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Constructing the Indian Immigrant to Colonial Burma, 1885-1948

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in History

by

Rajashree Mazumder

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Constructing the Indian Immigrant to Colonial Burma, 1885-1948

by

Rajashree Mazumder

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Chair

The Indian Ocean arena has been a zone of circulation and network for people, capital and commodities since centuries. People from the Indian subcontinent had been traveling to Burma as part of this network as court priests, merchants, pilgrims, travelers and soldiers. During the early twentieth century this figure was transformed in the official discourse and popular imagination to *immigrant*, or a “bird of passage” that was seen as draining the wealth of an incipient Burmese nation. My dissertation questions the process through which the archival and linguistic category of the immigrant emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the Indian Ocean arena. Specifically, I investigate how did the Indian immigrant come to be associated with such negative connotations.

Some of the indications of this transformation were the increasing number of people who left the Indian ports on the newly introduced steamship to work in the rice industry in Burma. It

was also due to the politics of enumeration and classification that the state imposed on the new arrivals at the Rangoon port and in the city. Instead of accepting the inevitability and the all-encompassing quality of these labels that have continued to be part of our present vocabulary, my objective is to use these particular historical developments as a lens to understand how did the word immigrant emerge? At the other end, how did this category itself create further historical change? While acknowledging the important role of the colonial economic framework, one must still ask what were the other social and political developments taking place during this period? Who were the actors in this narrative and how did they comprehend, receive, use, or reject these categories? Did the immigrant see himself/herself as a foreigner or an outsider? Bringing together volumes of colonial government archival material, popular literature, and newspaper articles, advertisements and cartoons, in English, Burmese, Bengali and Tamil, my aim is to unpack the label of the immigrant and hear and uncover the many different voices and stories about people who boarded the ship to Burma.

This dissertation of Rajashree Mazumder is approved.

Geoffrey Robinson

Nile S. Green

W. Rogers Brubaker

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

Dedicated to my parents, with love

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Since one of the essential requirements for this project was the use of Burmese sources, I learned Burmese at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Intensive summer language immersion programs can be challenging but for my teachers Saya U Saw Tun and Sayama Than Than Win who made the entire experience extremely enjoyable. Back in Los Angeles, it would have been difficult for me to continue with the Burmese language training if not for the friendship, hospitality, and kindness of U Kyaw Min and Daw Si Si Win. I will never be able to repay their kindness for helping me practice my Burmese, listening and improving my translations, and for all of the delicious Burmese dishes that aunty Win cooked for me as I pored through my Burmese lessons! Chapter five of this dissertation is based on Tamil language sources. Being unfamiliar with the language, I am grateful to Aparna Naraynan for translating these texts for me. Our intensive summer afternoon translation sessions in Delhi with her toddler Adhu playing around in the living room will remain fondly etched in my memory.

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3. "Low Income Housing, City Planning and Immigration Debates in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma" *World Wide Asia Conference* Leiden University, The Netherlands (August 31-September 1, 2012).
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Introduction

In August 1930, in a series of articles entitled “A Word to Non-Burmans,” published in the leading Burmese newspaper *Thuriya* (The Sun), the author stated, “Indian are outsiders to Burma and while we are not going to punish them for coming here to work and make money, it would be best that they leave for their home.”¹ Public resentment over growing unemployment within the country in the midst of worldwide economic collapse in 1929-30 reflected the belief that Indians present in Burma were responsible for taking scarce jobs from the indigenous Burmese. Such xenophobia found expression in the slogans of the *Dobama Asiayone* (“We Burmans Association”) commonly known as the “Thakin Party” formed in 1929 that wanted to preserve “Burma for the Burmans.”²

And yet Indians had been part of the Burmese and Southeast Asian landscape for centuries: participating as traders, mercenaries, priests performing rituals at the royal court, intermarrying with local women and even occupying important administrative positions. How and why did this linguistic and archival category of the immigrant and the negative stereotypes associated with it emerge during this period in Burma and the Indian Ocean arena?

It was undoubtedly in large measure due to the presence of the European colonial state and the arena that had been fashioned for its benefit – the prevailing capitalist economic structure, political power, and the bureaucratic apparatus with which the state enumerated,

¹ “A Word to Non-Burmans” *Thuriya* 30th June 1930.

² The *Thakin* (Burmese: ထာရှင်) were a Burmese nationalist group formed around the 1930s composed of young dissatisfied intellectuals. They drew their name from the way in which the British were addressed during colonial times, *thakin* meaning "lord" or "master". The party, however, was formally known as the *Dobama Asiayone Movement* (which can be translated into either "We Burmans" or "Our Burma"). Established by U Ba Thung in May 1930, it aimed to combine tradition with modernity by bringing together traditionalist Buddhist nationalist elements and fresh political ideals. It was significant in stirring up political consciousness in Burma, and drew most of its support base from university students.

mapped and maneuvered its population. This vision has significantly influenced historiographical writings on Indian immigration to Burma and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. These accounts have relied heavily on this colonial archive and at times unquestioningly reproduced statistics generated by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. Using this information, scholars have described in detail the crucial role of the Indian intermediaries and workers in the growth of these colonial economies and debated whether or not Indians were responsible for causing economic hardship for Burmese during these decades (thereby justifying anti-Indian sentiments).³

While these studies have proved to be good reproductions of statistical and administrative records, they have done little to move beyond the official point of view. There is for example at no point a critique of the undifferentiated category of the Indian immigrant or an explanation of the processes through which the negative stereotype was created or whether Indians living in Burma thought of themselves as immigrants. My work aims to fill these lacunae. Through this dissertation, I hope to answer the following questions: first, what are the other social and political developments in Burma during this time and how did they intersect with the economic

³ Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora & Co., Publishers, 1960) and Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), xv. In the introductory paragraph to his book, N.R. Chakravarti says, “this is the sad story of a minority race which lived for several generations in Burma, worked hard, and made tremendous contributions to the development of Burma over a period of more than one hundred years of British administration, only to be finally thrown out of their homes and vocations by the avalanche of international tragedies...”

The purpose of these two projects was to defend the presence of Indians and the crucial role they played in the economies of these countries. Thus, detailed statistical information from colonial reports and censuses on work, living conditions etc. was presented to make a case for the wrongful portrayal of Indians as profiting at the cost of indigenous population. While the above-mentioned works have been useful as compilation of statistical sources for the period under study, the texts vacillate between reiterating arguments made by contemporary authors (during the 1930s and 1940s) promoting rights of Indians in Burma and colonial officials who described Indians as the source of widespread unemployment in voluminous immigration reports.

More recently, Amarjit Kaur, “Indian Labour, Labour Standards, and Workers’ Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900–1940,” *Modern Asian Studies* 40:2 (2006): 425–475; Adapa Satyanarayana, “Birds of Passage: Migration of South Indian Laborers to Southeast Asia,” *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:1, 89-115. Burmese nationalist historiography has also followed a similar trend where official interpretations are used to justify anti-Indian sentiments as part of Burmese nationalism. For example, Maung Thaw, *India-Myanmar Set San Yay Hmat Tan* (Indo-Burma Relations) (Yangon: Sarpay Beik Hman Press, 1966) (1st Edition).

crisis and the consequent anxieties regarding outsiders to Burma during this period? Instead of accepting the hold of the overpowering nature of the colonial structure on historiography, I propose to investigate the *processes* through which the negative stereotypes of migrant labor are created and normalized during official and public debates in Burma. Second, what are the different contexts and circumstances through which the question of the Indian immigration took center stage in Burma and in India? Third, which are the groups of people involved in these debates? How did they make sense of the immigration problem (as it came to be referred to)? Finally, my attempt has been to hear the voice of migrant himself and how he/she may have responded to being labeled as a migrant. My dissertation addresses these unresolved questions and contributes to the growing literature on migration of people from South Asia to other parts of the British Empire and the larger Indian Ocean arena.

The first in the series of important developments that led to the creation of the figure of the Indian immigrant was the arrival of the steamship in the late nineteenth century to the Indian Ocean arena. This allowed thousands of passengers to leave from ports in India and arrive relatively quickly at different parts of the British Empire. The very act of boarding the steamship and being enumerated and profiled in the pages of the colonial records at the port of departure (in India) and arrival (in Burma) was the first step in the creation of the figure of the Indian migrant. But what was the perspective of the passenger? What was the experience of boarding the ship like for most people? Why were they going to Burma? What were their expectations? Did the passenger see himself/herself as a migrant leaving India never to return?

The second development was growing nationalist fervor in Burma and the rest of Asia during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Lay Buddhist organizations began to emerge everywhere in Burma, often founded and led by Burmese who had been educated in

Western or Anglo-vernacular schools and who were able to mobilize Western organizational techniques and media (such as new vernacular newspapers) to promote traditional Burmese culture and Buddhism. Many such organizations were soon reorganized into a larger body, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), which was founded in 1906. The YMBA's chief concern was the perceived decline of Burmese civilization and the corrosion of a distinct Burmese character in the face of a growing tide of foreign civilization and learning.⁴ These leaders felt that on the one hand, the distinct Burmese civilization needed to be protected from reckless foreign influences, but at the same time Western learning could be used as a conduit for getting news of events unfolding in Europe and other countries in Asia. Such learning also greatly encouraged the development of modern nationalism within Burma.

The defeat of a European power by an Asian one in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 was one such source of encouragement. In 1908, a Japanese movie exhibition brought gas-lit projectors and a film of the actual fighting in that war to Rangoon (the colonial capital of Burma). The film, shown in darkened areas on the streets, was the first movie ever shown in Burma.⁵ Like many other colonies in Asia, Burma was caught in the tide of these historic events. Another example is the political career of a Burmese Buddhist monk named U Ottama who had lived in India as a scholar and teacher and was drawn to the Indian National Congress, which spearheaded Indian anti-colonial efforts. Apart from India, he had traveled to various countries, including China, Korea, Vietnam, the United States, Britain, and Japan, observing their contemporary condition relative to Burma, before returning to Burma in 1918. Ottama had been

⁴ In 1916, the YMBA, led by a young lawyer member U Thein Maung, pledged two public resolutions: first, the YMBA would protest the use by foreign companies of the Buddha and pagodas in their trade or brand marks. Second, it would protest the wearing of footwear in religious precincts and order members to put up signs to this effect on all religious places.

⁵ Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.

particularly struck by the example of modernization in Japan. Both in his writings and in his speeches (circulated in the vernacular press) Ottama informed Burmese readers of Japan's industrialization and urged them to follow Japan's example of self-development.⁶ These speeches, the proliferation of political editorials, and expectations of the introduction of political reforms in Burma following World War I brought common Burmese people to the streets of Rangoon.

In 1917, when the Secretary of State for India, Lord Montagu declared the possibility of Indian self-government in the British House of Commons, many Burmese believed that such reforms were on their way for Burma as well (Burma being a province of the British Indian Empire). Instead, it was a shock for many Burmese nationalist leaders to learn the attitude of British government towards Burma, when the Lieutenant Governor of Burma (1910-1915), Harvey Adamson announced that the Burmese were unprepared educationally or politically for self-rule. The joint report drawn up by Lords Montagu and Chelmsford (thus known as the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms), which led to the Government of India Act of 1919, excluded Burma, declaring that its political development would be left aside as a separate issue to be dealt with at some point in the future.

Burmese disappointment with British apathy towards Burmese nationalist objectives resulted in a number of public demonstrations, clashes with the government, and in general a volatile political atmosphere. In 1919, the Rangoon University Act was submitted for discussion in the legislative council. Many Burmese viewed the proposed Act, and the requirement that classes be taught in English, as a means of preventing them from overcoming the claims of the Montagu-Chelmsford reform scheme. Students who went on a strike claimed that Burma needed

⁶ Ibid., 32.

a national college where the kind of education that was suited to the “sons of the soil” (i.e. the indigenous Burmese) could be given.⁷

As the student boycott movement spread throughout the country and soon involved nearly all government schools, it became a force of political unrest directed against colonial rule. Ultimately, in 1921, the Secretary of State for India recommended that the Government of India Act of 1919 be extended to Burma.⁸ This had several significant effects. One of the most important results of this Act (of 1919) was the introduction of a popularly elected legislative council of Burma. For the first time, elected Burmese and Indian representatives, though in a limited manner, became part of the political process in the colony.

If a nation can be defined as an “imagined political community -- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,” the early twentieth century was the period of growth for a certain kind of “political modernity” in Burma.⁹ This does not mean that nationalism was a

⁷ In part their complaints had been over issues of powers and representation. Students had not been asked for their views on the Act and now they demanded that the university council and senate should represent all classes of people and views and students should have representation as well. Further demands also related to university requirements and costs. The university, for example, was to be residential, making the cost prohibitive for poor Burmese students. See Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993), 20-34.

⁸ The experiment in governmental reform was inaugurated in Burma in 1922-23. The most significant political development was (a) introduction of the system of dyarchy, which divided the subjects of administration into “Transferred” and “Reserved.” The former was to be under the control of elected “native” representatives and the latter under British government control under Burma’s 1922 constitution. 58 of the 79 elected members of the legislative council were chosen in general constituencies. Fifteen were elected communally (8 Indians, 5 Karens, one Anglo-Indian, and one Briton), while the remaining 7 represented various business groups and the university. The governor nominated an additional 23 members, including 2 ex-officio member of the executive council and one member to represent labor. Under the dyarchy arrangement only those members of the governor’s council of ministers in charge of the transferred subjects (agriculture, excise, health, public works [except irrigation], forestry, and education) were responsible to the legislative council. The “reserved subjects” that were controlled by ministers responsible directly to the governor, included general administrative direction, law and order, land revenue, labor, and finance. Defense and external relations together with currency and coinage, communications and transportation controls, income tax, and civil and criminal law were the concern of the Central Indian Government at Delhi.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 5-7. According to Anderson, “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. It is imagined as *sovereign*

commodity imported from the western/European world to the east and granted to the colonized. Rather, the more important and interesting observation would be how the colonized made sense of this new political modernity in the form of new institutions, popular elections and the printing press. Therefore, the second interrelated development that I want to explore through my dissertation is the introduction of colonial institutions like the Legislative Council and the City Development Council and how a certain kind of political language and debate associated with them became a part of daily discussion in Rangoon.

Despite limited powers given to the councilors for law making, the Legislative Council provided an important political forum where different Burmese and Indian propertied elites, municipal officials, professionals, health inspectors, lawyers, academics, union leaders and members of nationalist political parties voiced their opinions on a variety of subjects ranging from government expenditure, condition of peasants, municipal concerns and scientific city planning in Rangoon. They also discussed the increasing presence of persons coming from outside Burma. The speeches made by councilors were greatly rhetorical and as printed historical documents, the legislative council debates are highly stylized sources that cannot be taken at face value. However, a critical reading of these documents can give us a window as to how the nationalist elite in Burma saw the presence of outsiders in their midst. For example: how did members of the Legislative Council define terms such as domicile, outline citizenship requirements and articulate the Burmese nation? How did these debates refer to and borrow ideas on immigration restrictions from other port cities of the world during the 1920s and 1930s? What were some of the local concerns that became the focus for immigration debates? Were the

because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”

debates always in correspondence with realities of how people saw the presence of Indians in Burma? In what way did the Indian representatives themselves react to, answer and contest being categorized as immigrants? And in what form and languages were these ideas expressed?

The existing historiography on colonial Burma has been enormously influenced by the writings of colonial official J.S. Furnivall. The 1920s and 1930s Burmese society was represented in the Furnivall's writing as a "plural society" where the lack of a binding force other than economy made it inherently unstable.¹⁰ In his work on the lower Burma delta (1974), Michael Adas contextualizes and elaborates upon this argument with evidence of the contraction of the colonial economy after World War I and the rise of xenophobic nationalism as a response by indigenous Burmese to the presence of outsiders who appeared to be taking away their limited jobs.¹¹ In more recent work on economy and plural societies in places like modern day Malaysia and Singapore, scholars have attempted to historicize the "racial-national" category of the Malay identity, as it was constructed and emerged in colonial and subsequently modern nationalist discourse.¹² Through my research, I hope to contribute to this debate about plural societies, by presenting how the language of nationalism and immigration debates were not along the straightforward lines of ethnicity (as in Burmese and Indians) but rather involved more complicated strata of class, gender and religion. My work explores how Burmese, European and Indian upper class elites in Burma and India were involved in debates throughout the 1920s and 1930s which blamed the lower class coolie laborers for social ills, specifically: causing the

¹⁰ John Sydenham Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).303-12.

¹¹ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

¹² Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

scarcity of housing in Rangoon, marrying indigenous Burmese women and then abandoning them upon their return to India, and also causing the shortage of jobs for native Burmese working force.

