

Report-III

Collective Memories of Repatriates from Burma: A Case Study of West Bengal*

The military coup in 1962 in Burma and the discriminatory policies pursued by the junta forced more than 300,000 Indians to migrate from Burma. Most of the returnees were Tamils. However, there was a sizable number of Bengali repatriates as well. The majority of the Bengali repatriates were East Bengali Hindus. The migrants settled in four camps in West Bengal viz. Burma Colony at Barasat, Hasnabad camp, Bongaon camp and Kamarhati camp. Out of these, the two camps at Hasnabad and Bongaon have been closed down. The present study will focus on the lives and the struggles of the people who are still living in the camps at Barasat and Kamarhati.

Methodology

The data used in this study has been gathered over a period of three months from December 2009-February 2010. About 45 interviews were conducted with the repatriates and government officials at the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation department and the Disaster Management department of the government of West Bengal. Information from the government departments was negligible as they claimed that they did not deal with the repatriates. In response to an application under the Right to information Act, 2005, the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation department replied that they did not have any information on the Indian repatriates from Burma in West Bengal.

The study would analyze the following issues:

- a) From when and where the returnees came to West Bengal
- b) The place and process of their disembarkation
- c) Whether they got any assistance from either friends, relatives or the government
- d) Did they get any legal right to hold property in India

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- e) Preferred cultural affiliations of the returnees
- f) Their views on the government of India

People living in the camps do not like the term 'refugee' used for them. In fact, the government of India never counted these returnees as 'refugees'. It is thus important to clarify the terms that are used in this paper. According to the 1951 UN convention, a refugee is a person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, in unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.¹

Section 1

A large number of Indians migrated to Burma after the British occupation. After the opening of the Suez Canal, the demand for Burmese rice grew and vast tracts of land were brought under cultivation. The influx of the Indians in search of economic opportunities combined with the trade opportunities opened up by Suez Canal changed the nature of the Burmese society dramatically. Burmese farmers were forced to borrow money from Indian moneylenders called *chettians* at high interest rates and were often evicted from their land when unable to return the loan. The indentured Indian workers cornered most available jobs. Even as the economy of Burma grew, wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of British firms, Anglo-Burmese people and Indian migrants. The civil service was largely staffed by the Anglo-Burmese community and Indians. Burmese were excluded almost entirely from military service.

The million strong Indian community came from all over the sub-continent. There were Marwaris, Gujaratis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Tamils and people from Andhra Pradesh. The western educated Bengali intelligentsia was the dominant class in colonial Burma and allied itself to the colonial masters.

Table 1: Indian Language Speaking Population in Burma (1901)

Language	No. of people
English	18,500
Hindustani	95,122
Bengali	204,973
Hindi	28,689
Punjabi	15,803
Tamil	99,576
Telugu	96,601

Source: The Imperial Gazetteer, p.139 as quoted in Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2007, p.61.

Table 1 shows Indian population of different origins. One may tend to assume that a high concentration of the Bengalis was due to the presence of Bengali Muslims from Chittagong in Rangoon and Akyab region of Burma. Since Chittagong was separated from Arakan by the river Naaf and there was no other barrier between the two regions, immigration from Bengal was quite natural. The Indian population reached 210,990² in 1931.

At the start of World War II, almost half of Rangoon's (Yangon) population was either Indian or South Asian, and about 16% of the population in Burma was Indian. Almost half a million members of the Indian community fled from Burma after the Japanese invasion in 1942 and sought refuge in Assam. Some returned after the war but majority chose to stay back.

Burma became independent on January 4, 1948. The dominant group was the Burmans who constituted 68% of the total population. However, the rising population and the growing economic power of the Indians were against the interest of the Burmans. After independence, the Burmese government decided to follow the policy of 'Burmese way to Socialism'. The policy stressed on three strategies, namely, nationalization, industrialization and 'Burmanization'. Nationalization of land meant elimination of absentee landowners, moneylenders and redistribution of land amongst landless peasants. This was implemented by Land Alienation Act, 1948 and Land Nationalization Act, 1949. The Industrial Regulation of 1948 stipulated that the majority of the shares in every private enterprise must be owned by Burmese. With the implementation of Citizenship Act, 1948, the Burmese government took over the land and property of the Indians and refused to give them citizenship. According to this law, citizenship was denied to people who came to Burma before 1823.

