

The Plight of Zomi Refugees in Delhi, India

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Abstract

This paper explores the socio-economic, legal, and humanitarian challenges faced by Zomi Refugees from Myanmar who have migrated to Delhi, India. The Zomis, an ethnic group from northern Chin State, Myanmar, have fled to India in waves since the 1962 military coup. Fleeing decades of military persecution, forced labour, extrajudicial killings, and famine, many initially sought refuge in Mizoram due to cultural and ethnic ties. Over time, many Zomis migrated to Delhi for better opportunities and access to UNHCR services, which are not available in the northeastern states. However, the lack of formal refugee recognition in India rendered them stateless and highly vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination and deportation. Zomi asylum seekers live in precarious conditions with limited access to essential services and legal protection. Drawing on qualitative data from open-ended interviews, this study highlights the difficulties that Zomi refugees face regarding basic services, education, employment, and legal protections. Unlike other refugee groups in India, the Zomi receive little state recognition or institutional support. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive refugee policies, improved legal pathways for documentation and resettlement, and stronger international engagement to ensure protection and dignity for this marginalised community.

Keywords: Zomi Refugees, Forced Migration, Statelessness, Legal Exclusion, Refugee Protection

Introduction

The forced migration of Zomi refugees from Myanmar to India has occurred in multiple waves spanning over six decades. Originating from Chin State in Northwestern Myanmar, the Zomi people have been subject to continuing displacement since the 1962 military coup, which marked the beginning of General Ne Win's authoritarian rule. During this period, ethnic minorities like the Zomis faced extrajudicial killings, forced labour, and systematic repression under the "Burmanisation" policies of the military government (HRW, 2009). A pivotal event contributing to further displacement was the 8888 Uprising in August 1988, a nationwide pro-democracy protest that was violently suppressed by the military. The aftermath of this suppression forced thousands more Zomis to flee Myanmar to escape torture, persecution, and the threat of death (Smith, 1991).

Additionally, in 2006, famine caused by the cyclical bamboo flowering, locally known as "Mautam", further exacerbated the hardships faced by the Zomi people. The environmental crisis was compounded by the already dire situation for Zomi communities, who were driven out by both human and natural disasters (McConnachie, 2018). The situation has deteriorated in recent years, culminating in the 2021 military coup that deposed Myanmar's demographically elected government. The coup has reignited ethnic violence and repression, making the prospect of return for Zomi refugees next to impossible (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Many Zomi refugees initially sought asylum in Mizoram, a northeastern state in India with cultural and ethnic ties to the Zomi people. Despite shared kinship ties in Mizoram, the lack of institutional support, economic opportunity, and essential services has led many Zomi refugees to relocate to Delhi. Unlike Mizoram, Delhi hosts the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which offers limited documentation and aid. However, the absence of a national refugee law in India and the non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention leave refugees like the Zomis legally unprotected, undocumented and at risk of deportation (Kumari, 2013).

While scholarship has extensively documented the experiences of Tamil and Tibetan refugees in India, the Zomi remain understudied and politically invisible. This paper addresses that gap by offering a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of Zomi refugees in Delhi, focussing on their socio-economic exclusion, statelessness, and marginalisation. In doing so, it not only contributes to refugee studies in South Asia but also underscores the urgency of legal and humanitarian reforms tailored to lesser-known refugee populations.

Review of Literature

The displacement of the Zomi people from Myanmar to India is deeply rooted in decades of military rule, ethnic repression, and socio-environmental crises. Zomi refugees began fleeing Myanmar in the 1960s due to severe persecution and political instability under military rule (Smith, 1991). The oppressive policies of the military junta, including ethnic violence and the “Mautam” famine, exacerbated the phenomenon, forcing thousands of Zomis to seek refuge in neighbouring India (McConnachie, 2018). While many Zomis initially found refuge in Mizoram due to cultural and ethnic affinities, this initial reception did not translate into long-term security (McConnachie, 2018). Limited access to healthcare, education, and employment, coupled with increasing social tension, compelled many Zomi refugees to move toward Delhi, where UNHCR offers limited forms of assistance (Baruah, 2001).

The lack of formal refugee law in India creates a policy vacuum. This has left Zomi refugees stateless and vulnerable to arrest and deportation (Kumari, 2013). Although the UNHCR operates in Delhi, only a small fraction of Zomi refugees can obtain formal refugee status. The majority remain undocumented, lacking access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and legal work (Barthwal-Datta & Singh, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by inconsistent responses from state and central authorities, which fail to provide adequate protection or support.