Passports and identity papers of some kind certainly existed before 1800 in various imperial contexts. However, I would like to argue that it has been in the past two centuries that words such as migrants, domicile, passport, national borders and rights of citizenship have become part of an everyday discourse¹³ They have been manufactured as states have sought to monopolize authority over the movement of persons and the establishment of their identities.¹⁴ This process happened more recently in Asia and Africa when former colonies fought to become independent nations. With the separation of Burma from India in 1937 and following the Japanese annexation during World War II, the government of newly independent Burma took concrete steps to prohibit Indian immigration. The new nation state had not only inherited a demographic landscape profoundly shaped by this colonial experience and the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, but also felt the necessity to prove its own legitimacy by the creation of a political majority for itself.¹⁵ From the point of view of the new nationalist elite, these minorities were often the indigenous ethnic groups that had been in coalition with the colonial state. But there were also foreign minority middlemen who had been an integral part of the exploitative colonial political, economic and administrative machinery and therefore were not welcome to

¹³ John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-3.

¹⁴ Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 10-17. Systems of registration, censuses, along with documents such as passports and identity cards that amount to mobile versions of the “files” states use to store knowledge about their subjects – have been crucial in states’ efforts to achieve these aims. Though not without flaws and loopholes, such registration systems have gone a long way towards allowing states successfully to “embrace” their populations and this to acquire from them resources they need to survive, as well as to exclude from among the beneficiaries of state largesse those groups deemed ineligible for benefits.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 320.

play a role in the new nation state.¹⁶ This was not exclusive to the Indian case in Burma. For example, the Chinese presence in Indonesia was reduced to the timeframe of the presence of the colonial state and portrayed only as an appendage to the European power. Not only was their presence falsely declared recent, but also they were branded sojourners or migrants who had no loyalties or ties to the country despite having worked and lived there for many years. Thus, through a re-writing of history, the memory of the frequent, and often unobtrusive presence of persons who were outsiders in the pre-colonial period had to be erased from the national consciousness.¹⁷ The migrant had no rights to citizenship or claims on the new government, as

¹⁶ The term “Middleman Minorities” coined by Hubert Blalock (1967) refers to minority entrepreneurs who mediate between the dominant and subordinate groups. Their customers are typically members of marginalized racial or ethnic groups that are segregated from the majority group. Edna Bonacich’s article “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *American Sociological Review* 38 (October 1973): 584-594 remains the seminal work on the topic. Bonacich offers an explanation for the development and persistence of middleman minorities as minority groups serving an intermediary position between the majority group and other segregated minority groups. She notes several commonalities among various middleman groups (e.g., Armenians, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Jews) in selected occupations (e.g., bankers, barbers, brokers, launderers, and restaurateurs). A key characteristic for Bonacich is the tendency of middleman minorities to be sojourners - people who intend to return to their country of origin.

Because they are sojourners and their migration is economically driven, middleman minorities are thrifty while amassing capital. Moreover, they maintain strong ties with their compatriots in the host and origin countries while remaining detached from the host society. In short, middleman minorities have little incentive to develop ties to the host society. Furthermore, they tend toward businesses in which assets are quickly accumulated and liquidated. Due to their sojourner status and their strong in-group ties, middleman minorities develop a competitive business edge. In particular, these entrepreneurs minimize their labor costs through their reliance on family members and fellow ethnic workers willing to work long hours for little pay. These circumstances allow middleman minorities to establish positions of economic dominance.

Their success places middleman minorities in conflict with different sectors of the host society. Entrepreneurs from other groups cannot readily compete with the middleman minorities’ cheap labor. Also, workers in the mainstream labor force view the workforce of middleman minorities as a threat to their own ability to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions. Finally, the minority clientele of middleman minorities resent them for not hiring members of their group and for not being vested in their communities.

Consequently, their success as entrepreneurs creates a paradox. Middleman minorities sometimes abandon their intentions to return to their country of origin, transitioning from sojourners to settlers. As settlers, they tend to become more integrated into the host society, a fate of many Jews, Chinese, Indians, and Japanese in the United States (Bonacich 1973). However, due to continued antagonism from the host society some middleman minority groups remain perpetual middlemen, maintaining their sojourner intentions and residential separation (Blalock 1967).

¹⁷ Writing on the Chinese in Indonesia during the 1965 Revolution, Pramoedya Ananta Toer was aware that he was living in times when there was a process at work, by economic, political and cultural means that was “making” the Chinese as alien subjects. His struggle in *Hoa Kiau* was to find a voice to counter this process of making the Chinese foreign and taking their voice away in more than simple legalistic ways. See Forward by Max Lane in English translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Hoa Kiau di Indonesia* or *The Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore:

the nation-state had come into existence for, and promoted the interests of its own the people exclusively.

Finally, the right to exit, like the right of entry has helped define citizenship over the last two centuries and the debates on emigration have reinforced the category of the immigrant.¹⁸ In the early twentieth century, Indian emigration to different parts of the British Empire (including Burma) became a topic of intense discussion in the colonial public sphere in India. During the nineteenth century the indentured labor system had sought to create the “free migrant,” (as opposed to the slave laboring population from Africa) in Fiji and Mauritius and other sugar plantations. But recurrent reports of poor conditions of work and pay and reports of abduction of unsuspecting peasants to work in tea and coffee estates (within India) and beyond, had brought into focus the evils of the maistry (or the intermediaries) system who were seen as the chief cause of exploitation of the migrant laborer.

Further, the leadership in the Indian National Congress raised questions in the parliament on the ill treatment of Indians in white settler colonies -- Natal in South Africa, Canada and other British dominions. The no-tax campaign by Gandhi in Natal was one such protest against racial discrimination against Indians. Thus, nationalist leaders argued that the indentured system showed the emerging Indian nation in a poor light in the larger international arena. In a powerful speech in the Imperial Legislative Council in India, Gopal Krishna Gokhale (a prominent Indian nationalist leader) said, “my objection to the system is that it is degrading to the people of India

Select Publishing, 1960, 2007), 13-34. Also see, Peter Carey, “Changing Javanese Perceptions of the Chinese Communities in Central Java, 1755-1825,” *Indonesia* 37 (April 1984): 1-84. William Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1951). Skinner, “Creolized Chinese societies in Southeast Asia” in Anthony Reid (ed.) *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996) 50-93.

¹⁸ Nancy L. Green and François Weil, *Citizenship and Those who Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 1-12.

from a national point of view.... wherever the system exists, there the Indians are only known as coolies, no matter what their position may be...”¹⁹

With World War II and returning refugees from different parts of Asia, a government department was set up to look after the interests of Overseas Indians. The question of citizenship however was a complicated one as families that had lived for several generations in Ceylon, Burma or elsewhere (and were keen to continue living in these places) were often left to fight a protracted battle with the new nation-state for recognition of their rights to domicile. They were branded as outsiders and often forced to return to India. Thus, the era of the circulation of labor under the auspices of the colonial state had come to an end. With the rise of new nation-states in the post-colonial era, the movements of the migrant (crossing boundaries) have increasingly come under the surveillance of multiple government agencies.

I. Rethinking Histories of Indian Migration

For at least the past two decades the Indian immigrant has figured in the field of indentured labor migration studies within the British Empire. Therefore, the questions posed have been under the rubric of whether or not the laborer was a “free” or “un-free” migrant.²⁰

¹⁹ John S. Hoyland, *Gopal Krishna Gokhale: His life and Speeches* (Calcutta: Y.M.C.A, 1947), 146.

²⁰ After Hugh Tinker’s, *A New System of Slavery; the Export of Indian Labor Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Institute of Race Relations by Oxford University Press, 1974) the attempt has been to first, to understand the workings of the colonial state machinery which controlled the lives of these migrants on plantations in Fiji, Mauritius and so on and secondly, to recover the “voice” of the migrant themselves. Some of the prominent works have been: Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University, 1996) and *Servants, Sirdars, and settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). Also, question has been posed: what happened to the female migrant laborer? See Brij Lal, “Kunti’s Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 22 (March 1985): 55-71; Prabhu Mohapatra, “Restoring the Family: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labor in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920,” *Studies in History* 11(August 1995): 227-260; Marina Carter, *Lakshmi’s Legacy: the Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Editions de l’Océan Indien, 1994).

Central to the analysis has been the interplay between colonial labor policy and the role of regulatory institutions and intermediaries in the labor market. Both factors contributed to the exploitative conditions of work, disease and high mortality rates in the rubber plantations of Malaya and rice mills of Burma.²¹ While hardships were part of the story of indentured migration in this period, it could also be an escape from social and economic exploitation and an avenue for upward mobility, denied to many lower caste and communities in India.²²

The study of Indian diasporic communities has on one end focused on explaining the structures of colonial control or the impact of migration on indigenous history by sifting through various push and pull factors underlying migration.²³ The other approach has been the analysis of social and cultural practices in diasporic communities.²⁴ But overall historians have acknowledged that movement of people across the waters was never a one-time isolated event. Rather it was a continuous circulation of people and ideas that shaped and re-molded diasporic consciousness in these foreign lands. In the context of Tamil diaspora in the Malay Peninsula, for most of the nineteenth century, the connections between South India and Southeast Asia were

²¹ Amarjit Kaur, "Indian Labor, Labor Standards, and Workers' Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900–1940," *Modern Asian Studies* 40: 2 (2006): 425-475.

²² Adapa Satyanarayana, "Birds of Passage: Migration of South Indian Laborers to Southeast Asia," *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:1 (2002): 89-115.

Some of the laborers who managed to return with enough money moved away from their native village in order to buy status and respect in an area where their origins were not known, preferably in an urban area like Madras. Harold R. Isaacs, *India's Ex-Untouchables* (Bombay, 1965) cited in Adas, *Burma Delta*, 94. Few chose to stay back in Burma, where they sought to make a new life. In one such example a Mala cowherd, decided to remain in Rangoon after his laborer's contract had expired. He decided to become a tailor's apprentice and brought his family to Rangoon once he was established. His son received a college education and rose to become a minister in Nehru's cabinet. Admittedly the cowherd and his son were exceptions, but the potential for social mobility existed for laborers, especially (as Adas says) in the first phase of economic growth in the Delta.

²³ K. S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786–1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Sinappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxford, 1970); Amarjit Kaur, "Sojourners and Settlers: South Indians and Communal Identity in Malaysia," in Crispin Bates, ed., *Community, Empire and Migration: South Asians in Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 185–205.

²⁴ Prabhu Mohapatra, "Following Custom? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labor in the West Indies, 1880-1920," *IRSH* 51 Supplement (2006): 173-202.

characterized by constant circulation.²⁵ Contiguous, sometimes overlapping communities of Tamil Muslim and Hindu traders, boatmen, dockworkers, and laborers sojourned in the port cities of Singapore and Penang (known, together with Melaka, as the Straits Settlements) and returned frequently to South India. Cultural symbols and religious practices circulated with them, shaping the urban landscape of the port cities of the Straits.²⁶

Scholars have until now focused on the study of two particular groups from Southern India to Malaya and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century: first, the business and social organization of the Nattukottai Chettiar mercantile community and second, lower caste Tamil male migrants to the rubber plantations in Malaya after 1870s.²⁷ In the past few years, there has been growing interest in how migrants (Tamil intellectuals in the port cities) thought of their experience as members of a diasporic community. In the early decades of the twentieth century there was a proliferation of print journalism - newspapers and journals were published in port cities in the region. Vernacular newspapers like *Tamil Nesan*, *Munnetram* (Forward or Progress), and the *Tamil Murasu* published from Singapore served multiple purposes: Tamil intellectuals in the diaspora saw the journals as instruments of reform and change.²⁸ These were tools of

²⁵ On the Bay of Bengal in the early modern period, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997): 735–762; Om Prakash and Denys Lombard, eds., *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800* (New Delhi, 1999). A valuable perspective on “circulation” as a particular kind of mobility in South Asian history can be found in the essays in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁶ Sunil S. Amrith, “Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal,” *The American Historical Review*, 114:3 (June 2009): 547-572.

²⁷ David West Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial order in Southeast Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁸ Sunil S. Amrith, “Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal.” Also see, Dinesh Sathisan, *The Power of Print: Tamil Newspapers in Malaya and the Imagining of Tamil Cultural Identity, 1930-1940* (Unpublished Dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2008).

modernization that would recreate modern Tamil cultural identity in the diaspora while keeping up with the developments in the native homeland. The community however, not only needed to look inwards, but also in the face of growing nationalism in Malaya (and Burma) in the 1930s, needed to be educated politically.

The story of circulating communities in the Indian Ocean arena would be incomplete without mention of Muslim migrants boarding ships for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.²⁹ Part of the narrative has been the medical aspect of the journey, focusing on how colonial discourse helped create the image of the unclean migrant who spread cholera and plague during their voyage on board and in their makeshift camps near Mecca. The other feature has been the fear of anti-government conspiracies and the potential for revolt amidst people gathered, especially during the politically volatile period of anti-colonial nationalism during the early twentieth century. Using personal narratives and first person accounts, there have also been attempts to understand how the pilgrim saw himself during this arduous journey of faith.³⁰

The problem still remains: how does one write histories of subaltern migrants who boarded ships but did not leave behind memoirs or autobiographies? In a recent work on penal convicts in the Indian Ocean arena, historian Clare Anderson used penal records, convict registers, official correspondence and photographs to reconstruct the lives of men and women

²⁹ Some of the works have been: William Roff, 'Sanitation and Security: The Imperial Powers and the 19th Century Hajj', *Arabian Studies* 6 (1982): 143-60; E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Michael Low, "Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues and Pan-Islam under British Surveillance, 1865-1908," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40 (2008): 269-90; Michael Miller, "Pilgrims' progress: The business of the Hajj," *Past and Present* 191 (May 2006): 189-228 and Saurabh Mishra, *Pilgrimage, Politics and Pestilence: The Haj from the Indian Subcontinent 1860-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Barbara Metcalf, "The Pilgrimage Remembered: South Asian Accounts of the Hajj" in Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, eds., *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (London: Routledge; and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 85-107.

who, because of extraordinary circumstances, came to the attention of the colonial authorities.³¹ While they have left only fragments of their lives in the official narrative, Anderson collates these fragments to construct snapshots of at least part of their lives and social worlds. The book shows how ensembles of multiple fragments could be put to work in a similar construction of subaltern life histories not otherwise available to us. Anderson tries balancing some of the practices and processes associated with imperial expansion in the Indian Ocean, the ways in which individuals lived them, while situating them in the broader geographical and social connections that they underpinned.

The history of migration in the Indian Ocean arena has therefore come a long way from the “free” and “un-free” characterization of previous debates. My work contributes to this growing new literature: first, while acknowledging the power of the colonial state and its labor policies, it tries to understand how negative stereotypes of the migrant labor became standardized during official and public debates in Burma. Second, it examines how these negative stereotypes were used by upper and middle class Burmese, Indians and Europeans to blame lower class migrant Indians for economic and social problems in Burma. Third, it seeks to contextualize these debates in Rangoon and puts them into perspective amidst similar debates on immigration across port cities of the world in early twentieth century against the backdrop of the growth of nationalism in Asia and larger economic and political changes taking place in Europe and British Empire. Finally, my attempt has been to bring forth the voice of migrant himself and his experiences traveling to and living within Burma through a range of previously unexplored sources: diaries, journals and novels. Though fragmentary, these voices can possibly provide an alternative narrative to the archives of the state.

³¹ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

II. Plural Society Paradigm and Historiography on Colonial Burma

The historiography on nineteenth century Burma under British rule has been under the shadow of the writings of J.S. Furnivall.³² His most influential work remains *Colonial Policy and Practice* where he outlined the impact of colonial rule on indigenous economic and social life in the form of the creation of a “plural society.” In his analysis of Burma and Netherland Indies, J.S. Furnivall, despite being a British colonial administrator in Burma, pointed out that the root of anti-immigrant feelings lay in the manner in which the colonial societies were constructed in the first place. In his book *Colonial Policy and Practice* he wrote:

In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples – European, Chinese, Indian and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labor along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations.³³

Thus, according to Furnivall, the plural society is an aggregate of individuals rather than an organic whole. Such a society is inherently unstable because there is no common social will to

³² John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) received his early education at the Royal Medical Benevolent College, Epsom. He continued his studies at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and in 1899 obtained a degree in the Natural Science. In 1901 he joined the India Civil Service and arrived in Burma on 16 December 1902, at which time he took up the appointment of Assistant Commissioner and Settlement Officer. He was made Deputy Commissioner in 1915 and Commissioner of Land Settlement and Records in 1920. He retired in 1925. During his career as a colonial official, Furnivall worked with the Burma Research Society and in 1924 founded the Burma Book Club. In 1928, he founded the Burma Education Extension Association, which sought to encourage the publication of translations into Burmese, to establish public libraries, form reading circles and study classes throughout the country, and to publish a monthly periodical *Ngan Hta Lawka* (The World of Books). Following his retirement to Britain, Furnivall became a lecturer in Burmese Language, History and Law at Cambridge University (1936-1941). In 1940, together with C. W. Dunn, Furnivall published a Burmese-English Dictionary.

