hussain and Bhushan (2010) investigate how cultural resources support coping among Tibetan refugees in India. Through interpretive phenomenological analysis of diverse participants, the study identifies Buddhist beliefs, reverence for the Dalai Lama, and strong community ties as key coping mechanisms.

These cultural elements foster psychological resilience and help maintain identity in exile. The presence of historical role models also reinforces collective strength. The study affirms the central role of culturally rooted values and practices in refugee adjustment and well-being, offering insights into non-Western approaches to mental health and adaptation.

Pandey (2022) compares the treatment of Uyghur refugees in Turkey and Tibetan refugees in India through a neoclassical realist and critical theory framework. Using case studies, the article argues that domestic political interests largely shape refugee policies in both countries. Turkey's response to Uyghurs and India's approach to Tibetans are mediated by internal concerns and strategic calculations, rather than consistent humanitarian commitments. The study concludes that bilateral ties alone cannot predict refugee treatment, emphasizing the need for a framework that blends real politics with critical theory.

Kipgen (2023) extends the discussion beyond India by examining how ethnic communities in the diaspora - specifically the Koz people in Singapore rely on church institutions for social and cultural integration. Although the context differs, the study affirms the role of religious spaces in migrant identity formation, which echoes similar patterns in Mizoram where churches serve as both spiritual and social safety nets for Chin refugees. Agier (2008) takes a more global view by framing refugees as living at the margins of state systems - socially included yet legally invisible. This concept aptly describes the Chin refugee experience in Mizoram, where cultural kinship ensures community participation but legal recognition remains vague.

Horst (2006), in her work on Somali refugees in Kenya, illustrates how displaced communities use kinship networks and religious organizations to establish everyday normalcy.

In Canada, Simich et al. (2005) found that social support, not just from official services but also from friends, communities, and cultural groups played a major role in how welcomed refugees felt. Refugees who had access to familiar religious or cultural spaces often felt more emotionally secure. Similar results were reported by Hynie (2018), who argued that strong community ties help refugees cope with the emotional and social stress of starting over in a new place.

Studies in Europe also show the importance of refugees' own impressions. Phillimore (2010), working in the UK, found that while government programs were helpful, the way local people interacted with refugees had a deep impact on how "included" they felt. Refugees who experienced friendliness and support were more positive about their host country, even if they still faced language or employment barriers.

Unaccompanied minor refugees are especially vulnerable, and Eide and Hjern (2013) found that children separated from families often relied on schools, peers, and youth workers to build emotional connections. Their impressions of the host country were shaped not just by safety, but by whether they felt seen and understood.

A broader view is provided by Esses et al. (2017), who argue that the social climate - especially public attitudes toward refugees has a strong influence on refugee well-being. When refugees sense hostility or suspicion, it affects how they see themselves and their future. On the other hand, kindness and openness can lead to more positive views of the host society.

The literature reviewed clearly suggest that while legal frameworks and policies are important, the everyday social environment comprising cultural familiarity, community support, and interpersonal interactions plays a crucial role in shaping how refugees perceive and adapt to their host societies.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to assess whether there are differences in perceptions of the cultural system of Mizoram based on the origin, clan, and age group of refugees who have migrated from Myanmar and Bangladesh. To ensure a comprehensive examination, the research adopts a quantitative analysis of the collected data.

Data Sources: This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through a meticulously designed individual-level questionnaire and personal interviews conducted with refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Whereas, secondary data were collected from a range of published and unpublished books, articles, academic journals, and relevant online resources, with the aim of enriching the research and broadening its depth and scope.

Sampling Design: This research examines the attitudes of refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Among the 11 districts in Mizoram, Aizawl, Champhai, and Lawngtlai were purposively selected for this study due to high concentration of refugee populations. Within these districts, five villages were randomly chosen to ensure geographic diversity and adequate representation. A quota sampling technique was employed to assign specific quotas to each clan, based on the availability and convenience of refugees. This method enabled the random selection of participants from the refugee population, ensuring adequate representation of various Mizo clans. It allowed diverse perspectives to be included, contributing to the understanding of the Mizo cultural system.

Sample Size: In this research respondents were selected using Yamane's sample size formula. This formula ensures that the selected sample is statistically representative of the larger population, providing robust and reliable data for the study. The sample size formula proposed by Yamane is as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N \cdot e^2}$$

In this formula, the variables are:

n = sample size

N = number of populations of the study

e = margin of error

In this research, the sample size for refugees was determined using the above formula as follow:

$$n = \frac{23525}{1 + 23525 \cdot 0.05^2} \approx 393$$

Utilizing the Yamane sample size formula, the required refugee population size for this study was estimated to be approximately 393. To ensure adequate representation and minimize sampling error, an initial sample of 470 individuals was selected from various clans in descending order: Chin, Lai, Kuki, Zomi, and Lusei. The sample allocation was proportionally determined based on the population size and availability of each clan. Following the exclusion of inconsistent data, the final study sample comprised 461 individuals from the different clans.