Zomi refugees in Delhi endure poor living conditions, including overcrowded and dilapidated housing. Basic necessities such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity are often lacking, leading to significant health problems. Overcrowded living circumstances lead to the

development of diseases including tuberculosis and respiratory infections, while poor access to healthcare exacerbates health consequences, particularly for children and the elderly (McConnachie, 2018).

Education access for Zomi refugee children is hindered by language barriers, lack of documentation, and financial constraints. Many children cannot enrol in schools or face difficulties in integrating into the Indian education system (Kumari, 2013). Employment opportunities are equally limited due to their undocumented status. Zomi refugees are often confined to informal, low-wage jobs with minimal protection, facing exploitation and discrimination from employers (Kumari, 2013). The economic marginalisation and lack of stable employment further contribute to their overall socio-economic vulnerability.

The economic challenges faced by Zomi refugees are profound. Their restricted employment opportunities and low salaries in informal sector jobs make it difficult to meet basic needs including food, clothes, housing, and healthcare. High living costs in Delhi exacerbate their economic hardships, trapping them in a cycle of poverty with few prospects for improvement (McConnachie, 2018). Their economic marginalisation is a primary driver of their broader socio-economic vulnerabilities, further complicating their situation.

Zomi refugees face significant barriers to integrating into local communities in Delhi. Unlike in Mizoram, where they share cultural ties with the Mizo population, they encounter social exclusion and discrimination in Delhi. Their distinct ethnic features and unfamiliarity with local customs contribute to their isolation and difficulty in finding comfortable housing and stable employment (Baruah, 2001). Furthermore, the resettlement process for refugees is slow and fraught with delays, leaving many Zomi refugees in a state of uncertainty and frustration as they await resettle to third countries (Baruah, 2001).

Zomi refugees are more vulnerable than other refugee groups in India, such as Sri Lankan Tamils and Tibetans, due to a lack of formal registration and protection. The lack of a legal framework for their protection, combined with India's non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention, increases the risk of deportation and exploitation (Barthwal-Datta &

Singh, 2024). The ongoing violence and repression in Myanmar make returning unsafe and infeasible, leaving Zomi refugees in a state of limbo with no viable options for repatriation (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Existing literature has extensively examined the treatment of more prominent refugee groups by India, such as Sri Lankan Tamils and Tibetans, many of whom benefit from designated settlements, work permits, and state-supported services. In contrast, the Zomi refugees remain largely absent from policy discourse and academic analysis. While recent studies on the Rohingya have sparked international concern, the plight of the Zomi refugees- despite similar vulnerabilities-remain underrepresented in legal, media, and scholarly domains.

This gap highlights the need for focused research on the experience of Zomi refugees, especially within urban settings like Delhi. This paper builds on existing studies by offering primary data that reveal how legal invisibility intersects with socio-economic exclusion, framing the Zomi refugees as a case of protracted statelessness within an ambivalent host state.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks-forced migration, statelessness and socio-economic exclusion to analyse the Plight of Zomi Refugees in Delhi. Together, these frameworks help contextualise the structural and lived dimensions of displacement, legal invisibility, and marginalisation.

First, Kunz's (1973) theory of forced migration provides a foundational lens. It emphasizes the involuntary nature of the refugee movement in response to persecution, violence, and systematic exclusion. The displacement of Zomi refugees from Myanmar fits Kunz's typology of "reactive refugees"- individuals who flee not for opportunity but for survival. Their narratives of fleeing military crackdowns, forced conscription, and religious persecution underscore the coercive forces driving their migration.

Second, the study applies the concept of statelessness, defined as the condition of individuals who lack nationality under the operation of law. Statelessness renders refugees legally invisible, stripping them of the protections, rights, and identity that citizenship confers. The Zomi refugees, lacking documentation in both Myanmar and India, experienced what Arendt (1951) describes as a loss of the “right to have rights.” Without legal status, they are excluded from public services, face constant risk of deportation, and endure systematic discrimination in employment, education, and housing.

To deepen this analysis, Agamben’s (1998) notion of “bare life” is relevant. He describes individuals who live under sovereign power without legal protection as reduced to survival without political recognition. The Zomi denied statehood yet subject to state authority, exemplifies this condition. Their existence in Delhi is defined by continuous surveillance, legal precarity, and socio-political exclusion.