Colonial Policy and Practice brings together four recurrent themes found in Furnivall’s writings; (i) colonialism and its deleterious effects on the dependencies, (ii) the disparity between colonial policy and practice, (iii) his concern about the welfare of the natives, and (iv) how to re-integrate the unstable social order — plural society — created by colonial rule.

³³ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (1948).

integrate the different ethnic sections. Economically, the atomized individuals do not share a set of wants and values to guide or check social action among the ethnically diverse but divided society. Rather, with the gradual erosion of indigenous custom and tradition because of economic competition, Furnivall saw the inevitability of social chasms between different groups and the clash of interests. Elaborating on his experience on Burma and Netherland Indies, Furnivall gives an example:

In tropical countries social demand usually takes effect through custom. Sometimes a patch of jungle round a village is reserved as a public convenience and is closed to fuel cutting. People could get their fuel with less trouble, more cheaply, by cutting timber there, but social demand, taking effect through village custom, prevails over individual demand. So long as custom retains its force, no one would think of cutting down the scrub. But we have noticed that in Rangoon, Indian immigrants saw a way to make easy money, and cleared the scrub to sell fuel in the market. Individual demand for private gain prevailed over the social demand for common welfare and prevailed more readily because society was no longer homogenous.³⁴

There is an assumption that the colonial state was the first entity, which brought these different entities together in this marketplace like situation in the first place. Further, the state was also needed to ensure that the plural society did not dissolve into anarchy. Therefore, the Indo-Burmese or Sino-Burmese riots during the 1930s in Rangoon and the countryside were a consequence of the breakup of this plural society and inability of the colonial state to solve the conflict because as its own resources were stretched to the limit. As Furnivall saw it, the central problem of postcolonial indigenous governments was to re-integrate this plural society. Economic progress and social welfare and order in the plural society “could be attained only

³⁴ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 309. In another example he talks of how when Britain annexed upper Burma, the British government contemplated retaining the Burmese prohibition of trade in opium and alcohol, but this was impossible because the demand of the Chinese and the Indians had to be met.

through political reintegration on a national basis.”³⁵

The theoretical paradigm of “plural society” has been extremely influential in studying colonial societies in Southeast Asia and especially in the case of Burma. As Michael Adas in his book *Burma Delta* puts it, “more than any historian on Burma, Furnivall managed to bridge the gap between elite and mass, between political events and the social and economic developments, which shape them.”³⁶ Therefore, instead of reading the history of modern Burma in terms of the standard model of “nationalists versus imperialists,” a plural-society approach allows for the full integration of the role of the Europeans, Indians, and Chinese and the various interactions of these groups in the period under study. Further, it encompasses both minority elite groups and the masses of Burmese and Indian agriculturalists and urban laborers.

³⁵ Lee Hock Guan, “Furnivall's Plural Society and Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 24:1 (April 2009): 32-46. Also, Julie Pham, “J. S. Furnivall and Fabianism: Reinterpreting the ‘Plural Society’ in Burma,” *Modern Asian Studies* 39:2 (2005): 321–348. She argues that the conventional depiction of him merely as a nationalist sympathizer or a colonial paternalist ICS officer is misleading. By tracing his long association with the Fabian Society she tries to portray a more complex Furnivallian attitude to colonial development and freedom. Two misconceptions of Furnivall’s theory of how a ‘plural society’ is created stem from overlooking his political orientation: first, it is a condemnation of colonialism and secondly, it is a creation of Furnivall’s alone. Her study is more concerned with how the ‘plural society’ initially emerged rather than how it functions as an analytical concept.

The way in which Furnivall would eventually organize the stages of the plural society teleologically was indicative of his Fabian belief in progress and his own scientific background. The plural society had five stages of development: initial colonial domination; liberation of laissez-faire economic forces; pluralization along racial lines; disintegration of common social will; and stagnation. These stages signified both social and economic changes. While traits in Furnivall’s work such as having a scientific approach and an emphasis on scholarly research reflect not just Fabianism but also the broader shift towards science and the rise of social sciences in England in the 1920s and 1930s, Furnivall’s understanding of society and views on colonialism were characteristically Fabian. Firstly, he understood society as an organism that must be preserved, protected, and improved upon, under the leadership of social engineers and secondly, he had faith in Britain as the leader of an international community of nations.

The role of indigenous nationalism therefore was to re-integrate this plural society. For Furnivall, there were two kinds of Burmese nationalism: constructive and destructive. Furnivall recognized nationalism as the one indigenous force that could be exploited to reintegrate a plural society, and he encouraged Europeans to see that ‘Nationalism in Burma is morally right, and economically sound and *may* be made economically attractive’. But Furnivall did not support the extreme kind of nationalism that would encourage Burmese to seize complete governance before they were ready for it; still lacking the appropriate ‘wisdom’, Burmese leaders would forfeit their place in the modern world by shutting out Britain completely. The British had the responsibility to ensure that the existing nationalist sentiment among the Burmese was used *constructively* lest it become one of the ‘quasi-religious forces such as patriotism that would prove insufficiently strong to counteract economic forces that continued to threaten the unity of Burmese society. For the Burmese to modernize and eventually become independent, not only were moderate nationalism and sound colonial administration both necessary, but also they were dependent on each other to succeed.

³⁶ Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 8.

Adas uses this plural society approach to study the actions of these various groups who had come to the Lower Burma Delta to earn their livelihood or work at some level of the colonial British administration. But the actions of these various people were pre-determined by the larger economic changes that were taking place in the lower delta region and the manner in which this was linked to British colonial economic empire. The central theme of Adas' study therefore, is the rise of the lower delta region to a position of pre-eminence within Burma. Adas uses the term "frontier" to describe this new uncultivated land.

While the economic needs of the members of this plural-society were more than adequately met during this phase of expansion, such a pace of development could not be sustained forever. Because there were no major changes in agricultural technology, increased rice production was largely a function of the extension of paddy cultivation into new areas. Consequently, the rapid growth of the delta rice industry depended on the continuing increase in arable land. By the time of World War I, available land suitable for new rice cultivation was confined to small pockets. By the mid-1920s government officials observed that most of the land in lower Burma, which cultivators could profitably bring into paddy cultivation, had already been farmed.³⁷

Against the backdrop of these crippling economic changes, Adas discusses the gradual break-up of the plural society in Burma and in other parts of Southeast Asia. This plural society

³⁷ Ibid.128. Also, see A. J. H. Latham, *The Depression and the Developing World, 1914-1939* (London: Crook Helm, 1981), 178. Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2005).

Subsequent research on the closing of the economic "frontier" in Burma has extended the argument to the declining or contracting market in the international rice trade in the early twentieth century. In the late 1920s, Burma's rice exports were facing difficulties in a number of important ways. For example, in 1927-28 the Japanese government imposed a duty on the import of foreign rice followed by a full prohibition in Japan and its colonies the next year. Also, a strong challenge to Burma rice developed in the regional markets – the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay states from rice imported from Siam and French Indo-China. Simultaneously, there was a slump in world market prices of wheat bringing it within reach of populations who had earlier been able to afford only rice. Thus, the sharp drop in the value of rice on the world market in 1929-30 only touched off a series of chain reactions in the various sections of the rice industry, which had already become serious by the 1920s.

was an extremely vulnerable and unstable form of social organization. Its existence depended primarily upon the maintenance of a delicate social and economic balance among the different cultural groups who composed it. This balance could be sustained only as long as each group acquiesced in the roles and social, economic, and political niches they occupied during the period of the plural society's formation and only while there was continuous economic expansion. In a situation where indigenous people (forming the majority of the population) gradually emerged as a dissident group and began competing for a larger share or control of niches held by others, the whole plural hierarchy would be threatened. Thus, Burmese nationalism peaked in the 1930s, at the same time as the effects of the Great Depression swelled the ranks of unemployed Burmese. Burmese laborers desperately in need of jobs became more and more resentful of the Indian immigrants who had preempted most of the positions available in Rangoon and other urban centers. According to the *Indian Immigration Report of 1940*: "every time a position opened up in processing or shipping there was an Indian around the corner waiting to step into it."³⁸

The concept of a plural society has been, and continues to be adopted by many scholars studying Southeast Asian societies. A few scholars have, however, pointed out that Furnivall exaggerated the pluralistic features of Southeast Asian colonial societies; especially his claim of the social and cultural separation of the different ethnic groups who he says only met in the marketplace. In his work on Chinese in Java, Coppel points out how for example Chinese population *peranakan* in Java has not only acculturated itself to the native population linguistically but has adapted to the local customs and way of life. Acculturation among the *peranakan* Chinese of Java could scarcely have occurred to this extent if their interaction with the local

³⁸ James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*. (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery Burma. 1941), 96.

population was restricted to the market place, as Furnivall suggested.³⁹

Chie Ikeya in her work on “refiguring” Modern Burmese women in early twentieth century Burma pushes this argument further. The influx of predominantly male immigrants may have disenfranchised indigenous males, but a surge in mixed unions between indigenous women and foreign men often offered a potential avenue for empowerment for women. Patterns of urbanization – especially the remarkably steady and large population of women in urban Burma – also indicate that processes of modernization were more diffuse and social stratification more fluid than historians have claimed. Thus, according to Ikeya, the plural society model’s overriding concern with the ethnic landscape has failed to take into consideration the gender-ethnic perspective.⁴⁰ Her work on Burmese society and the predicaments of colonial modernization has helped scholars of Burma to look beyond the narrative of a passive indigenous society that was uniformly disenfranchised as a result of colonial political and economic exploitation.

My work tries to incorporate and address some of these critiques of plural society: first, the need for a shifting conception of ethnicities in plural society. In Burma boundaries are fluid and are continuously redrawn based on how some of the groups (like Burmese women or Burmese Muslims or Indian Muslims within the larger category of Indians and Burmese) saw and represented themselves on a national platform during debates on immigration. Second, I

³⁹ Charles A. Coppel, “Revisiting Furnivall’s ‘Plural Society’: Colonial Java as a Mestizo Society?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20:3 (1997): 562-79. According to the 1920 Census, 70 per cent of the Chinese of Java used Malay or some other local language, rather than Chinese, as their main home language. These Chinese, known as *peranakan*, then numbered more than 268,000 and were, with very few exceptions, locally born and necessarily of mixed ancestry, since few women had emigrated from China to Java before the twentieth century. Moreover, they published extensively in Malay from the 1880s and were prominent in the development of the Malay press and of Malay-language literature in Java. Moreover, their acculturation was not limited to language. Local studies by anthropologists in the middle of the twentieth century provide evidence of the considerable degree to which the culture and ways of life of the *peranakan* Chinese in Java had adapted through interaction with Indonesians and Europeans. The Chinese had in fact, *not* held to their past or culture.

⁴⁰ Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

explore how the Burmese plural society in the first half of twentieth century was not always stratified horizontally along lines of gender, ethnic or religious affiliations, but also divided vertically along class lines.

III. Sources

I utilize and bring into discussion a wide range of primary sources in multiple languages, which describe the presence of Indians in early 20th century to 1940s Burma. The search for official sources and non-official sources took me to a number of archives and libraries in Britain, India and Myanmar. In Britain: Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library, the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics, the Women's Library at the University of London, the South Asian Center at Cambridge University, and the Indian Institute and Rhodes Library at Oxford University. In Myanmar, National Archive in Yangon and the Yangon University Central Library and in India, the West Bengal State Archives and the Tamil Nadu State Archives and the Roja Muthiah Research Library. At the various national and state level archives, my focus was on acquiring information from government records -- official letters and papers, maps, printed publications -- of the British imperial administration of Burma (i.e. 1885-1948). And in libraries, both in Britain and Myanmar, I have tried to move out of the ambit of official sources to search for collections of private papers, newspapers and magazines.

An important part of these non-official sources have been newspapers published in Rangoon, Burma during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Such modern print media as newspapers and magazines began to circulate in Burma at the turn of the century when the British annexation of Burma significantly intensified the movement of commodities, from India

to Burma. The large supply of paper from India and a rapidly expanding railway system that facilitated transportation to areas not served by the existing inland water transport system made printed material increasingly accessible and affordable. Together with the relatively high literacy rate of Burmese people, these developments led to the rapid rise and spread of the popular press in colonial Burma.⁴¹ Census records report only fifteen newspapers in circulation in 1891 and twenty-six in 1901. By the end of the 1930s, there were over 200 newspapers and periodicals published in Burma with the eight most popular Burmese dailies in Rangoon alone comprising a circulation of 31,500.⁴² The average cost of a newspaper decreased from six pyas in the early 1920s to three and a half pyas in the mid-1930s, making it more affordable than it already was to the average Burmese family.⁴³

By 1921, vernacular Burmese newspapers published from Rangoon overtook the number of those printed in English. The fact that it catered to a large and diverse Burmese reading public can be discerned also from the miscellaneous contents of the press. Besides news articles, social commentaries, and the like, there were law reports, letters and comments from the readers, advertisements, serialized fiction, poetry, anecdotes, gossip columns, and astrology. Writer-journalists and editors reported international events based on information supplied by foreign news agencies but at the same time, they paid attention to local news. Cartoons—many focusing on current events and carrying distinct social and political undertones—added to the eclectic contents of the Burmese press. Unlike the *Rangoon Gazette*, which endorsed the official point of view, these vernacular newspapers provide a range of opinions and accommodated a diverse

⁴¹ See the chapter “Colonial Setting” in Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

⁴² S.G. Grantham, *Census of India, Burma, 1921 Volume X Part I Report*, vol. 10, 1 (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1923), 189.

⁴³ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 40.

range of interests. Nationalist newspapers like *Thuriya* criticized the government and the new consumerist colonial Burmese society that had emerged during the twentieth century. To illustrate, the first available copy of the newspaper (second issue) dated Thursday, 6 July 1911 consisted of 23 pages.⁴⁴ Almost the entire front page is allocated to an advertisement by the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company showing their ferry timetable, which illustrates the connection between Rangoon and Mandalay, the second largest city in Burma. It also informs connections between Rangoon and other major cities located in the huge rice producing Irrawaddy delta, such as Kyailat, Dedaye, Kungyangone, Maubin and Htundhay. This page shows the formation and expansion of the community of *Thuriya's* readers, the emerging English-educated, Burmese middle class of the time. At the bottom of the page, the newspaper invited potential advertisers in both Burmese and English. This newly inaugurated paper struggling with financial instability for some time relied mainly on income from advertisements, which continue for another seven pages. Page 3 shows an advertisement for an English-style raincoat. The price of the raincoat was 18 rupees and 8 annas. The price was certainly not cheap, but the monthly salary for a lower division clerk at a governmental office, or an assistant schoolteacher at the time, was around 125 rupees. This made commodities like the raincoat affordable for the urban middle class, many of whom would be subscribers to *Thuriya*.⁴⁵

Chie Ikeya has produced an excellent scholarly work on the Burmese public sphere and the print culture in her study of colonial and nationalist discourses on the “modern Burmese women in early twentieth century.”⁴⁶ My own work takes inspiration from the kind of sources

⁴⁴ Takahashi Yuri, “The Sun with the Peacock’ The *Thuriya* Newspaper and the Origins of Burmese Nationalist Publishing” (presented at the 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Adelaide, 2010).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*.

