

Governing Refugees from Myanmar: A Comparative Analysis of Thailand and India

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Abstract

This paper examines Thailand's evolving refugee governance through its emerging two-tiered approach toward refugees from Myanmar, tracing the shift from long-standing border camp containment to the rapid growth of urban refugees across cities such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot. While Thailand has historically relied on humanitarian aid and camp-based management, restricting legal access to work and mobility, the reduction of U.S. humanitarian assistance prompted the introduction of work-permit schemes for refugees in border camps. However, this policy has not been accompanied by a coherent framework for the expanding urban refugee population, leaving many without formal recognition or protection and in persistent legal and economic limbo.

The paper situates Thailand within a regional comparison with India's fragmented and localized refugee governance. Neither Thailand nor India has a national refugee law or uniform work-right framework. However, Thailand has introduced a formalized but limited work-permit scheme for refugees in the border camps, while in India, Myanmar refugees, particularly Chin in Mizoram, work largely through informal tolerance shaped by state-level discretion and ethnic affinity. By comparing Thailand's formal but bounded regime with India's informal and uneven labor tolerance, the paper asks how different configurations of work access shape refugees' survival and self-reliance, and what political and economic conditions are necessary for labor rights to translate into sustainable livelihoods. The paper draws on policy analysis and qualitative observations with refugees working outside camp settings in both Thailand and India to examine how access to labor is experienced, negotiated, and enacted in practice.