Third, the framework incorporates socio-economic exclusion theory, which explains how marginalised groups are systematically denied access to resources, participation, and opportunities (Silver, 1994). In urban India, legal invisibility translates into practical hardships-Zomi refugees are barred from formal employment, excluded from schooling, and pushed into overcrowded and unsafe living conditions. This exclusion is compounded by their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences, further limiting integration.

Additionally, the study references the theory of liminality, which describes the condition of being “betwixt and between”-neither belonging to the country of origin nor the host state (Turner, 1969). The Zomi are caught in a prolonged state of transition, unable to return to Myanmar and uncertain about resettlement prospects. This liminality produces psychological distress and erodes long-term agency and community resilience.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, this study captures the layered vulnerabilities of Zomi refugees. It moves beyond simply documenting material hardship to illuminate how legal and structural forces intersect with personal experience, shaping a life lived on the margins of both state and society.

Data and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Zomi refugees in Delhi. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing nuanced, in-depth narratives that illuminate the complex interplay of forced migration, statelessness, and socio-economic exclusion.

Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 20 Zomi refugees currently residing in various informal settlements across Delhi. The sample included participants of diverse age groups, educational backgrounds, and employment statuses. The selection was based on purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with key informants in community networks and expanding through referrals.

The number of interviews was determined using the principle of thematic saturation- the point at which no new information or themes emerge from additional interviews. Saturation was reached by the eighteenth interview, with two additional interviews conducted to confirm consistency across responses.

The interviews focused on five core areas:

- [1] Reasons for Displacement from Myanmar
- [2] Legal status and access to documentation
- [3] Living conditions and health
- [4] Education and employment barriers
- [5] Integration and resettlement experiences

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' preferred languages (Zomi, English, or Hindi) with the aid of community translators where necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret the interview transcripts. This involved identifying recurring patterns, categorising themes (e.g., “legal invisibility,” “employment exploitation”), and connecting them to the theoretical frameworks. NVivo software was used to assist in organising and analysing the qualitative data systematically.

This methodological approach ensures that the findings are grounded in empirical evidence while remaining attentive to the lived realities and agency of Zomi refugees in navigating legal and social exclusion in an urban Indian context.

Results and Findings

The findings are organised thematically and draw from open-ended interviews with 20 Zomi refugees in Delhi. The themes reflect patterns of forced displacement, legal invisibility, socio-economic marginalisation, and psychological distress. The voices of participants are integrated to illustrate key insights while avoiding narrative redundancy. Together, these findings highlight the persistent insecurity that characterises life for Zomi refugees in urban India.

Table 1: Profile of Interview Respondents

Respondent ID	Gender	Age Group (Years)	Marital Status	Education Level	Occupation	Years in India	Place of Origin (Myanmar)
R1	Male	30–39	Married	Graduate	Construction Worker	5	Cikha
R2	Female	40–49	Married	High School	Domestic Helper	6	Tuithang
R3	Male	20–29	Single	Undergraduate	Unemployed	3	Tedim

Respondent ID	Gender	Age Group (Years)	Marital Status	Education Level	Occupation	Years in India	Place of Origin (Myanmar)
R4	Female	30–39	Married	High School	Street Vendor	4	Taingen
R5	Male	40–49	Married	Graduate	Pastor	7	Cikha
R6	Female	20–29	Single	Secondary School	Tailor	2	Vangteh
R7	Male	50–59	Married	Primary School	Security Guard	8	Tuithang
R8	Female	30–39	Married	No Formal Education	Homemaker	6	Tonzang
R9	Male	20–29	Single	College Dropout	Daily Wage Labourer	3	Tedim
R10	Female	40–49	Married	Middle School	Vegetable Seller	5	Cikha
R11	Male	30–39	Married	Graduate	Informal Teacher	5	Tuithang
R12	Female	20–29	Single	Undergraduate	NGO Volunteer	2	Tedim
R13	Male	30–39	Married	High School	Mason	4	Vangteh
R14	Female	50–59	Widowed	Primary School	Childcare Worker	7	Cikha
R15	Male	40–49	Married	Secondary School	Carpenter	6	Tonzang
R16	Female	20–29	Single	High School	Part-Time Cook	2	Tuithang

Respondent ID	Gender	Age Group (Years)	Marital Status	Education Level	Occupation	Years in India	Place of Origin (Myanmar)
R17	Male	30–39	Married	Graduate	Community Leader	7	Tedim
R18	Female	30–39	Married	College Dropout	Domestic Worker	5	Cikha
R19	Male	20–29	Single	Undergraduate	Student	3	Tedim
R20	Female	40–49	Married	Secondary School	Caregiver	6	Tuithang

Forced Displacement and Statelessness

Across all interviews, respondents framed their migration from Myanmar not as a choice but as a matter of survival. Most fled Chin state, especially from regions like Cikha, Tedim, Taingen and Tonzang following the 2021 military coup, citing increased persecution, forced conscription, and religious targeting. Many men who responded recalled barely avoiding being recruited by ethnic armed groups or the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw). A respondent from Tedim explained:

“We found ourselves crammed between two firearms. If we refused to enlist, the military would arrest and torture us, and local militias would view us as traitors. We had no choice; we were forced to flee.”