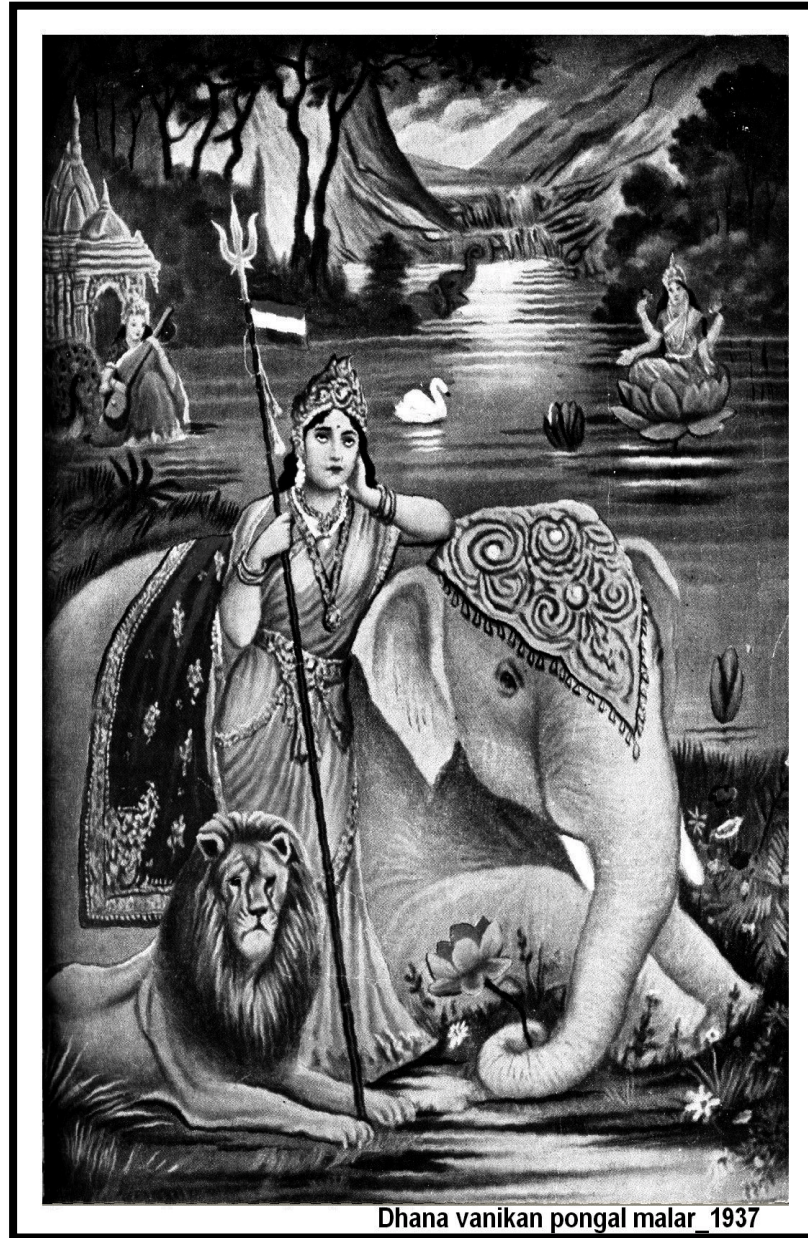
that she has used in her study. Beyond newspapers, I explore Burmese novels written and published by feminist writers of the time. Specifically, for chapter four on debates on mixed marriages, I use the Burmese feminist author Ma Ma Lay's short stories (in Burmese) where the central female characters represent the Burmese nation itself and marriage to a foreigner (and an Indian at that) is shown as equivalent to loss of honor for the entire nation.

The focus of this project however is problematizing the category of the Indian immigrant. Simultaneously, I aim to recover the voice of the migrant himself in his journey to Burma. Hence, the requirements of this dissertation have led me to explore multiple language sources. First, I bring into use novels by the Bengali novelist, Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, whose semi-autobiographical novels are based on journey and stay in Rangoon. For the middle class migrant to Burma, it was a journey full with difficulties: physical hardships and being subjected to racial sleights. Second, I use Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam's publications from both Madras and Rangoon and the manner in which the community saw their presence within the country and their links back home. On the eve of separation of Burma from India in 1937, the editorial of Tamil language journal *Dhana Vanikan* (published from Rangoon), through these two images, tried to emphasize their commitment to their roots, but as well as to the place they had made their workplace for generations. The first image (figure 1) is a traditional calendar art print of Mother India, easily available in shops in Madras city around this period. The second image (figure 2) represents mother Burma. It is perhaps an indication to what the Chettiar community thought (or wanted to project) about its obligation to the country and its people in times of economic and political difficulties.

Figure 1⁴⁷

Image of Mother India in Tamil language Chettiar Sangam Journal

Dhana Vanikan



Dhana vanikan pongal malar_1937

⁴⁷ “Dhanavanikan, Kottaiyar,” 1937, Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai [RMRL].

Figure 2⁴⁸

Image of Mother Burma in Tamil language Chettiar Sangam Journal
Dhana Vanikan



⁴⁸ Ibid.

IV. Chapter Outline

The first chapter discusses the realm of the Indian Ocean in early modern period (16th, 17th and 18th centuries) and the many different actors that circulated in this zone. The Burmese word *kala* meaning “foreigner” (literally someone who has crossed the seas) had been in use for several centuries to describe the various groups of people - Europeans, Chinese, Indians and others who traveled in this region for work, as travelers, as pilgrims, as merchants or as mercenaries. With the establishment of British colonial rule during the mid and late nineteenth century, there was a drastic transformation in Burmese social, economic and political life. The manifold increase in the presence of foreigners and particularly Indians in this group marks the beginning of a shift in the meaning of the word.

Chapter two, “Narratives of Travel: Indian Passenger on the Steamship to Burma” examines how with the arrival of the steamship technology there is a transformation in the scale of people who are now able to travel from the subcontinent to Burma. Further, I link this development to how the colonial state homogenizes different classes, castes, regions and religious groups from the subcontinent into the category of “immigrant.” The efficiency in prevention of disease through quarantine, forcible inoculations, provisions of adequate food, cooking facilities and general amenities are meant to standardize the description of the voyage and arrival of persons at port. However, more affluent Indian passengers demanded to be treated differently than their inferior countrymen and often lodged protests with the authorities and wrote in newspaper columns.

Chapter three focuses on low-income housing, city planning and immigration Restrictions in Early Twentieth Century Rangoon. I use legislative council debates, committee reports and newspaper commentaries to show how municipal concerns and housing problems in

Rangoon city became an occasion for European, Burmese and Indian propertied elites to identify certain indelible traits of the Indian immigrant. Low-income groups in the city were identified exclusively as Indian. They were seen to over-crowd and reduce the standard of city life. Over a period of time, the information gathered through these surveys and debates were used to create legal categories of “domiciled” and “undomiciled” whereby unskilled manual laborers migrating from India were solely identified as the latter class. Thus, a very specific municipal problem in the city became an occasion to create immigration restrictions Acts.

The Fourth Chapter: “I Do Not Envy You”: Mixed Marriages and Immigration Restrictions in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon discusses the question of women, colonial modernity and nationalism in early twentieth century Burma. During the early twentieth century, the stereotype of the “modern,” avaricious and materialistic Burmese woman who enters into marriage of convenience with the foreign immigrant man (circulated in popular colonial and nationalist discourses) became a symbol of the ruined Burmese race. In this chapter, I discuss legislative council debates where male legislators argue for specific laws and immigration restrictions designed to discourage mixed marriages and rescue Burmese women being abandoned when the man returned to his native country. Further, I show how the woman’s question was transformed from the perils of temporary marriages to the impact of foreign immigrants on Burmese nation. Beyond these official debates, I explore the spread of print culture in early twentieth century Burma particularly women writers who expressed their opinion on this mixed marriage issue.

Fifth Chapter: “Retreating Mercantile Diaspora: the Chettiars in Burma in 1930s and 1940s” discusses the role of mercantile diaspora from the subcontinent performing the middleman function in colonial economies in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. I focus here on the Nattukottai Chettiar community during the 1930s and 1940s when they try to cope up with the changing economic and political conditions. Specifically, I examine the formation of the Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam (association/society) to bring the community members together on a political forum to make demands and present grievances to both the Indian government and the governments in Burma and the Straits Settlements. I discuss legislative council debates, which passed the Land Tenancy Act against the Chettiar ownership in Burma. At that juncture, they were faced with intricate questions of legal claims and citizenship. Using the Nattukottai Chettiars as an example of merchant diaspora that were on the retreat in the Indian Ocean arena during the mid-twentieth century, I end this dissertation with thoughts on how decolonization and rise of the new nation-state in mid-twentieth century categorizes and circumscribes movement of people and group.

CHAPTER ONE

“The Familiar Stranger”: Indians in the Bay of Bengal in the Early Modern Period¹

Introduction

In a popular Burmese folktale shared by both Buddhist and Muslim Burmese even today, many centuries ago, a ship carrying merchants from the Indian subcontinent across the Bay of Bengal was wrecked in a fearful storm. Despite the destruction, two of the passengers (both of them adolescent boys) survived and managed to reach the shore. A *pongyi* (Buddhist monk) rescued them, treated their wounds and gave them shelter in a monastery. Once when he left for the forest, he instructed the boys not to touch the food kept within the monastery as it had magical properties and eating it would create disorder and turmoil. But both disregarded the advice and as soon as the monk left, they ate the food, as a result of which the entire monastery was turned upside down. When the monk returned, he realized what had happened in his absence, but to his dismay he could not overcome the magical power that the two boys had acquired and the boys could not return back home by themselves. The two survivors are named Byat Wi and Byat Ta in Buddhist mythology and Ismail and Ibrahim amongst Muslims in Burma and are still worshipped as mythical messengers from across the seas, as spirits (*nats*) who would

¹ The title for this chapter has been inspired by Jonathan N. Lipman’s *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997). Further on this concept, see Felipe Fernández-Armesto, “The Stranger-Effect in Early Modern Asia” in Leonard Blussé and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, eds., *Shifting Communities and Identity Formation in Early Modern Asia* (Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Universiteit Leiden, 2003).

protect the believers and punish the transgressors.²

I begin with this fragment of shared mythology to emphasize how closely the two cultures – Indians from the subcontinent and Burmese have been enmeshed since centuries. On the one hand, the stranger is seen to have crossed the seas, managed to survive a fearful storm and acquired magical qualities in the process of his stay. But on the other hand, being mischievous and unwilling to follow the laws of the land, he is punished and unable to return home.

Beginning with Ashin Dasgupta's work, historiography in the past few decades has shown the significant degree to which the trading networks of the Indian Ocean were integrated into a genuine regional commercial culture, forming an economic zone of its own.³ Even within this larger Indian Ocean arena, as Jos Gommans and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have argued, the Bay of Bengal in the early modern period (roughly from the mid-seventeenth century to the

² U Ka, *Lmyo Bada Pyathana* (Religious Problems Between Buddhists and Muslims in Burma) (Promo, Burma: Pyinsa Rupan Press, 1952) (2nd Edition), 47-48. Also, see chapter one "The Beginnings of Muslim Settlement in the Irrawaddy Valley" in Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1972), 1-17. Southern Burma, or more exactly, the coastal regions of Arakan, the delta of the rivers Irrawaddy, Pegu, and Tenasserim, were known to the Muslim traders from Arab world and the Indian subcontinent in the tenth and eleventh century. Some of these seamen had settled in Burma voluntarily and others had been shipwrecked and were forced to seek refuge on shore. These traders were mentioned in the Burmese Glass Palace Chronicles from 1050 A.D.

In another version of this myth, two sons of an Arab merchant were saved from a shipwrecked vessel on the shores of Martaban. They apparently reached Burma in the year 1055, during the reign of King Anawratha (1044-1077). One of the sons was Shwepyin-gyi and the other Shwepyin-nge. They were employed as horsemen in the service of the King. While returning from a battle, the king stopped at a village not far from Mandalay and ordered his men to build a pagoda. On their refusal to help in building the pagoda, the king ordered them put to death. The legend therefore spread that the spirits of the executed brothers reside in the pagoda. And in their memory, both Buddhists and Muslims of the region celebrate festivals and abstain from pork to mark the occasion.

The second mention in the Glass Palace Chronicles is from the days of King Sawlu (1077-1088) who succeeded his father Anawratha to the throne. In his youth, a Muslim Arab teacher educated him. On ascending the throne, he appointed the son of his teacher, Yaman Khan as the governor of the city Ussa (which is the Pegu of today). Eventually, Yaman Khan revolted, took the king prisoner, and had him put to death. He marched on the capital Pagan to capture it, but was defeated and killed by Sawlu's brother, Kyanzittha. The nucleus of Muslim settlement in the interior of Burma dates from the reign of Kyanzittha who during his wars took many Indians (especially Muslim) captives, and settled them on the land in various places throughout his kingdom.

³ Ashin Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson, *India and the Indian Ocean 1500-1800* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987).

nineteenth century) constituted a zone of distinct unity.⁴ The subcontinent and Southeast Asia (both the mainland and the archipelago) shared commercial, cultural, religious and political characteristics shaped by highly mobile groups of traders, pilgrims, mercenaries and courtiers who crisscrossed the Bay of Bengal. It was only with the advent of western technology (shipping and communication) from the mid to late nineteenth century that established patterns of trade that depended on the monsoon were disrupted and transformed.⁵

Keeping this historiography in mind, I aim to focus on the following questions: first, who were the key players (both Indian and Europeans) that circulated between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia (and specifically to Burma) during the early modern period?⁶ Second: what were the kinds of commercial and cultural interactions between these different groups and indigenous societies in Southeast Asia and what specific roles did Indians play in these exchanges? Finally, what were the developments that led to the British conquest of Burma and large-scale travel of Indians to Burma for employment? And how did the integration of

⁴ J. Gommans, "Trade and Civilization around the Bay of Bengal, c. 1650-1800," 19.3 *Itinerario* (1995): 82-108. S. Subrahmanyam, "Connected histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997): 735-762. Om Prakash and Denys Lombard, *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999). More recently, Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011).

⁵ Peter Klein, "The China Seas and the World Economy between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The Changing Structures of Trade," in Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich ed., *Interactions in the World Economy: Perspectives from International Economic History* (New York, 1989), 61-89.

⁶ "Circulation refers to the movement of people and commodities between one part of the subcontinent to the other. Apart from goods and men, many other commodities circulate within the society (and in between a given society and other societies). Information, knowledge, ideas, techniques, skills, cultural productions (texts, songs), religious practices, even gods circulate. Circulation is different from simple mobility, inasmuch as it implies a double movement of going forth and coming back, which can be repeated indefinitely. In circulating, things, men and notions often transform themselves. Circulation is therefore a value-loaded term, which implies an incremental aspect and not the simple reproduction across space of already formed structures and notions. The totality of circulations occurring in a given society and their outcomes could be viewed as defining a 'circulatory regime,' susceptible to change over time. This 'circulatory regime' in its turn tends to shape society, which can be seen as an ensemble of crisscrossing circulatory flow." Claude Markovits, Jacques Poucheпадass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2-3.

Burma into the British colonial capitalist system change the status of Indians in Burma? Knowledge of this earlier period will help us understand and appreciate how the establishment of the colonial structure and migration alternatively overturned or destabilized this earlier world, whether in social, cultural or economic terms. While the traces of this earlier world and connections may have well survived in the twentieth century, there was an obvious imposition of a new kind of connection between India, Burma and the rest of the Indian Ocean arena. One of the chief consequences was the creation of the new figure of the Indian immigrant who came to be defined purely by the nature of work he performed and the niche he occupied in the new economic regime. Instead of diverse identities as priest, merchant, pirate, soldier and so on, during the colonial period, the Indian immigrant to Burma came to be seen overwhelmingly as a middleman - the lower class coolie laborer or the capitalist serving colonial interests or his own without any reciprocal obligation to the emerging Burmese nation.

I. Mercantile, Religious and Political Networks in the Bay of Bengal Arena

From as early as the first millennium A.D. Indic influences have been described as integral to the Southeast Asian processes of state formation. They played a crucial role in creating a cosmopolitan and yet a distinctive Southeast Asian culture. Scholars have demonstrated how Hindu and Buddhist concepts originating from the subcontinent, instead of being imposed on an alien society (in kingdoms and states in Southeast Asia), were interpreted and used to consolidate an existing belief system. O.W. Wolters, for example, argues that the Hindu *bhakti* cult was grafted onto the local cult of the “man of prowess,” increasing his status into that of overlordship, and thereby effectively bringing persisting indigenous beliefs into

sharper focus.⁷ More recent frameworks on state formation both in Southeast Asia and eastern India have shown a social convergence between the regions which made them part of the same historical development. Thus, Sanskrit intellectuals and scribes who formed the conduits of Sanskrit *kavya* (poetry) and the Pallava script to the Malaya peninsula in c. 400 C. E. were not civilizing emissaries or agents of powerful South Indian kingdoms, but arrived with experience at newly formed princely courts which shared similar backgrounds, and faced similar problems (as in courts in Malaya) in establishing authority. Thus, the ideology of kingship which emanated from courts of the Gupta empire found fertile ground in Southeast Asia for the same reasons as it did in eastern and southern India, suggesting a social “nearness” or convergence on both sides of the Bay of Bengal.⁸

One of the earliest known South Indian merchant associations, the *Manigramam* (from Sanskrit Vanik-graman, “guild of merchants”) is mentioned in copper plate inscriptions from the ninth century from Malabar. During this period, this merchant group appears to have extended its operations to the Coromandel Coast. The *Manigramam* are also mentioned in a ninth-century Tamil inscription from Takuo Pa/Ko Kho Khao, an entrepôt on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. After the ninth century, the presence of this merchant association is attested to in the context of various South Indian as well as Southeast Asian inscriptions, usually in the context of donations to political rulers or the public good.⁹ Kenneth Hall in his work interprets the Tamil inscriptions of Southeast Asia as evidence that South Indian merchant collectives displayed

⁷ O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), 107-121.