Analytical Method: In this research, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to summarize and interpret the findings effectively. Key measures such as the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and percentages were utilized to provide a clear and concise representation of the data. In addition to descriptive statistics, a non-parametric test like the Chi-Square test, was utilized to examine whether a significant association exists between cultural system and various demographic characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section aims to examine the perceptions of refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh regarding the favorable system prevailing in Mizoram. The analysis focuses on various parameters, including the presence of the Young Mizo Association, cultural practices and their administration, denominational influences, governmental administration, interpersonal relationships, and values such as hospitality, kindness, selflessness, and helpfulness. The results of this analysis are presented below.

Some parameters look into the role of the Young Mizo Association or the YMA which is a large non-governmental organization purely run by the youth of Mizoram. Their main aim is preservation of Mizo cultural ethos like kindness and helpfulness while protecting Mizo identity.

Table 1: Attitudes of Refugees Towards Favourable system of Mizoram by Age Group

Favourable system of Mizoram	18–25 years	26–45 years	46–64 years	65 and above	Total
The presence of the Young Mizo Association	16.5%	35.8%	33.9%	13.8%	100.0%
The cultural practices and their administration	16.7%	40.0%	33.3%	10.0%	100.0%
Denominational influences	17.3%	37.3%	20.0%	25.3%	100.0%
Governmental administration	12.5%	40.6%	34.4%	12.5%	100.0%
Interpersonal relationships	20.0%	26.0%	36.0%	18.0%	100.0%
Hospitality, kindness, selflessness and helpfulness	26.7%	36.3%	26.7%	10.4%	100.0%
Total	19.7%	36.0%	29.7%	14.5%	100.0%

$\chi^2=20.751$, $df=15$, and $p=0.145$

The analysis of Table 1 reveals distinct patterns in the attitudes of refugees from Myanmar and toward various socio-cultural systems of Mizoram, with the middle-aged group (26–45 years) generally showing the highest levels of favorability in most categories. Thus, while middle-aged refugees tend to hold more favorable views in several areas, this trend is not robust enough to conclude that age significantly influences the attitudes of refugees towards Mizoram.

The chi-square statistic was employed to assess the relationship between educational qualifications and the favorable system practiced by Mizoram. The analysis revealed no significant association between the two variables at the 5% level of significance, with a chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 20.751$, degrees of freedom (df) = 15, and a p-value of 0.145, suggesting that age may not be a decisive factor in shaping overall attitudes towards Mizoram's systems. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which posited no association between educational qualifications and attitudes toward the favorable system, was upheld.

The data presented in Table 2 provides a detailed overview of the attitudes of refugees from various clans-Lusei, Lai, Chin, Kuki, and Zomi towards different aspects of the Mizoram system. It also includes a chi-square statistic (χ^2) for testing the statistical significance of the observed associations.

Table 2: Attitudes of Refugees Towards Favourable system of Mizoram by Clan

Favourable System of Mizoram	Lusei	Lai	Chin	Kuki	Zomi	Total
The presence of the Young Mizo Association	0.0%	4.6%	89.0%	0.0%	6.4%	100.0%
The cultural practices and their administration	1.7%	20.0%	76.7%	0.0%	1.7%	100.0%
Denominational influences	0.0%	17.3%	54.7%	26.7%	1.3%	100.0%
Governmental administration	3.1%	18.8%	78.1%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Interpersonal relationships	0.0%	50.0%	36.0%	12.0%	2.0%	100.0%
Hospitality, kindness, selflessness and helpfulness	0.0%	27.4%	21.5%	37.0%	14.1%	100.0%
Total	.4%	21.3%	55.5%	16.5%	6.3%	100.0%

$\chi^2=201.751$, $df=20$, and $p=0.000$

It could be observed from the table that the Chin clan consistently expresses the highest levels of favorability across multiple aspects of the Mizoram system. This is particularly evident in their responses concerning denominational influences, governmental administration, and the presence of the Young Mizo Association. The Chin clan appears to hold a strong, positive view of these aspects, indicating that they may have a greater alignment or affinity with the institutional and cultural components of the Mizoram system. In contrast, the Lai clan shows a preference for aspects related to cultural practices and interpersonal relationships. This suggests that the Lai clan may place more value on social and cultural dynamics within Mizoram, rather than on governmental or organizational factors. The Kuki clan, on the other hand, demonstrates a marked emphasis on values such as hospitality, kindness, and selflessness, highlighting their appreciation for the humanitarian and relational elements of Mizoram's system. The Lusei and Zomi clans, however, show more mixed responses, with varying levels of favorability across the different categories. These two clans appear to exhibit relatively less enthusiasm for most aspects of the Mizoram system, suggesting that they may have a more ambivalent or less positive view overall.