Many reported traumatic experiences, including abductions, killings, and the destruction of homes. Women frequently described fears of sexual violence and the collapse of basic services. A widow from Cikha said:

“My husband was abducted and never returned. I had no food, no safety, and no future for my children. I escaped to India and spent days on foot, unsure of what lay ahead.”

Upon arriving in India, refugees encountered a different form of insecurity-statelessness. Lack of citizenship in Myanmar and unrecognised by the Indian state, they occupy a legal void. Except for a few registered with UNHCR in Delhi, most have no identification or legal status. This invisibility limits their access to services and increases the risk of arrest or deportation. One respondent summarised:

"We are in a state of uncertainty. In reality, we are no longer citizens of Myanmar, and India does not acknowledge us. We are individuals without a nation, documents, or rights."

The stories of the Zomi refugees illustrate how statelessness and forced migration exacerbate vulnerabilities. They now face legal exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation in India after fleeing a militarised crisis in Myanmar.

Legal Invisibility and Vulnerability

The absence of a national refugee law in India leaves most Zomi refugees classified as "illegal migrants." Only a minority possess UNHCR refugee cards. Even those who are registered reported long delays, uncertainty, and lack of clarity in the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process. A refugee who travelled from Mizoram stated:

"I travelled from Mizoram just to apply. I have yet to receive a response after waiting months for the interview. In the meantime, my family is having difficulties at home."

UNHCR documentation offers limited protection and does not translate into legal residence, work rights, or public entitlements under Indian law. Respondents described frequent harassment from police and landlords. A young male refugee from Taingen recounted:

"On the street, the police stopped me and asked for my Identity Card (ID). When I had nothing, they threatened deportation and asked for money. We live in fear."

This legal invisibility reinforces socio-economic exclusion and undermines any sense of long-term stability. The Zomi community is dependent on a patchwork of NGOs, CBOs and unofficial networks for safety and support because India lacks a designated government agency in charge of refugee protection.

Living Conditions and Health Risks

All respondents reported living in overcrowded, poorly maintained housing, often sharing one-room accommodations with multiple families. They described inadequate water, sanitation, and ventilation. A community leader explained:

"We, the three families share one room. The roof leaks during rain. We had no privacy, and the children fell sick often"

These substandard conditions contribute to the spread of respiratory illnesses, skin infections, and stress-related disorders. Healthcare access is minimal. Most rely on local pharmacies or traditional remedies due to a lack of documents and an inability to afford hospital visits. A refugee explained:

"Even when we are very sick, we avoid hospitals. They ask for papers we don't have. So, we just wait and hope it passes."

Many respondents emphasised how the lack of documentation and high costs prevented them from accessing healthcare services. According to one refugee representative:

"We do not have the money or the right identification, so even if someone gets sick, we cannot go to the hospital. Sometimes we simply use home cures in the hopes of getting better."

The respondents stressed how hard it is to get public health services. Limited medical camps and emergency aid are offered by certain NGOs and faith-based groups, but these are erratic and unable to satisfy the community's expanding needs. Many people are also discouraged from seeking medical assistance due to ignorance, language barriers, and fear of discrimination. According to a female respondent:

"We are not proficient in Hindi or English. We feel abandoned or mistreated even when we visit the hospital."

Mental health challenges, including anxiety, trauma, and depression, were also common, especially among youth and widowed women. No formal psychological support systems were available.

Barriers to Education and Employment

Due to their lack of legal recognition, economic hardship, language barriers, and stateless status, the Zomi community in Delhi faces major obstacles to both education and employment. Many schools require documents such as birth certificates or Adhaar cards, which refugee families lack. Even when enrolled, students struggle with language and curriculum integration. A community elder stated:

"The school authorities request documents that we do not have. Despite their willingness to learn, some kids could not be admitted. Even those who study do not understand the language and drop out"

Older children often leave school early to support their families. Employment among adults is confined to the informal sector-domestic work, construction, tailoring, or food delivery they face low wages, long hours, and frequent exploitation. Women in particular are limited to poorly paid household labour. One young male respondent explained:

"We work long hours and sometimes aren't paid at all. If we complain, we were told we can be reported to the police."