⁸ Hermann Kulke, “Indian Colonies, Indianization, or Cultural Convergence? Reflections on the Changing Image of India’s Role in Southeast Asia,” *Semaian* 3 (1990): 8-32.

⁹ Sebastian R. Prange, “Like Banners on the Sea: Muslim trade Networks and Islamization in Malabar” in Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea, eds., *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 28.

“some degree of residential commitment” that went beyond seasonal visits. The notion that Malabari merchants settled in Southeast Asia is further supported by a thirteenth-century inscription from Pagan (upper Burma), noting a donation made to a local *Nanadesi* temple by a native of the Malabar coast who was connected to a south Indian merchant group.¹⁰

Thus, early medieval merchant guilds originating in South India appear to have successfully acquired political support for their ventures both back home and in Southeast Asia. Over the next few centuries, with the rise and spread of Islam, the southern coast of India seems to have become a part of a much larger oceanic trade network. Arab traders had frequented the Malabar Coast since pre-Islamic times and then traveled to Southeast Asia as early as the seventh century in search of spices. After the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in the mid-eighth century, Muslim merchants traveled to Sumatran ports. By the ninth century, the merchants of Basra and Siraf seem to have sent regular trading missions to India and Southeast Asia. Permanent Muslim trading communities settled both on the Malabar Coast and in Southeast Asia, linking different commercial circuits in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and South China Sea. Thus, dissemination of Islam provided a new kind of religious and cultural bridge across communities at the many seaports connecting the Arab world, India and the Indonesian-Malay archipelago. During the thirteenth century, this direct and sustained commercial interaction between the Arabian Sea trading network, southern (Malabar) coast and maritime Southeast Asia came into sharper focus with the rise of powerful dynasties – Fatimids in Egypt, Cholas in South India, and the Song dynasty in China. Trade networks supported by the rise of strong centers of political power were complemented by the expansion of the agricultural base and political

¹⁰ Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988), 76. Also, see Tilman Frasch, “Coastal Peripheries during the Pagan Period” in Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider, eds., *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), 65.

growth of the Khmer and Burmese states.¹¹

European travelers visiting the coastal cities of Burma in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries described thriving commercial ports in lower Burma in their reports. In a letter by Thomas Stevens, an Englishman who visited Burma in November 1586, described the ports: "...We went to Dela, which is fair town and hath a fair port into the sea, from whence go many ships to Malacca, Mecca and many other places...From Dela we went to Cirion (called Syriam in the later period) which is good town and hath a fair port into the sea, whither come many ships from Mecca, Malacca and Sumatra and from divers other places, and there the ships stay and discharge, and send their goods in paroes to Pegu."¹² Afanasii Nikitin, a Russian merchant who traveled in Asia in 1470 traveled to ports of Burma. Describing Pegu he said: "Pegu is no inconsiderable port, principally inhabited by Indian dervishes. The products derived from thence are manik, iakrut, kyrpuk, which are sold by the *dervishes*."¹³ Probably by *dervishes* (in this context), he meant Muslim traders settled from the Indian subcontinent in Burma.

The Portuguese traveler, Duarte Barbosa, who visited the subcontinent during the years 1501-1516, mentions commerce being carried on between India and Pegu by Muslims, infidels (Hindus?) and Christians. He gives a detailed list of goods and mentions that the ships' route went from China via Molucca, Malacca, Sumatra, Pegu, Bengal, and Ceylon to the Red sea.

¹¹ Haraprasad Ray, "Trade between South India and China, 1368-1644," in O. Prakash and D. Lombard, eds., *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1800* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 37.

¹² "Letter from Thomas Stevens to his father Master Thomas Stevens, 1579" in J. Courtenay Locke, *The First Englishman in India: Letters and Narratives of Sundry Elizabethans Written by Themselves and Edited with an Introduction and Notes*, The Broadway Travellers (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1930). Dela maintained lively commercial ties with Malacca on the one hand and with Mecca on the other until the middle of the eighteenth century. Even today villages with residents following the Islamic faith exist in Twante, in Syriam and their surroundings, whose beginnings date back to that period.

¹³ Athanasius Nikitin of Tver, *Narratives of Voyages to India*, Medieval Russian Series trans. (Cambridge, Ontario: Parantheses Publications, 2000).

“Moorish” ships exported sugar, lacquer, and rubies from Pegu and imported cottons, silks, opium, copper, silver, herbs, medicaments, etc.¹⁴ Another item of importance in which there was a brisk trade in Burma was the large clay vessels from Martaban and from Pegu, known as “Pegu jars”, or “Martaban jars” or simply “Martaban.” These jars were used on ships to store food and water. The Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century and the Portuguese traveler Barbosa of the sixteenth century mention the Martaban jars that the Muslim seamen used.¹⁵ In the second half of the sixteenth century, the importance of the city of Bassein (or Cosmin, a Portuguese settlement in Burma) rose as a port for the export of wood to as far as the western Indian Ocean. In addition to the export of wood (between the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries) the shipbuilding and ship-repair industry rose in importance in Burma. Syriam, and later Dela and Rangoon, became important ship building centers where vessels were built mostly for Arab and Armenian merchants.¹⁶

Thus, apart from an outlet for their indigenous products, Burmese ports emerged as important nodes in sea communication, situated as they were on the route of ships sailing between the ports of the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, Coromandel, Malabar, Ceylon, the Spice Islands of the Malay archipelago, and China. In these ports, merchants from India managed to carve a niche for themselves as brokers and partners in trade. They were able to procure key administrative and political positions. A British trader in Mergui (another city on the border of Burma and Thailand) reporting in 1678, said: “The Mahomedans had worked up the trade with great ability. They controlled flourishing business and with their wealth becoming so important,

¹⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 108

¹⁵ Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 4-5.

¹⁶ Radhakumud R. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (Bombay: Longmans, 1912), 202.

they also held key administrative appointments, the Governor of Mergui, the viceroy of the province of Tenasserim, and the Governors of all the principal towns on the overland route between Tenasserim and Ayutthaya were either Indians or Persians.”¹⁷ Despite the influential positions of the Muslim traders in the Burmese ports (and in fact other ports in the Indian Ocean arena), they often faced stringent regulations imposed upon them by the Burmese kings. The local governors caused even more difficulties than the kings, through occasional boycotts and other restrictive measures. The annoyances and persecutions of the city and port governors could however be mitigated by bribery and gifts.

Over the years, the population of Indian merchants (non-indigenous) kept on increasing. Many had come to the coasts (of Burma) temporarily for food, water, and repairs for their vessels and had stayed on. Others had come at the beginning of monsoon rains and were not able to leave Burma until the end of the season (from mid-May until mid-November no vessel left Burma). Such merchants stranded in coastal towns often married local Burmese women. The Burmese governors actually encouraged temporarily settled foreigners to marry local (indigenous Burmese) women, but when they left, they were not allowed to take their wives and children

¹⁷ Maurice Collis, *Siamese White* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 40 cited in Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 5.

Also see, Helen Fujimoto, *The South India Muslim Community and the Evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang to 1948* (Tokyo: ILCAA, 1988), 10-15. In her work on the history of Jawi Peranakan or the Indo-Malay community in Penang (Malay Peninsula), Helen Fujimoto traces the merchants' activities from fifteenth-century contemporary accounts. In one such account, Tomé Pires (a sixteenth century Portuguese traveler), during his stay in Malacca, describes the influential position of the “klings” or South Indian traders amongst all other foreign communities residing in this cosmopolitan city. Many of them were appointed into high positions like the “controller of exchequer” and in charge of ports (*syabandars* or *shahbandar*). Since the power of the kingdom and the ruler were derived mainly from trade, many foreign merchants were able to attain positions of central economic and political importance, springing from their role as mediators between the sultan and his source of wealth. The extent of their power was revealed in 1444, when the leader of the Tamil Muslim faction in the Malacca court, Raja Kassim, instigated a coup d'état against the ruler chosen by the deceased king and himself ascended the throne. A century later, South India Muslim influence was still strong at the Malacca court, through the office of *Bendahara*. This official combined several functions, being “a sort of Prime Minister, he was in the first place Chancellor and Lord of the Treasury and also the Chief Justice for all civil and criminal affairs. The *Bendahara* families were often so powerful that they were able to determine the question of succession and often consolidated their own power by marrying into the family of the sultan.” (14-15).

with them. Such a custom continued as late as in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The descendants of these Arabs, Persian and Indian Muslim traders formed the original nucleus of the “Burman Muslim” community which, in the days of the Burmese kingdom, was known as the *pathee* or *kala*.¹⁹ As the years passed, the number of Muslims (especially in the coastal areas) in Burma increased, partly as a result of the growing numbers of descendants from mixed marriages and partly because of the arrival of more Indian traders and seamen.

This continued contact of Muslim traders with Burma from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries left many cultural traces. It resulted in the infiltration of Arabic and Persian words in the Burmese vocabulary, particularly in the fields of navigation and trade. Some of these words have no parallel in the Burmese language, for example, the word *nakhuda* or the captain, an expression that is repeatedly found in the documents of the East India Company in connection with Burmese ports or, the title *shahbandar*, a term given to senior port officials meaning “head of the port.” Throughout the Indian Ocean, this latter title was given to officials vested with specific authority over foreign ships and traders, and who were in fact, senior customs and officials. During these centuries, it was mostly the Armenians and Indian Muslims who held these positions at Burmese ports.

¹⁸ D.G.E. Hall, “Studies in Dutch Relations with Arakan, Part I, Dutch Relations with King Thirithudhamma of Arakan,” *Burma Research Society Fiftieth Anniversary Publications* 2 (1960), 72.

¹⁹ The term *kala*, *kla*, *kula* is the Burmese term given to natives of the Indian subcontinent but in time came to embrace all foreigners who had crossed the seas to come to Burma. [Col. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, new ed. Edited by William Crooke (London: John Murray, 1903), 495]. Christians came to be called *phiringies* or *feringies*, (foreigner) a term brought by Indians to Burma (Bishop Bigandet, *An Outline of the history of the Catholic Burmese Mission: From the Years 1720 to 1887* (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1887), 3]. The Burmans called their native Muslim “Pathikula” and their Hindus “Hindu-kula” (Yule and Burmell, *op. cit.*, 669). From these, it would seem, a number of words have emerged, such as *Kaladan*, *Kalagon*, *Kalaywa* etc. given to Muslim villages established during the period of the Burmese kings from the eleventh century onwards. After the colonial conquest, Europeans were generally spoken of as *kala-phyu* (white foreigner). During the colonial period, gradually, the term “kala” came to be a derogatory term used to describe Indian immigrants, particularly lower class (and often lower caste) Indians. Burmese Muslims (from families with roots in Burma since generations) found this term objectionable, as they did not see themselves as foreigners or recent immigrants. See W.S. Desai, *A Pageant of Burmese History* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1961), 298.

Apart from linguistic contribution, the presence of Indian communities contributed to an extremely cosmopolitan religious environment. Scholars have pointed out the important role of Sufi missionary activity in these trade routes as a powerful force behind mass conversions in the Malaya-Indonesian Archipelago.²⁰ A key testimony is the number of religious places of worship built by Muslim sailors at various sites along the coasts from India to Malaya in honor of some of these religious mendicants. In the early twentieth century, Sir Richard Temple, an ardent orientalist and amateur ethnographer remarked on the presence across the eastern Indian Ocean of shrines, built by Muslim sailors, which he called “Buddermokan” (*badr-mokan*). They were built in memory of the saint Badr-al-Din Awliya, who is worshipped as a spirit (*nat*) by the Buddhist, as a lesser god (*deva*) by the Hindus, as a sacred spirit by the Chinese and as a saint by the Muslims. His worship was the same as that offered throughout the region to spirits and supernatural creatures, revered by the whole population, regardless of religion. This worship surrounds a shared mythology or belief in the “great flood”, introduced to Burma by people of Islamic faith and mixed with a variety of Hindu, Buddhist and animistic beliefs.²¹

²⁰ However, rather than a simple process of diffusion or transmission of Islamic traditions from South to Southeast Asia, recent work has focused on how these ideas were in fact in circulation. See Torsten Tschacher, “Circulating Islam: Understanding Convergence and Divergence in the Islamic Traditions of Ma’bar and Nusantara” in Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea, eds., *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore; Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 48-67. As Tschacher points out, while veneration of specific saints spread from South India to Southeast Asia, saints buried in the Straits Settlements were included in the devotional practices of Tamil-speaking Muslims in the subcontinent. But beyond Sufi saints many other petty scholars or educated laymen who served local communities as *imams*, *muezzins*, or as other religious dignitaries traveled between these coastal areas and contributed to this movement of ideas. Significantly, these individuals are known by the same term in both Malabar and Nusantara (Indonesian word for the Indonesian archipelago) “*Labbai*” (Tamil, *leppai* or *lappai*; Malay and Javanese, *lebai*; Achenese, *leubé*). Practices such as ritual feasting, Muharram processions and recitals of panegyric *mawlid* poetry were shared between South Indian and Southeast Asian Muslims, creating connected trajectories of religious practice.

Another important linkage was circulation of Islamic textual culture in the Tamil language in the Straits Settlement. During the late nineteenth century, with the explosion of print culture, a number of prominent Tamil language newspapers began to be published from the Straits Settlement. Thus, these Muslim patrons were instrumental in the creation of Malay print culture in the Straits Settlements. While the majority of subscribers were residents of Singapore, the publications found substantial overseas readership in Sumatra, Siam, Ceylon and India.

²¹ Richard C. Temple, “Buddermokan,” *Journal of Burma Research Society* XV, 1 (1925): 1-33.

Among the shrines built during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one is in Akyab (apparently built in 1756), another in Sandoway, and a third on a small island of the Mergui archipelago off the Tenasserim coast. Their principal devotees were sailors and fishermen. The architectural style (with minaret and cupola) and the niche on the west side (*mihrab*), synthesizes the Burmese pagoda and the Islamic mosque. There are also graves of saints (*dargāh*) in Sandoway, Bassein, Syriam, and other places, which are said to be the tombs of patron saints of fishermen and sailors since centuries.²²

Parallel to their commercial penetration in the coastal towns of Burma, Indians also settled in the interior of the kingdom. The army of King Anawratha (during the eleventh century) had boasted of Indian units and bodyguards.²³ From the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth, Muslim artillerymen, together with Portuguese prisoners, served regularly in the Burmese army, generally in the bodyguard units. Many of these mercenaries in reality had been prisoners of war.²⁴

These prisoners of war were distributed and settled in many villages so as to prevent the formation of a strong, united force, which might constitute a threat against the kingdom. The

²² Col. Ba Shin, "Coming of Islam to Burma, down to 1700 A.D.," *Lecture before Asian History Congress* (New Delhi: Unpublished, 1961) in Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 8.

²³ During Anwratha's attack on Martaban, capital of the Tailangs, King Minkyiswasawke (1368-1401) encountered fierce resistance organized by two Muslim officers who were finally defeated. When King Razadarit (1385-1423) besieged Dagon (today's Rangoon area), he succeeded in conquering the city only with the help of Indian (Muslim) sailors. Razadarit met with difficulties because the other side also employed Indian mercenaries. By the end of the fifteenth century, several of these mercenaries were described as using firearms. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 9-10.

²⁴ Victor Lieberman, "The Transfer of Burmese Capital from Pegu to Ava," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 112:1 (1980), 78. During the sixteenth century, the rulers of the first Taung-ngu Dynasty had relied on Portuguese and Muslim mercenaries to supply and operate the latest types of arquebuses and more especially small artillery. [After] conquering Syriam from Filipe de Brito in 1613, Anauk-hpet-lun sought a new solution to the problem of foreign expertise: he deported over 1,500 of de Brito's Portuguese and Muslim followers. The prisoners of war included their families were settled in the river valleys surrounding Ava, where along with less specialized indigenous peoples, they were allotted village lands and organized into hereditary army platoons. [These] deportees and their descendants became the backbone of the artillery, and to a lesser extent the musketeer section of the imperial guard.