General Ne Win seized power in Burma in a military coup on March 2, 1962 and became the head of the state as the chairman of the Revolutionary Council and Prime Minister of Burma. General Win ordered a large scale expulsion of Indians living in Burma. The nationalization of private ventures in 1964 forced over 300,000 Indians to leave Burma to escape racial discrimination. Indian owned businesses were nationalized and their owners were given 175 kyat for their trip to India. This led to deterioration in Indo-Burmeses relations and the Indian government arranged ferries and aircraft to lift Indians living in Burma.

In 1963, a conference was held in Rangoon at Bandula Square where the then Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri assured the safe return of the Indians residing in Burma. They were brought back via ship and air by the Indian government.³ Till 1962, Indians in Burma did not get

identity cards. Therefore, All Burma Indian Congress which was a body of Indians in Burma issued a certificate for every Indian in Burma. The Indian embassy at Rangoon issued emergency certificates for every Indian who returned from Burma. This emergency certificate was used as a travelling document. On the basis of this certificate, Indians were supposed to get travel allowance as well as free food and lodging in India.

Most of the returnees were Tamils but there were some Bengalis who returned to Bengal. They arrived after 1962. Most of them were East Bengali Hindus. The Indian Muslims who returned settled in Kamarhati camp in 24 Parganas (North). Many still live at that camp. There are three civil society organizations at Kamarhati and Burma Colony, Barasat. They are Kamarhati Repatriates Society, Subarnapottanam Society and Irrawady Society.

The Bengalis who had migrated to Burma earned their livelihood from small businesses, shops and contractual works. They maintained their cultural identity and established Bengal Academy and Tagore College which were affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Secondary education and Calcutta University respectively and the medium of education in them was Bengali. The I.B. File no. 121 of 1919 preserved in the State Archives of Government of West Bengal provides the names of some Bengali organizations that flourished in Burma⁴.

Section II

There are 77 families in Burma Colony at Barasat together with the Kamarhati camp at Agarpara.

Debabrata Chakraborty, a returnee, recalls that in 1948 he went to Burma with his family at the age of five from his native place Chattogram in Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal). They lived in the Akyab region of Burma and owned a house. He studied in the Bengal Academy till class VI and came to Rangoon after being promoted to class VII. He had a limited knowledge of the Burmese language. He recounts that even though they were outsiders they never faced any problem from the local people. "Burmese were peace loving people and spent whatever they earned and were helpful," he said. He laments the policy of nationalization pursued by the government of Burma. Even the local betel shops were not spared, he said. The government repression increased as it could swoop down on a family at any time and conduct a head count. If members in a family increased, the unregistered member was taken into custody. Their properties had to be handed over to the Burmese government or else they were not given the 'No-objection certificate'.⁵ Chakraborty possessed about 3 acres of land which he had to hand over to the Burmese government. He was provided with an emergency certificate (E.C.) dated 3.3.1976. He and his family arrived at the Dumdum airport in Calcutta in 1978. Chakraborty was

allotted a room at the Uday Villa Kamarhati camp on February 17, 1978. His room number was 2/2. A small amount of cash was given to him and other families for about seven months. After fifteen years, he received Rs. 1500 as business loan from the Relief Directorate, Government of West Bengal.

“I had worked in a private firm that I got because of my qualifications. The government never helped me in getting a job. I am retired now but I have to support my family and require financial assistance. Despite the fact that we possess necessary documents, the repatriates have not been provided rehabilitation according to the laws laid down by the government,” said Chakraborty.

Dilip Bose who returned in 1966 now lives in Burma Colony, Barasat and runs a small business. In Burma, his family lived in Pegu. They had a business there and also owned land. They were harassed after the military coup and decided to leave Burma. They had to surrender all their property to the Burmese government before leaving. They boarded a ship with help from the Indian government and were brought to the Madras port and later shifted to Howrah in West Bengal. They were then rehabilitated to the Hasnabad camp. He recounts his experience in the camp thus:

“Hasnabad camp was just a tent. There were about 25-30 families living in the camp and there were about 200 people who lived there. We were given small amount of cash and supplies. Later, we received a housing loan of Rs. 5000 but were not provided by business loan according to the law. According to rules, if we got a loan of any kind we could not stay back at the relief camps. Therefore, we were shifted to Burma Colony. Later, I had to live with my family in rented quarters in the colony. I was given land in Burma Colony only in 1976.”