The chi-square test results ($\chi^2 = 201.751$, $df = 20$, $p = 0.000$) reveal a statistically significant association between clan affiliation and attitudes towards the various aspects of the Mizoram system. The p-value of 0.000, which is significantly lower than the conventional threshold of 0.05, indicates that the observed differences in the attitudes of refugees from different clans are not due to random chance but reflect a genuine relationship between clan affiliation and the favorable system of Mizoram.

Given the highly significant chi-square result, it can be concluded that clan affiliation plays a crucial role in shaping the attitudes of refugees towards the Mizoram system. These findings suggest that the socio-cultural and possibly historical backgrounds of different clans contribute to distinct perspectives on various elements of the Mizoram system. As such, the null hypothesis, which posited that there is no association between clan affiliation and attitudes towards the favorable system, is rejected. Instead, the alternative hypothesis is supported, which asserts that there exists a significant relationship between clan identity and the way refugees perceive the different facets of the Mizoram system. This emphasizes the

importance of considering cultural and clan-based factors when analyzing attitudes towards societal systems.

Table 3 presents the attitudes of refugees from Myanmar towards various aspects of the Mizoram system. It also provides the overall percentage distribution of these attitudes and the results of a chi-square test (χ^2) to determine the statistical significance of the observed differences between the two groups.

Table 3: Attitudes of Refugees Towards Favourable system of Mizoram by Origin

Favourable system of Mizoram	Myanmar	Bangladesh	Total
The presence of the Young Mizo Association	99.1%	.9%	100.0%
The cultural practices and their administration	90.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Denominational influences	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Governmental administration	96.9%	3.1%	100.0%
Interpersonal relationships	52.0%	48.0%	100.0%
Hospitality, kindness, selflessness and helpfulness	28.9%	71.1%	100.0%
Total	66.8%	33.2%	100.0%

$\chi^2=171.291$, $df=5$, and $p=0.000$

The data reveals a significant contrast in the attitudes of refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh toward the favorable system of Mizoram. Refugees from Myanmar consistently demonstrate more favorable views across most categories, particularly in areas such as the Young Mizo Association, cultural practices, and governmental administration. In contrast, refugees from Bangladesh exhibit considerably lower favorability, especially in relation to cultural practices and governmental administration. However, Bangladeshi refugees place greater value on qualities such as hospitality, kindness, and selflessness.

The chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 171.291$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.000$) supports the existence of a statistically significant association between the refugees' country of origin and their attitudes toward various aspects of the Mizoram system. With a p-value of 0.000, which is well below the conventional threshold of 0.05, it can be concluded that the observed differences between refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh are not due to random variation but represent a genuine and significant relationship. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which proposed no association between country of origin and attitudes, is rejected. These findings underscore the importance of considering the refugees' country of origin as a key factor influencing their perceptions and attitudes toward the Mizoram system.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the perceptions of refugees from Myanmar with an added table to compare attitude between refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh regarding the socio-cultural systems of Mizoram, focusing specifically on the Champhai district which has seen a significant influx of refugees. The findings highlight the complex interplay between refugee communities and the local Mizo population, emphasizing cultural affinities, particularly among the Chin refugees, and the role of organizations like the Young Mizo Association in fostering integration.

The results indicate that clan affiliation and origin play a crucial role in shaping refugees' attitudes toward Mizoram's socio-cultural systems. While refugees from Myanmar generally exhibit a more favorable view of the local systems, including governmental administration and cultural practices, refugees from Bangladesh demonstrate a preference for qualities such as hospitality and kindness, underscoring the varying priorities of different refugee groups.

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding refugee perceptions in the context of cultural systems, as these views contribute to the broader discourse on refugee integration, policy-making, and social support mechanisms. The significant role of kinship networks and informal community support systems, such as religious organizations and local institutions, emerges as key to the successful adaptation of refugees.

Thus, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between refugees and their host communities, offering valuable insights into the cultural and social integration processes. The findings provide a foundation for future studies and policy discussions aimed at improving refugee experiences in Mizoram and other border regions.

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