Indian groups (mostly followers of the Islamic faith) gradually assimilated into their Burmese surrounding, gave up their language, customs and dress. Over the space of a few generations, many of their religious and cultural beliefs underwent a transformation too.²⁵ By the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, there were already Muslim communities of considerable size in all principal cities of Burma. They generally lived in separate quarters for foreigners called *kaladan*, “foreign dwellings.” Special officials bearing the title *kalawun* controlled these specific areas. On the whole, these settled groups enjoyed wide religious tolerance. The Burmese state was not interested in their internal organization nor in their religious lives, nor did they try to convert them to Buddhism. Many churches and mosques were built without any interference wherever there was a foreign community. These facts aroused the attention and interest of travelers visiting Burma in the nineteenth century.²⁶

²⁵ Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 14. In the twentieth century, commentators pointed out the many heterodoxies Islam in Burma had sunk into. “Women of all ranks go unveiled, and clothe as scantily as the rest of their countrywomen. The sanctity of the purdah, elsewhere so unfailingly an accompaniment of Islam is here entirely unknown. Also, some of them give into the Burmese practice of tattooing the thighs and legs. As might be expected, they are very ignorant sons of the Faith, and in the indiscriminating character of their diet are said to be no better than their neighbors. But nothing in the life and conversation of their Burmese co-religionists seemed to offensive to the Mahomedans (from outside Burma) as the free dress and habits of the women, who are said to be even admitted to prayer in the same mosques with the men. These habits were such a gross violation of all Moslem propriety, that no man, they considered, was fit to lead the devotions of a congregation of believers who allowed such laxities in his family.” Also see, Shwe Bo U Ba U, *Hundred Years of Muslims in Mandalay* (Rangoon; U Thaw Press, 1959).

²⁶ Michael Symes, *Journal of His Second Embassy to the Court of Ava in 1802*, ed. D.G.E. Hall (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 160, 215. A case of Muslim persecution during the reign of Bodawpaya (1782-1819) stands out against this background of tolerance. Henry Gouger, *Personal Narrative of Two Years’ Imprisonment in Burmah* (London: John Murray, 1860), 97. There are two versions of this story: one that is recounted by an Englishman called Gouger who was imprisoned in Burma for two years during the reign of Bagyidaw (1819-1837), successor to the Bodawpaya mentioned above; the other, according to the tradition of the Myedu Muslims (the group who were persecuted). Also see, G.E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma: 1824-1942* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1946), 267-277 and Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 12-13.

According to Gouger, the king was once suddenly overcome by religious doubts and decided to examine Islamic tenets. He invited the dignitaries of the large Muslim community (Moulvis) in Ava, the capital: “...To their consternation, the flesh of the hated animal (pork) was placed before them, and they were commanded to eat it.” The prisoners had no choice but to partake of food. As against this version, the (Myedu) Muslim tradition has it that the Moulvis refused to partake of the flesh of the pig and were executed forthwith. Legend has survived that the bodies were not buried for several days. A great storm blew up and caused the king to regret his deed. They were then given a proper burial. These are buried in Amarapura (the old Burmese capital) and are considered martyrs.

Politically and militarily, the histories of India and Burma are entwined in other respects as well. The influence of Bengal on the kingdom of Arakan had been negligible up to 1430. This independent kingdom turned westwards, towards Bengal (as they shared common land boundaries), as the Burmese Court at Ava grew in power. In 1404, the King of Arakan, Naramekhla (1404-1434) was forced to flee the Burmese forces and take refuge in Gaur, capital of the Bengal Sultanate, which had become independent of the Mughal emperor in Delhi. Ahmad Shah, Sultan of Gaur gave Naramekhla shelter and the latter served him as an officer in the army and fought during his wars. Eventually in 1430, Naramekhla succeeded in reconquering Arakan with the help of an army supplied by Ahmad Shah's successor Nadir Shah. Upon his return, Naramekhla founded a new city, Mrohaung (also called Mrauk-U), which remained the capital until 1785 when the Burmese ruler (at Ava) conquered Arakan. Prominent Indian influence in Arakan, then, may be said to date from 1430. On his return, Naramekhla ceded certain territory to the Sultan of Bengal and recognized his sovereignty by accepting Muslim titles in addition to the Buddhist Arakanese ones. Coins with inscriptions in Persian, court ceremonies and administrative methods were adopted from Gaur and Delhi into Arakan.²⁷

After the death of Naramekhla, Arakanese rulers started expanding northwards and there were regular Arakan forays and raids on Bengal. Increasing Portuguese interest and ambitions in the region seem to have helped these expansion plans. Portuguese mercenaries provided much needed artillery and firearms skills in the Arakanese army and in return they were permitted to establish bases for their operations and granted commercial concessions. Together, the Portuguese and the Arakanese established a lucrative slave trade in the area. Half the prisoners

²⁷ M.S. Collis and San Shwe Bu, "Arakan's Place in the Civilization of the Bay," *Journal of Burma Research Society* XV, 1 (1925): 39-43. Also see, D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1958). G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of English Conquest* (London: Longmans, 1925), 138-139.

taken by the Portuguese were given to the king; the rest were sold on the market or forced to settle in the villages near Mrohaung.²⁸

An important source of information for this period comes from the Portuguese traveler, Sebastian Manrique, who was in Arakan from 1629 to 1637. He describes the arrival of prisoners from Bengal in Portuguese and Arakanese ships and their convoy (whom he accompanied) and his unsuccessful attempts to convert them to Christianity.²⁹ Bengali ballads from the period also describe the threat of the Portuguese pirates, who conducted predatory raids to take people away as slaves. The earliest description of “Harmads” (Portuguese pirates) and “Phiringis” (mixed race as a result of intermarriage between Portuguese and Indians) occurs in the celebrated poem of Mukanda Ram, written in the year 1577. In his description of Dhanapati Sadagar’s sea voyage, he says, “the captain left the country of the Phiringis and steered the ship day and night for fear of the Harmads.”³⁰ Portuguese pirates often joined hands with Burmese robbers, and the word Harnad, originally applied to Portuguese pirates alone, came to denote this latter group as

²⁸ Om Prakash, “Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680,” in Jos Gommans and Jacques Leider (eds.) *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), 98. For more literature on piracy see, Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History*. Lakshmi Subramaniam, *Medieval Seafarers of India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1999), Stephan Egbert Arie Van Galen, “Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom (Burma) from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century AD” (Research school CNWS, Faculty of Arts, Leiden University, 2008), Jacques P. Leider, “Relics, Statues, and Predictions Interpreting an Apocryphal Sermon of Lord Buddha in Arakan,” *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 2 (2009): 333–364.

²⁹ Sebastian Manrique, *Travels Of Fray Sebastian Manrique, 1629-1643: A Translation Of The Itinerario De Las Misiones Orientales.*, ed. Lt. Col. C. Eckford Juard and Father H. Hosten, vol. I *Arakan* (Oxford: Hakluyt Society, 1927), 101-102. Also see, Maurice Collis, *The Lord of the Great Image- Being Experiences of Friar Manrique in Arakan* (London: Readers Union/Faber and Faber, 1946) cited in Rila Mukherjee, ed., *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 178. In 1632, when the Portuguese were chased out of Hughli (current district in West Bengal, India), a band of them under Manuel de Azevedo, attempted to settle at Sagor, downstream from Hughli. This island on the (Bengal) delta was sparsely inhabited, despite possessing a natural harbor. Here the locals celebrated festivals where the men shaved their heads and beards, and anointed themselves with oil, and then prayed at a ruined temple, ruined because other groups of Portuguese pirates had devastated Sagor through slave raids. The festival ended with the locals wading out to sea where they were eaten by sharks (they could have been captured by pirate raids).

³⁰ Babu Ashutosh Chaudhury, “Nuranneha and the Grave” in Dineshchandra Sen, ed., *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, vol. 4, 1 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1932), 19-55.

well. “They had no mercy for any particular sect or community, the rich, the poor, the young and the aged, Hindus and the Mahomedans were often indiscriminately murdered or taken as captives.”³¹ The ballad “Nuranneha and the Grave,” collected and published by Babu Ashutosh Chaudhury in 1928 provides a graphic account of the oppression by the Portuguese pirates. It was adapted from an original folksong that he had heard from a local boatman at the Chittagong port:

They made men, women and boys captives and made holes in their palms through which they passed cords to bind them. When rendered perfectly disabled this way, they were kept confined under the deck of their small boats and carried to distant countries for being sold as slaves. The expressions, “Harmad’s Mulluck” or Mager Mulluck” were in extensive use and were applied to anarchical countries. The entire population dreaded the Harmad, and in their manners and customs they were more like the Mahomedans than the Hindus.³²

This violent history of displacement of people in the Bay found further literary outlet with the intermixture of the two cultures (Indian and Arakanese), following Mughal prince Shah Shuja’s escape to Arakan. In the seventeenth century, Mughal prince Shah Shuja fled to Arakan in order to escape persecution by emperor Aurangzeb who had won the battle of succession in Delhi. Sandathudhamma, king of Arakan (1652-1687) granted him permission to continue to Mrohaung on the condition that his followers surrender their weapons. Two sources from the period describe the events that followed: one was by French physician Bernier who was in India between 1658 and 1667 and the other by Dutch representatives who were in Mrohaung around the time. According to the various reports, Shah Shuja, though initially given a warm welcome and promised safe voyage on to Mecca, was not treated well. Subsequently, in 1661, the prince tried to escape the palace and lead a rebellion against the king. Shah Shuja was killed in the

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Ibid., 23-24.

battle and emperor Aurangzeb used this incident (the death of an imperial family member) as an excuse to send an army and end to the Portuguese-Arakanese pirate raids on the east Bengal coast. Between 1665 and 1666, a large Mughal force demolished the Portuguese-Arakanese settlements in Sandwip, Chittagong and other joint trade and military strongholds. Following this defeat and eventually the death of the Arakanese ruler Sandathudhamma, there was a gradual decline in the power of the kingdom of Arakan. In 1785, finally the Burmese rulers (at Ava) conquered Arakan and annexed it to Burma.³³

While the political legacy of the Muslim-Buddhist Arakanese ruling group may have come to an end, the religious and cultural influences have persisted over the centuries. A few of Shah Shuja's soldiers who escaped the massacre were later admitted into the Arakanese's kings bodyguard group as a special archers unit called *Kamans* or *Kamanchi* (from the Persian word: bow, *kaman*; bowman *kamanchi*). Over the years fresh Afghan mercenaries from the subcontinent reinforced this group and they went on to play a decisive political role as the Arakanese kingdom lost its previous supremacy. In 1710 however, the Arakanese ruler King Sandawizaya (1710-1731) succeeded in gaining the upper hand and most of the group was exiled to Ramree. According to the 1933 official census report: "the descendants of these groups live in Ramree and in a few villages near Akyab and bear the same name to this very day. They speak and follow Arakanese language and customs, though they practice the Islamic religion."³⁴

The intermixture of the two cultures was reflected in the sphere of language and the arts. Between the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Muslim poets and writers (from the

³³ Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 341. Also, Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of English Conquest*, 148.

³⁴ J. J. Bennison, *Census of India, Report Volume XI Part I Report*, vol. XI, Part I (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1931).

subcontinent) were employed in the court of Arakanese kings. These poets and writers wrote in Persian and Arabic or in the mixed language, Rohinga, which they developed as a combination of Arabic, Bengali and Arakanese. The art of calligraphy, miniature paintings in Mughal style, Persian songs and music and musical instruments adapted from the Mughal court, became part of the Arakanese heritage.

Two Bengali authors, Daulat Kaji and Alaol, were part of the literary life in the Arakanese capital during the seventeenth century. References, albeit oblique ones, to the sojourn of Shah Shuja in Arakan may be found in the works of Alaol. Reputedly a native of Fatehpur in Bengal, Alaol was the son of a Mughal officer called Shamsheer Qutb, located at Jalalpur. It is claimed that Portuguese pirates in the Ganges delta kidnapped Alaol as a child during a raid. He later came to be established in the Arakan court as a successor to Kaji. Between 1645 and 1652 he is reputed to have completed a Bengali version of the *Padmavat*, Malik Muhammad Jayasi's celebrated mid-sixteenth century *masnawi*. Implicated in the aborted uprising of 1660-61 (against the Arakanese ruler), Ālāol apparently spent some time – perhaps several years – in prison. On his release, he turned from Indo-Persian themes to more classic Persian ones, such as Yusuf and Zulaikha, or Khusrau and Shirin. In 1669, he completed several significant texts: *Saifulmuluk badiyujjamal*, and in 1673 – after being initiated into the Qadiri Sufi order by a *pir* called Sayyid Mas'ud Shah - the *Dara Sekandara Nama*.³⁵

Apart from the court literature at Mrauk U, Muslim authors of Chittagong (present day Chittagong) also produced works meant for a rural audience. Mainly, the texts (poems) were

³⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Persianization and 'Mercantilism' in Bay of Bengal History, 1400-1700," in *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72-73. Also, see, Thibaut D'Hubert and Jacques P. Leider "Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court: Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth-century Arakan," in Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, 358.

panchalis, the traditional form of Bengali narrative literature. These were performed by a *gayena* (singer) or a *kathaka* (story teller) and sometimes accompanied by musicians. The themes were mainly religious in nature; such as the voluminous narrative texts composed by Saiyid Sultan's *Nabivamsa* (the Lineage of the Prophet). Their aim was to teach the fundamental tenets of Islam to the recently converted population of the region, although at times they mixed elementary Islamic praxis and Sufi teachings with Yogic practices.³⁶

In broad strokes, these were some of the religious, cultural, commercial and political linkages between the subcontinent, Burma and the larger Bay of Bengal arena. In the next section, I will focus on the growing commercial prominence of the East India trading companies in the region and the rivalry and competition between these different actors in the Bay of Bengal arena.

II. Competition in the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century

In an interesting account of competition between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Indian merchants in the Bay of Bengal region in the mid-seventeenth century, Wil O. Dijk reveals how the Dutch were reluctant to establish trading posts in Burma to begin with as they knew that Indian merchants with their long tradition of trading with countries across the Bay of Bengal would be tough economic rivals.³⁷ They wrote, “from Pulicat and Masulipatnam many Moorish and Gentive [Hindu] ships sail to Pegu, Tavoy, Tenasserim, Arakan and Achin. They

³⁶ Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, 358.

³⁷ O Wil Dijk, *Seventeenth-century Burma and the Dutch East India Company, 1634-1680* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2006), 147.

make huge profits in Pegu because their costs are so low, adding that the Muslims and Hindus are flooding the market with cloth and other commodities so that profits are meager.”³⁸ This extensive (especially Muslim) trade to countries around the Bay of Bengal adversely affected the VOC’s trade with Siam, Burma, and Sumatra’s west coast. The VOC tried hard to gain some kind of control over this flourishing trade by issuing passes or permits to other merchant ships. Often permits were deliberately withheld to stifle this trade but in fact, the Muslim traders chose to ignore the matter entirely and continued to send their fully laden ships to Tenasserim, Burma, Achin, Persia, Mocha and the like, cutting into the Company’s trade.³⁹

Thus, merchants from various backgrounds -- Armenians, Arabs, Jews, Indians and Chinese, Dutch and the Portuguese -- were contenders for the lucrative trading operation around coastal Burma. From Bengal, the connection with Burma was mainly through the ports at Martaban, Dagon, and Cosmin (Bassein) in the Irrawaddy Delta. In part, the importance of these ports lay in their midway location on the subcontinent between West Asia on the one hand and Southeast Asia and East Asia on the other. But perhaps even more important was the subcontinent’s capacity to put on the market a wide range of tradable goods at highly competitive prices. These included agricultural goods, raw materials (such as cotton and indigo) and finished textiles. According to the 1516 testimony of António Dinis, the Portuguese factor at Martaban, four or five Bengal ships visited Cosmin every year carrying mainly textiles, which were exchanged primarily for silver made into rings or small hoops.⁴⁰

Apart from private merchants in this motley crowd, a considerable investment was made

³⁸ Ibid., 147.

³⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁰ Om Prakash, “Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680,” 96.

by the state itself. The Mughal state for instance, though agrarian in character, was extremely interested in the income generated through port duties, but also the precious metals that were obtained for coinage and other uses through this trade. From the perspective of the Mughal Indian *mansabdar* group, consisting of the Mughal nobility as well as senior state officials, the foreign trade sector was a channel for lucrative investment of its own resources. For example, in November 1653, all six ships leaving for the eastern littoral of the bay belonged to nobles and state officials. Using such documented evidence from Hugli and Balasore in Mughal Bengal, Om Prakash concludes that such intense involvement of politically privileged merchants in coastal and high seas trade may not have characterized other segments of the Bay of Bengal littoral; yet these merchants were an important constituent group of the trading community of the region.⁴¹

The shift in Burma's political center of gravity from the interior to the coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was derived in part from the growth of Indian Ocean trade. As long as Pegu remained an independent capital (1369-1599), maritime revenues may have constituted the bulk of royal income. Although the relative importance of these revenue sources declined after the capital returned to Ava in upper Burma during the period of the restored Taung-ngu dynasty (1600-1752), the crown remained inordinately concerned to protect and preserve its coastal revenues.⁴² Burmese kings consciously encouraged foreign trade by initiating embassies to maritime states and by offering trade concessions and a reduction in customs duties. As Victor Lieberman points out, throughout the period under consideration, Burmese rulers milked international trade through a combination of custom duties, royal monopolies on valuable

⁴¹ Ibid., 95.

⁴² Om Prakash, "Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal", 95.

exports and imports and overseas trading expeditions in vessels owned or rented by the Crown.⁴³ A closely related development was the role of imported precious metals in promoting monetization in the Burmese economy. From the late sixteenth century onward, the import of large quantities of New World silver via India, Japan and the Philippines facilitated the increasing replacement of copper coinage with coins made from silver. By the early eighteenth century silver had become the basic currency medium throughout most of the lower Burma delta.⁴⁴

Apart from the Bengal-Burma sea route, a large volume of trade in this zone seems to have been carried out from the Coromandel Coast in India. By the early sixteenth century, Pegu and lower Burma, in particular the ports of Martaban and Cosmin figured prominently in the trade carried out from the central Coromandel port of Pulicat. António Dinis (the Portuguese factor at Martaban) mentions four to five ships arriving annually at Cosmin. While the export cargo consisted of textiles and yarn, the imports were mainly gold and rubies. This trade, however, came under increasing pressure as the Portuguese concession system involving monopoly rights, progressively replaced crown shipping. Being unable to operate as independent ship owners any longer, the Coromandel merchants engaged in this branch of the trade, known as Chulias in parts of Southeast Asia and Marakkayars in Coromandel, in addition to Telugu-speaking Chettis of the Balija and Komati communities, were increasingly obliged to freight space on the ships of the Portuguese concession holders. With a substantial decline in the volume of trade because of the Portuguese stranglehold, by the end of the sixteenth century Pulicat was a

⁴³ Victor Lieberman, "Secular trends in Burmese Economic History, c. 1350-1830, and their Implications for State Formation," *Modern Asian Studies* 25:1 (1991), 17. Also see, Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 Volume I Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003-2009). Lieberman, *Strange Parallels Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 Volume II Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

shadow of its former self.⁴⁵ The focus of trade shifted from Pulicat to Masulipatnam, which had been a relatively minor port until the middle of the sixteenth century.

The rise of Masulipatnam was in part related to the political consolidation of the sultanate of Golconda under Ibrahim Qutb Shah (1550-80). There were regular sailings from Masulipatnam to all Burmese and Tenasserim ports, and Golconda merchants went further to Ayutthaya. In fact, Golconda Muslims secured great influence in the port of Mergui as port administrators and local officials.⁴⁶ The rulers of Golconda exchanged diplomatic greetings with all rulers of this region and they themselves actively participated in this trade.⁴⁷ The other participants in this trade were the Chulia Muslims of southern Coromandel who plied ships to Tenasserim, Pegu and Ayutthaya. They also held high office in the island of Ujang Selang and in the neighboring tin-rich district of Bangeri, one of them becoming the governor of the island in

⁴⁵ Om Prakash, "Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680," 97. Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 Volume I Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 508).

As Subrahmanyam shows, some of the factors at Pulicat, like João Moreno, mixed commerce and piracy as occupations. In 1521, a certain Manuel de Frias, was appointed the first Portuguese Captain of the Coromandel and Fishery Coasts. This captain was a resident of Pulicat, and held the post for a period of three years. He was to have jurisdiction over all Portuguese residents on the coasts, and further, with the aid of a small fleet maintained – at least initially – at the expense of the Crown, was to enforce the issuing of *cartazes* (or passes for navigation) to shipping that operated on and around Coromandel. The revenue that was generated by issuing these cartazes probably went to the captain as perquisite, and was in addition to the salary paid to him by the Crown. A clear picture of this aspect of the captain's activities emerges from a document dated 1526, which in large measure relates to the affair of a ship captured by the then captain of Coromandel, Manuel da Gama, off the port of Kayal. The ship, which was attempting to sail from Satgaon in Bengal to either Ceylon or Malabar, did not carry a *Cartaz*, and as a consequence its entire cargo – largely pulses, rice and other provisions, with a small portion being Bengal textiles – was confiscated, and the Muslim *Nakhuda* and his family (who were on board) sold into slavery.

⁴⁶ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 122.

⁴⁷ Dijk, *Seventeenth-century Burma and the Dutch East India Company, 1634-1680*, 151. Dutch accounts mention how the Dutch had to sell their goods as quickly as possible, invest the proceeds in profitable return goods to fill the hold of their ships before speeding them on their way. Dutch expectations of high profits from their Burma trade always stood in direct relation to the size of Muslim cargoes. The Nawab of Golconda's cargoes in particular, were considered the most damaging. Since everyone traded in the same goods, the Nawab's ships returned from Burma with large quantities of Chinese coins, lac, wax, pitch, ivory, long peppers and of course passengers with their freight. The Nawab's ships tended to arrive in Burma in March, November and January. Part of their cargo was sold in Syriam (port and town situated in Southwestern Burma) and the remainder (including much red cotton yarn) was taken to Ava.

the 1670s (on the Malaya Peninsula). Ships owned by Chettiar merchants sailed from Pulicat, Devanampattinam and Porto Novo (Coromandel coast) to Mrohaung, Syriam and Mergui.⁴⁸ Further, these merchants employed factors in Ayutthaya (later Siam) to take care of trade at the other end.⁴⁹

The emergence of Masulipatnam was also an Indians merchants' response to the Portuguese control over the Pulicat-Melaka sector. The network of Burmese ports with which trade was carried out from Masulipatnam during the 1580s came to include the ports of Mrauk U and Chittagong in the northern Burmese kingdom of Arakan. In the 1590s, two or three ships left Masulipatnam annually for Pegu, laden with textiles and yarn. The rise of this alternative network greatly alarmed the Portuguese *Estado* administration, which tried hard to disrupt it. Through official and unofficial armadas, attempts were made to disrupt trade both at Aceh and at Masulipatnam. The merchants of Masulipatnam, who tried to evade the Portuguese *cartazes* (system of permits to practice trade) often encountered privateers waiting to capture local shipping outside the port city, through which the Portuguese raiders hoped to make profits. However, not all expeditions met with success. In 1581, an account from the chronicle of Diogo do Couto, describes the travails of such an expedition, which was dispatched from Goa to Masulipatnam to target two Acehnese and one Peguan ship reported to be present in the waters in

⁴⁸ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).122.

⁴⁹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 302-303. As part of his argument about the many different vocations of the pre-colonial merchant or the portfolio capitalist, Subrahmanyam describes the career of Achyutappa Chetti. Working as an intermediary for both Dutch and English East India Company in the Bay of Bengal region, he had his own shipping interests, mostly at Pulicat and to a lesser extent in Devanampattinam. His ships plied the ports of Ceylon, Arakan, Pegu and Malay Peninsula. Further, he came to acquire an important role as well in the trade with Mergui – which was in a sense a trade with Ayutthaya, given that a high proportion of the textiles were carried from Mergui to Tenasserim and thence to Patani or Ayutthaya. In a single year, 1632, shipping interests owned by him and his brother Chinanaa, traded along at least five distinct routes in the Bay of Bengal. Up to a certain point this was seen as advantageous by the Dutch company as well, who observed the existence of certain side-benefits for themselves. For example, they made use of Achyutappa's factor at Pegu to further their own early trade there.

the area. The Peguan ship was sunk, though at a considerable monetary cost to the Portuguese raiders. The Acehnese ships, on the other hand, completely eluded their grasp.⁵⁰

Thus, the early seventeenth century was a period of intense of competition between the Portuguese and Indian merchants in Burma in the Bay of Bengal arena and when the Dutch and the English attempted to enter this trade, they found the Coromandel interests already well entrenched. Not only were these companies competing with the local (Indian) buyers in Coromandel who bought textiles and yarn for the Burmese market at much more favorable prices, but they had to compete with one another for a limited share in the trade. In 1636, the English tried in every way to lure weavers away from Pallakollu, a village that the Dutch held on lease. When the Dutch factors in Masulipatnam called them to account, the English feigned ignorance.⁵¹

Apart from textiles, other European companies (like the Dutch) were involved in shipping Indian slave labor to Burma.⁵² In 1638, for example, the factors in Syriam (in Burma) wrote urgently to their counterparts in Pulicat: “Do not forget to send, at the earliest, the slaves that were ordered and an additional 20, for without them, the Company’s affairs will be hindered. When you send them, be sure to include several strapping fellows who can be put to work on any

⁵⁰ Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce*, 155.

⁵¹ Dijk, *Seventeenth-century Burma and the Dutch East India Company*, 151-154. Notwithstanding the animosity between all these different trading interests, from time to time they also lent a hand to each other. Muslims ships sometimes carried small VOC cargoes to Burma and brought back Dutch return goods to Coromandel. Occasionally they even delivered one another’s personal correspondences. On their part, the Dutch and the English both freighted Indian textiles and red cotton yarn for the Nawab of Golconda’s agent in Ava. When war between Holland and Portugal broke out in the 1650s, the Dutch began seizing Portuguese ships and merchandise in the Bay of Bengal. However, by the mid-1670s, the Dutch in Pulicat lacked suitable ships for Burma and were obliged to entrust their letters and even their Burma trade account books to others, including their arch rivals, the Portuguese.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 140. Considering the tiny wages of VOC servants in the lower echelons and the relatively expensive Burmese labor force, the official (VOC) solution was getting slaves from Indian coasts to work in Burma. They bought some slaves in Bengal for 10 reals-of-eight each (52 stuivers the real = 26 guilders).

task.”⁵³ On another occasion, the Governor-General of the East Indies wrote in 1628 to the Dutch factor in Pulicat: “We ask you to issue strict orders to all places wherever slaves are purchased that only young persons - boys and girls between the ages of eight to twenty years - are to be bought. The old, the unsuitable, and the useless are to be left out. If you cannot get the right ones, do not buy any slaves for a while.”⁵⁴

During the seventeenth century, the English (EIC or the English East India Company) were trying to get a foothold in the Bay of Bengal trade. They had a factory in Syriam, with a subordinate station at Ava in Burma. Notwithstanding the comparatively meager funds they had at their disposal, they were able to carry out their trade (from India to Burma) on a small scale with the help of local Indian Muslim merchants. Most sales were affected on credit or against borrowed money.⁵⁵ English trade also suffered considerable fluctuations because of political and economic disturbances in the subcontinent: the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb’s temporary prohibition of all European trade in the region, skirmishes with the French, and local conditions in the Coromandel (droughts and crop failures, decline and bankruptcy of many established textile brokers and merchants) were responsible for keeping the profit margins for the company fairly low.

However, the early eighteenth century saw many changes, which would pave the road for future English domination of the region. First, Coromandel was displaced by Bengal as a chief supplier of textiles to Europe. Eventually this was to provide an incentive for the English to

⁵³ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁴ Om Prakash, “Coastal Burma and the Trading World of the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1680”, 99.

⁵⁵ Dijk, *Seventeenth-century Burma and the Dutch East India Company, 1634-1680*, 147. According to Dutch accounts, in their eagerness to procure as many piece goods as possible, the EIC factors were prepared to accept almost anything, even pieces that were of inferior quality. And because the English were willing to pay for imperfect goods, it became increasingly difficult for the Dutch to get the weavers to produce high quality cloth.

interfere with local politics in order to gain control of the land revenue.⁵⁶ Second, under the English East India Company, Madras seems to have emerged as a new important port center for shipping, receiving, and the redistribution of goods whereas the Dutch ports of Nagapatnam and Pulicat seem to have been on the decline.⁵⁷ Despite these changes, the early eighteenth century was still a period when the Madras port and the Bay of Bengal arena were a zone open to multiple trading communities (Asian and European) in the eighteenth century.⁵⁸

As British power and political ambitions for the subcontinent grew, British goals clashed with the expansionist ambitions of the Burmese monarchy over the control of the eastern part of India. The result was a series of Anglo-Burmese wars that led to the annexation of Burma and its being made part of the British Indian Empire in 1885.

III. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Expansionist Regimes

The rise of the English East India Company as a political power in India, and its expansionist plans for India changed the dynamics of its relationship with Burma. Anglo-Burmese relations in the previous two centuries (as mentioned earlier) had revolved around the EIC trying to establish profitable trade ties with the court of Ava. Small factories were set up at Syriam, Ava and Bhamo in the mid-seventeenth century, but it was really the Indian merchant

⁵⁶ Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740*, 198.

⁵⁷ 198.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 198. The indigenous merchants of Madras dealt with the English as brokers and middlemen while maintaining their own shipping interests. Some also operated with Portuguese or Armenian merchants. As late as the eighteenth century Chettiar merchants owned ships that left the ports on the Coromandel for distant ports in the Bay of Bengal. Ships with prominent Hindu names like Venkatesh, Venkatachalam, Tirupathy, Jailachutmi and Arunachalam were owned by persons with names having suffix 'chetty' and were identifiable as komatis, balija chetties, beri chetties, or vyapari chetties. Some ship owners could also be identified by their links with the English as dubashes, kanakpillais and poligars.

intermediary on whom the EIC depended. However, the EIC's conquest of Bengal in 1757 (Battle of Plassey) and the subsequent grant of *diwani* (revenue collection rights) of the province by the Mughal Emperor (in 1765) meant that for the first time, the company and the Burmese kingdom actually came to share a common land frontier.

The Burmese court at Ava at this time was engaged in its own process of administrative centralization and expansion.⁵⁹ By the turn of the nineteenth century, the court of Ava could claim a series of spectacular successes in the battlefield in Ayutthaya (Siam), China and Manipur (in India). The areas occupied by the Burmese through their western campaigns into India (Arakan and Manipur) led to a significant influx of ritualists, astronomers and other learned men in the Ava court. Many were classed into the *ponna* community (the word *ponna* itself may be corruption of the Sanskrit words for Brahmin). Under royal patronage, all manner of Indian culture (both religious and secular) was integrated into the courtly culture at the capital at Amarapura.⁶⁰

The ministers at the Burmese court were aware of the growth of British power in India and possible future plans for British expansion towards the northeastern part of India. The main locales of tension between Calcutta (the capital of the British India in the early nineteenth

⁵⁹ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See chapters "The Irrawaddy Valley in the early nineteenth century" and "The Court of Ava."

⁶⁰ King Ksinbyushin (1763-76) raided Manipur in December 1764, carrying away people into captivity, for he wished to increase the population of the new capital, Ava, into which he moved in April 1765. The gates of the restored city were named after conquered states. The various wards were according to precedent, allotted on racial lines: thus, the Indian traders lived in one, the Chinese in another, Christians in another, and the Siamese and Manipur captives. Such captives were often a source of suspicion, as in 1774 when the leading families of the Manipur were extirpated for alleged plotting.