Refugees with degrees or prior training from Myanmar find their qualifications unrecognised, leaving them underemployed or in manual labour roles. According to one respondent:

"No one here acknowledges a graduate from Myanmar, even if they are one. Thus, they wind up doing cleaning or delivery work."

The precarious legal status and systematic exclusion of Zomi refugees in Delhi have a significant impact on their education and employment experiences. They continued to be trapped in cycles of poverty, informal labour, and educational marginalisation in the absence of official recognition or government assistance. These obstacles impede the community's long-term growth and integration to have an impact on people's well-being.

Economic Hardship and Exclusion

The economic vulnerability of Zomi refugees is severe. Without work permits or access to credit, banking or welfare schemes, they live on unstable incomes. Rent, food, and transport consume most of their earnings. A respondent noted:

"We make Rs.10,000 a month and pay Rs 5,000 just for rent. After food and travel, nothing is left."

The most common sources of income are manual jobs in small factories, food service, tailoring, domestic work, and daily wage labour. Nevertheless, this job is precarious, low-paying, frequently below the minimum wage, and susceptible to abrupt termination without warning. A young male refugee revealed:

"We don't have a set pay scale. We work some days and do not work others. We do not get paid if we get sick."

Community support networks offer limited relief, but internal solidarity is strained by widespread poverty. Many turn to informal savings groups or local moneylenders, deepening financial instability. One respondent explained:

"We are unable to secure our savings or obtain loans. We use our meagre savings or borrow money from friends in an emergency."

The community's precious position is further exacerbated by economic tension with nearby low-income groups who view Zomi refugees as competition for housing and jobs.

Social Exclusion and Cultural Friction

Despite strong internal cohesion, the Zomi community remains isolated from Delhi's broader society. Language barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination contribute to repeated evictions and social tension. A woman in her 40s described:

"We were asked to leave because of our prayer meetings and food habits. They said we were disturbing the neighbours."

The main languages spoken by Zomi refugees are Burmese, Tedim or Zomi. Due to their limited knowledge of Hindi and English, the majority of respondents found it challenging to interact with employers, landlords, medical professionals, and school staff. This increased miscommunications and made Delhi's life lonelier. According to a young refugee:

"I do not understand Hindi, but I want to work somewhere better. When someone speaks quickly or becomes irate, I become afraid."

Many respondents noted being labelled "illegal migrants" or "outsiders", even by low-income neighbours, exacerbating feelings of alienation and exclusion.

Frustration with Resettlement Processes

The gradual and unpredictable process of refugee resettlement via UNHCR became a major worry. Several participants had applied for third-country resettlement through UNHCR. While some had completed interviews and training, they experienced prolonged delays and administrative obstructions. A community leader recalled:

"Three families had visas, tickets, and approval. However, the FRRO denied the exit permit. They were devastated."

Numerous refugees reported waiting years for confirmation or advancement even after submitting applications for refugee status and passing interviews. Long-term planning is impossible due to this ongoing uncertainty, which also increases psychological stress. One male respondent revealed:

"I had my interview over a year ago, but I have not heard anything since. They tell me to wait, but I keep checking. How much longer can we wait in this manner?"

This bureaucratic limbo contributes to emotional exhaustion and despair. Refugees feel trapped and unable to return to Myanmar or move forward to a more secure future.

Comparative Disadvantage

Many respondents drew contrasts between their situation and other refugee groups, such as Tibetans or Sri Lankan Tamils, who receive greater state support. One elder commented:

“The Tamils have camps. The Tibetans have schools. We have no recognition, no help-nothing.”

Their small numbers and lack of media visibility contribute to their exclusion from policy discourse and advocacy efforts. One refugee leader stated:

“No one pays attention because we are less numerous and not in the news. We are even delayed by UNHCR.”

Their path to documentation and resettlement is slowed down by their invisibility, which also makes their exclusion from policy discussions worse.