A striking feature of the returnees is that majority of them are women. Most women respondents at Barasat and Kamarhati said they were secure inside the camp. However, displacement had created the need to build a new home and a new identity for themselves. Some women even had to sell *ghutey* to make a living.

Meera Barua, 65, was only six when Burma got its independence. She recounts her life in Burma thus:

“My father was a farmer and we owned two acres of land in the Akyab region. Following the Nationalization Act, 1948, the Burmese government took away our land without compensation. I had four elder brothers and two sisters. One of my sisters committed suicide after being raped by security personnel while another married a Burmese to secure her future. However, my father was desperate to protect his ethnic identity. Therefore, he arranged my marriage with a Bengali. I was only thirteen. My husband had a press and a small house in Rangoon. When Ne Win came to power he passed the Printers and Publishers Registration Act according to which all publications and other media (including videos and films) had to be assessed by the Press Scrutiny Board before publication or release. My husband’s press was sealed after this law was implemented.”

At the time Barua had three children. The Burmese government then imposed a tax of 50 kyats per month on every non-national family who wished to stay in Burma. The family then decided to leave Burma. They reached India on November 19, 1963 on a steamer. "We had everything but in few days we lost it all. Since women are the most vulnerable they are easy prey for molestation, abduction and even suicide as happened to my sister," said Barua. They were settled in Hasnabad camp initially in a small room. There was only one toilet and a tube-well for thirty-five families. One of her children died of malnutrition. Finally, after a year they were given land for building a house in Burma Colony.

The camps also provide shelter to political exiles. Aryan, whose father is the elder brother of Barua is a member of All Burma Federation of Students Union whose aim is to restore democracy in Burma. He is now staying with Barua. He identifies himself as a Burmese and when asked whether he wanted to retrieve his Bengali identity he answered in negative.

Section III

The government of India and the state government had elaborate plans to rehabilitate the repatriates but the ground realities prove that these plans were never pursued in earnest. The Centre had promised to provide Rs 5000 as business loan, Rs. 1000 as business premises loan, Rs. 11,000 as housing loan that were supposed to be repaid over 25 years.⁷ The actual sum paid varied between Rs. 500- Rs. 3000. They were given small amount of cash and provided free electricity but were stopped after some time. The Kamarhati Uday Villa camp building was declared dangerous by the State Public Works Department and residents were asked to vacate it.⁸

The repatriates were provided with ration cards on the basis of emergency certificates and later got their voter identity cards. However, government assistance is being curtailed gradually. The reason provided is that the repatriates were now becoming self employed so the need for assistance is decreasing. Six cases are pending against the land on which repatriates are camped in Kamarhati. The state government has asked the Land and Revenue department to take necessary actions to settle the cases. Also, in a letter dated 16.3.2004 the loans advanced to the state government for rehabilitation purposes were written off. The repatriates now would get back the mortgage papers and would not have to repay the loan.⁹

The infrastructure, however, is still in a dilapidated condition at the camps. There is a lack of proper sanitation and availability of drinking water although Uday Villa camp does have water tanks for water supply. Education facilities need immediate attention as they have to depend either on the free schools run under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan scheme or private schools. The rate of dropouts is very high.

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Notes

¹ For legal exposition of the status and rights of refugees see, James Hathaway, *The Law of Refugee Status*, (Toronto: Butterworths, 1991); Guy S. Goodwin Gill, *The Refugee in International Law*, second edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); B.S. Chimni (ed.), *International Refugee Law: A Reader*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2002)

² Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata,

³ Tin Dashak Poro Jamir Dalil Panni Barasater Burma Ferot Bangalira', *Protidin*, 05.04.1995

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the history of Burma and Indians living in Burma see Frank Trager, *Burma, from kingdom to republic: A historical and political analysis*, (London, Pall Mall: 1966) and John F Cady, *A history of modern Burma*, (New York Cornell University Press: 1958)

⁵ A No-objection certificate was provided to each repatriate stating that there was no tax, bills or criminal records due against them.

⁶ Cow dung cake used as fuel.

⁷ Government document dated 4.12.1990 at the Directorate of Relief, Government of West Bengal.

⁸ Letter dated 8.12.1990, memo no. 1579 DDM from the Director of Disaster Management, West Bengal to the Joint Secretary to the Government of West Bengal, Refugee, Relief & Rehabilitation Department.

⁹ Letter no. 473-FR/7M-2/01 by the Deputy Secretary to the Government of West Bengal to the Director of Relief, West Bengal.

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