Table 2: Summary of Key Themes from Interviews with Zomi Refugees in Delhi

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Observed Impact	Policy Implication
Statelessness and Legal Status	“We do not have any documents. We are nothing here without refugee cards.”	Legal invisibility; fear of arrest or deportation	Need for legal recognition and provision of temporary refugee documentation.
Overcrowded Living Conditions	“Tens of us share two rooms. Sewage water through roof leaks caused by rain.”	Poor sanitation, disease risk, lack of privacy	Improved access to safe, affordable housing and urban health services
Employment Exploitation	“We were paid less than half for the long hours we put in. We lose our jobs if we complain.”	Income insecurity; vulnerability to labour abuse	Access to livelihood support, work permits, and enforcement of labour protections

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Observed Impact	Policy Implication
Healthcare Exclusion	"When we are ill, we visit the pharmacy. Hospitals ask for documents we do not have."	Chronic illness, untreated conditions	Emergency healthcare access regardless of documentation; mobile clinics via NGOs
Barriers to Education	"The government school did not accept our children without proper documents."	School exclusion; rising dropout rates among refugee children	Relaxed enrolment requirements; non-formal education programs for refugee youth
Social Discrimination	"Our prayer meetings and cooking are not like those of our landlords; they want us to leave."	Cultural isolation; frequent evictions	Community integration initiatives; interfaith and intercultural dialogue efforts
Delays in Resettlement	"We have completed our training and interview, but FRRO has denied our permit."	Emotional distress; indefinite waiting for third-country resettlement	Streamlined coordination between UNHCR and Indian authorities on resettlement logistics
Community Support Reliance	"We are only assisted by our own people. By supporting one another, we manage to survive."	Internal solidarity, but overburdened support networks	Strengthen NGO-CBO collaboration; scale up humanitarian assistance and outreach

Discussion and Conclusion

The study highlights how the Zomi refugee experience in Delhi is shaped not only by displacement from Myanmar but also by systematic exclusion within India. Through the lenses of forced migration, statelessness, and socio-economic marginalisation, the findings show that Zomi refugees are trapped in a cycle of legal invisibility and material deprivation. Their stories reveal a dual vulnerability: first, as survivors of ethnic persecution, and second, as undocumented migrants in a state that lacks a formal refugee protection framework.

Unlike better-known refugee populations such as Tibetans or Sri Lankan Tamils—who benefit from relative state support and social visibility—the Zomi are politically invisible. They lack access to designated settlements, formal work opportunities, or state-administered welfare. This invisibility is compounded by cultural and linguistic isolation, which limits their ability to integrate into the urban fabric of Delhi.

Although India has historically hosted diverse refugee communities, its continued refusal to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol leaves a policy vacuum. In this context, the UNHCR provides limited assistance, but its reach is constrained by bureaucratic delays, centralised operations in Delhi, and the absence of coordination with Indian authorities. Zomi refugees thus find themselves in a liminal state—unable to return to Myanmar, unrecognised in India, and uncertain about third-country resettlement.

This prolonged legal and social limbo reflects what theorists such as Aganben have described as “bare life”—existence without political rights. The concept of statelessness is not abstract for the Zomi; it is lived daily through the denial of education, healthcare, formal employment, and the fear of police harassment. These deprivations are not merely humanitarian concerns; they are political outcomes shaped by deliberate policy silence.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need to expand the scope of refugee discourse in India beyond high-profile cases. By documenting the experiences of an overlooked community, this

research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of forced displacement in South Asia and highlights the urgent need for both reform and targeted humanitarian action.

The plight of Zomi refugees in Delhi illustrates the human cost of policy neglect. Having fled multiple waves of ethnic persecution and military violence in Myanmar, the Zomi continue to live in precarity, unprotected by either their country of origin or their host country. Their statelessness is not just a legal anomaly but a condition that reinforces poverty, marginalisation, and long-term insecurity.

Without formal legal recognition, the Zomi are denied access to basic rights-housing, healthcare, education, and work. The absence of national refugee legislation in India, combined with limited UNHCR reach and inconsistent local enforcement, leaves this community in a state of enduring vulnerability. While some manage to survive through internal solidarity and informal work, their prospects remain constrained by systematic exclusion.

Recommendations

This study calls attention to the need for a comprehensive, rights-based policy in India that includes all refugee populations, regardless of their size or political visibility. Immediate measures such as temporary documentation, work permits, and decentralised UNHCR services in northeastern states like Mizoram could significantly reduce the community's hardship.

The experience of Zomi refugees also calls for greater international attention and cooperation. Given the impossibility of return under current conditions, expanded pathways to third-country resettlement and regional protection mechanisms are essential. Without these, the Zomi refugees will remain trapped in a cycle of displacement and invisibility-surviving, but not living.

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