The King sent an embassy to the holy city of Benaras to fetch Brahman scholars. Nine such learned men were employed in the court and they were frequently consulted on matters of state. Numerous Sanskrit works on grammar, medicine, astrology, erotic lore etc. were translated into Burmese. In 1771, an official, Manu Wannana Kyawhtin, compiled the Manusarashwemin *dhammathat* (in Pali) based on older law books. These works in Pali were compiled and translated into Burmese. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of English Conquest*, 248-249.

century) and Amarapura (the capital of pre-colonial kingdom of Ava) were to be the border states of Arakan, Manipur, Assam, Jaintia and Cachar. Already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Burmese (Konbaung) army had made repeated invasions of Manipur and Assam. But now any attempt at expansion by the Burmese state in the Brahmaputra valley after 1823 came to be seen as a direct encroachment on the buffer zone between British Bengal and Burma.⁶¹ See Figure 3 for the map of shared boundaries of English East India Company and Burmese Empire during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The dispute led to the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) and despite a few initial victories by the Burmese army, the latter was forced to retreat. A treaty was finally signed in February 1826 whereby the court of Ava agreed to cease interference in the affairs of these border principalities and cede to the British their provinces of Manipur, Arakan and the Tenasserim. They also agreed to allow for an exchange of diplomatic representatives between Amarapura and Calcutta and to pay an indemnity (in

⁶¹ Ibid., 300-304. Harvey arrived in Burma as member of the Indian Civil Services (ICS) in 1912. He describes the circumstances that led to the confrontation and accused the Burmese for infringing British territory. "Burmese frontier guards sometimes fired on British subjects proceeding in their canoes down the Naaf estuary (Chittagong district) the frontier between Arakan and English territory. After February 1823 therefore the English stationed an outpost on Shahpuri Island (in Chittagong district). Suddenly at midnight on 23rd September, 1823 a thousand Burmese soldiers swarmed on to the island in boats with flaming torches. The outpost consisted of a dozen nameless *sepoys* (Indian soldiers) under a *jemadar* (rank in the British Indian army). The Burmese burnt the outpost stockade to the ground and garrisoned the island and slaughtered the soldiers. When the papers, including a survivor's statement, were laid before the Viceroy, he repressed his first impulse and wrote personally to the king of Burma asking him to reflect on what the consequences of this sort of thing must inevitably be, and offering him the loophole of disavowal. The king did not reply. The Shahpuri Island had been under the Collector of Chittagong (British control) for generations and had been included in the revenue settlements." According to Harvey, the administrative heads in the Government of India still hesitated to believe that the king meant war. "As late as 24th November 1823, the Adjutant General, discussing troop movements, wrote that it would be necessary to strengthen the frontier guards, but that there was no actual need to anticipate a campaign."

"For twenty-nine years the Burmese had habitually crossed the frontier at will, occasionally murdering and enslaving British subjects, destroying lakhs' worth of property, holding the company's elephant hunters to ransom, claiming the surrender of crowds of panic stricken refugees, and seeking to drive their slave-gangs home through British territory. Letter after letter from the Viceroy remained deliberately unanswered, and his envoys had been subjected to vulgarities of a type associated with the scullery." Harvey blames the arrogance of the king for bringing the two polities on the brink of war. "War was expensive but the loot of Calcutta would compensate him for that; the muskets and cannon captured from the English would come in very useful for his projected conquest of Siam; and as for the wastage in manpower, this would be made good by the myriads of prisoners his great generals would bring home. No doubt the English were quite good soldiers in their way, but they had won their reputation at the expense of black Hindus: they would find things very different when they met real Burmans."

installments) of ten million rupees or one million pounds sterling.⁶²

The period between the First and the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852) saw an increase in British commercial and administrative efforts in the newly conquered territories. The Burmese court on the other hand was involved in internal political intrigues, undermining any real chance of regaining lost territories. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British were in a confident position in India and under the leadership of Lord Dalhousie the British Indian army was busy annexing and taking over provinces and deposing the native rulers. In December 1851, the governor of Rangoon fined the captains and crews of two British ships a thousand rupees for a reported customs violation. Lord Dalhousie used this as a pretext to immediately dispatch two vessels of the Royal Navy with the ultimatum that the Burmese government should withdraw the fine and that the governor be immediately removed. The ruling elite of Burma, afraid that the consequences of refusal would be a new war, accepted the terms. Nevertheless, the British naval officer in command at Rangoon, Commodore Lambert, went ahead and ordered the blockading of the coastline. Though Dalhousie reprimanded Lambert for his actions, Calcutta decided hostilities were inevitable and sent a new ultimatum, demanding one million rupees to cover the

⁶² D.G.E. Hall, *Burma* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1950), 105. The peace talks, which comprised the cession of Arakan, Tenasserim, Assam and Manipur and the payment of an indemnity in rupees equal to one million pounds sterling, so staggered the Burmese that the discussion was broken off. Not until the British army was at Yandabo (within a few days' march of the capital) did the Burmese finally give way. On 24th February 1826 the Treaty of Yandabo was ratified and the British army stopped its advance. Through the cession of Arakan and Tenasserim, Burma lost most of her sea frontage through retaining the ports of Rangoon, Martaban and Bassein. The safety of the northeast frontier of British India was assured by the cession of Assam and the undertaking by the court of Ava to abstain from interference in Manipur, Cachar and Jaintia. Among additional stipulations, it was laid down that an indemnity of a crore (million) rupees was to be paid in installments. A British resident was to be posted at Ava and a Burmese ambassador at Calcutta, while a separate treaty of commerce was to be negotiated.

The entire expedition had proved to be a huge drain on the finances of EIC. The war which had it been properly organized, should have lasted only a matter of months, had gone on for nearly two years and cost thirteen million sterling. The total forces employed by the British went up to 40,000 men, of whom no less than 15,000 lost their lives, though only four percent were battle deaths. But the British intervention in Burma was to have certain irreversible consequences. The British possession of the two large provinces was the beginning of a larger debate within the administration: whether these were to be ultimately relinquished or should they go on until they occupied the whole country. For some years, the main issue was whether they were even worth keeping.

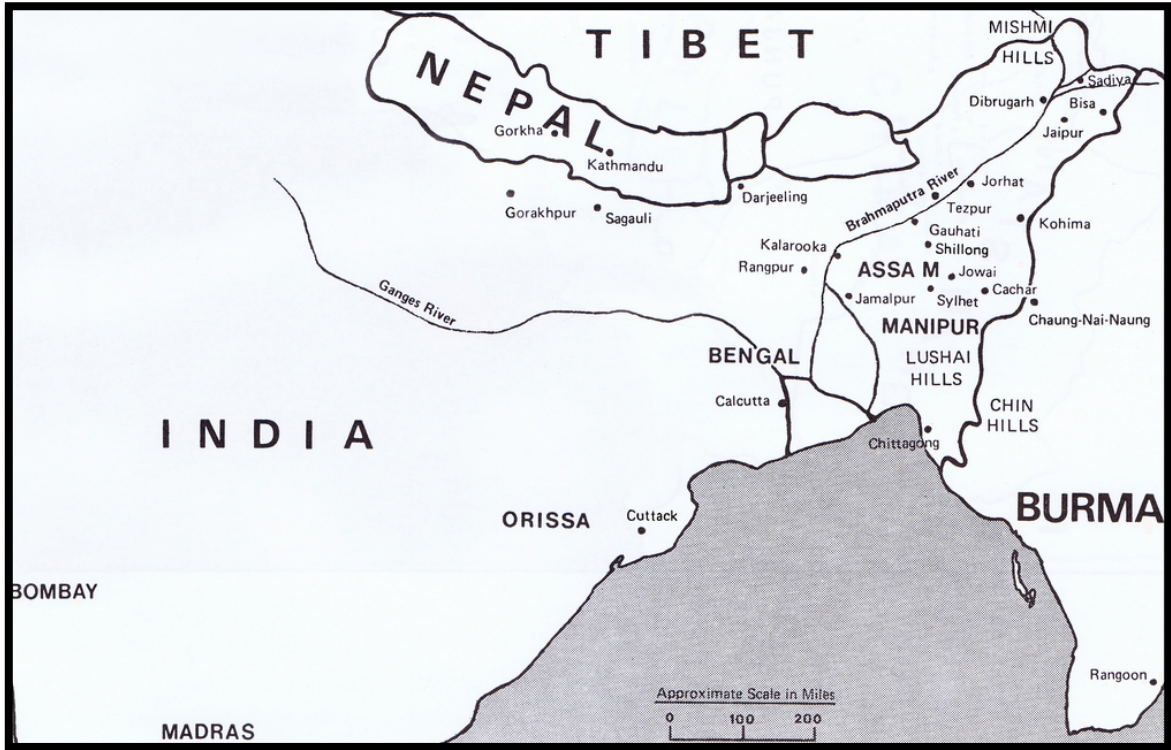
costs of having to prepare for war. Without waiting for a reply, joint British naval and ground forces quickly seized the coastal towns of Rangoon, Bassein and Martaban.⁶³

Over the next quarter century, an informal British empire was established in Burma with its center in the lower Burma delta (away from the traditional center of the Burmese kingdom in northern Burma). King Mindon (of the Konbaung dynasty) desperately tried to maintain a sovereign foreign policy, mostly by cultivation of good relations with Britain on the other hand, and the establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations with rival powers on the other. By courting the friendship of Britain's European competitors, France in particular, it was hoped that the king would be able to restrict British expansion in future. Under Mindon's son and successor, Thibaw, this tightrope act proved impossible, leading to the annexation of Burma in 1885. Apart from the possible French threat to British interest in the region (because of its proximity to Indo-China), between 1853-78 British commercial interests had made the conquest of Burma by the British forces almost inevitable.

⁶³ Thant Myint, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 23. Burmese forces were commanded by the Myoza of Tabayin, one of the sons of the great Burmese military general Thado Maha Bandula. But thirty years of advances in military technology and planning on the British side, and little innovation on the Burmese side, meant that the king's forces could offer only limited defense. In April 1852, the Myoza of of Tabayin himself was killed in the defense of Rangoon, and Pegu was taken in November despite spirited resistance. In December, Dalhousie declared the newly acquired territory as a new province of British Burma. Two months later, a palace coup overthrew the ruling group. The King's half-brother Mindon, leading a peace party, became the new king and Burmese forces were withdrawn from the battlefield.

Figure 3⁶⁴

Sketch of Boundaries between East India Company's Domains and Burmese Empire during Early Nineteenth Century



⁶⁴ <http://www.6thgurkhas.org/website/regiment-history/1817-1825>. The Gurkha regiment (of the English East India Company) was involved in one of its earliest battles since its inception against the Burmese Empire. The First Anglo-Burmese War broke out in 1823 over territorial disputes between the English East India Company and the Burmese army in Manipur and Chittagong. The Regiment, which was employed on the North East Frontier with Burma, gained its first experience of the Assam area during 1823-26, where it was to serve on many other future occasions.

Conquest of the Lower Burma Delta and the New Indian Presence

Under the Konbaung dynasty (pre-colonial Burma), the lower Burma delta was a frontier area on the southern periphery of a slowly expanding traditional society in the Burman heartland (the dry zone). As described in the previous sections, the Burmese ports were part of a larger international network of trade and commerce. However, the potential for opening and developing new lands for agricultural development on the delta frontier was limited. In a traditionally structured Konbaung context there was little incentive for subsistence agriculturalists to risk the hazards involved in making such investment. Following the British conquest and pacification of the region, the political and economic institutions of lower Burma were transformed as the area was rapidly drawn into a capitalist, commercially oriented global economy. British administrators, realizing the potential of the region for the growth of rice as a cash crop for export (particularly with the growing demand from Europe), abrogated the ban on the export of rice from the region and made changes in the system of land revenue settlements in order to attract more cultivators.⁶⁵

The process of expansion led to demographic shift – both migration of indigenous Burmese from northern part of Burma to the Delta but also outside Indian labor and capitalists

⁶⁵ Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 28-29. British diplomats and merchants who visited Burma in the Konbaung period clearly recognized the great economic potential of the delta region. They noted the fertility of the soil and pointed out that the flat and open nature of the terrain was well suited to the cultivation of a wide range of market crops, including rice, cotton, tobacco, indigo, sugar and coffee. Some observers felt that lower Burma would provide both an excellent source of foodstuffs and raw materials, and a fine market for British manufactured goods. Although the British were well aware of lower Burma's potential, they were seldom able to take advantage of the possibilities for commercial expansion, which the area offered prior to its conquest in 1852. Burmese rulers imposed many duties and restrictions on foreign merchants who traded at Rangoon. The Konbaung monarchs also banned the export of rice, bullion, and a number of other commodities, which European merchants sought to purchase in the Burman empire. British hopes of developing a market in Burma for their manufactured goods were also frustrated. As early as 1795, the Governor General of India complained that despite a demand in the Konbaung dominions for products from England and India, the "machinations" of Burman officials had impeded the importation of these goods.

who came to Burma to till the lands.⁶⁶ In the year prior to the British conquest of the Burma delta the price of one hundred baskets of paddy on the Rangoon market was Rs. 15, by the mid-1860s it had reached Rs. 50. In 1867-68 exports of rice from lower Burma delta totaled nearly 235,000 tons. In the 1870s the delta's position as an exporter of rice was firmly established, and by 1872-73 over half a million tons of rice was shipped annually from the ports of Burma.⁶⁷

Following the British conquest of the Burma delta, the Indian presence in the region changed. With the gradual establishment of the British colonial infrastructure in the mid-nineteenth century, there was influx of Chettiar capital to finance cultivation (given indirectly to the indigenous Burmese moneylender). But apart from capital, commercial agriculture on a large scale required more and more peasants (particularly hired laborers) to till the fields and work in the rice mills and other sectors of the fast developing economy. Initial attempts to employ indigenous Burmese and then Chinese laborers had met with limited success and therefore, the attention of the British administrators turned to the peasant-cultivators from the Madras and

⁶⁶ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier*, 19-28. In the eighteenth century, the Mon population of lower Burma (one of the ethnic groups of Burma) was diminished by wars, emigration, and assimilation by the northern Burmese kingdom. Repeated rebellions were crushed followed by Burman reprisals and Mon emigration to Siam. The Burmese rulers followed a deliberate policy of suppression of the Mon language, which could have been the reason for indigenous Mon population being counted as Burmese (as they were forced to adapt to Burmese language and customs) during the census surveys. Karens made up the remainder of lower Burma's nonurban population in Konbaung times. This nonurban, localized population in lower Burma delta in the Konbaung period was mostly employed as subsistence cultivators, fishermen and salt manufacturers. Even the population in some of the relatively large urban settlements like Bassein and Henzada was never more than a few thousands.

Also, Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in the Year 1795 by Lieut.-Colonel Michael Symes. To Which Is Now Added, a Narrative of the Late Military and Political Operations in the Birme Empire. With Some Account of the Present Condition of the Country, Its Manners, Customs, and Inhabitants.* (Edinburgh: Printed for Constable and co, 1827). Vol. 2: 353. Towns like Bassein and Rangoon had foreign merchant populations settled in them. Michael Symes describes the merchant community of Rangoon at the end of the eighteenth century as a mixture of Muslims (both Persian and Indians), Parsis, Armenians, and a few Christians (Portuguese, English and French). By the 1850s the foreign population of lower Burma living in towns was almost wholly Indian and Chinese and was located mainly in Rangoon and Bassein.

⁶⁷ Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 73.

Bengal presidency in India.⁶⁸ Recurrent famines during the 1870s helped to attract laborers from India to Burma. With subsidies on steamship tickets to Burma and the relatively higher wage rates, Indian seasonal laborer became a part of the new economic landscape of lower Burma.⁶⁹

Colonial official B.R. Pearn described the reason for the increased Indian presence in Burma:

In the early days of the rice milling industry almost all the paddy was milled in the big European-owned mills at the ports, where Indian labor was found to suit conditions of employment admirably. Coming from the poorest districts of India, the Indian coolies were willing to work long hours at arduous, monotonous work for very little pay. They were docile, submissive and could be controlled quite easily. The bigger mills housed them in insanitary overcrowded barracks while other Indians lived in cheap lodging-

⁶⁸ Observers repeatedly cited the “laziness” and “inaptitude” of the native worker as the reason for importing the more sturdy, docile and relatively cheap foreign laborer. Fielding H. Hall, *A People at School* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), 22-31. In his description of Burma and its people, Fielding Hall describes the essential difference between the Indian and the Burmese race and the latter’s incapability for hard work. “Coming over from India, there were many striking differences to be noted between the Burmese and the people who live in the great peninsula. In India, I think the most pervading impression that one receives is of its immense sadness. The people seem always to be fighting against starvation, which is very near. The thin cattle, the starved dogs, the skinny fowls, the whole hard landscape is imbued with the same tragedy of life...There is an oppression, a weight, as if life were a weariness and a disillusion terribly spent in trying to hold at arm’s length disease and want and death, never escaping from them, often failing to hold them at bay...In Burma all is different. The people all seem young. They are never old. Life comes to them always as a pleasant thing. The people seem all happy, all well to do, as if the wants of life were easily fulfilled. Life is a broader, greater thing than any money can cover...We see the Burman at his festival and say: the lazy brute! Why is he not working? We offer a man double pay to do this or that, and he refuses because his soul abhors it. Then we condemn him; we prophesy for him dire prophecies; we rail at him because he will be independent yet for all our money, because he will not turn himself into a machine, because he will retain his liberty.”

Also see, Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass Company Ltd., 1977) for a similar idea

⁶⁹ In 1877-78, before the Asiatic line of steamers competed with the British India Steam Navigation Company, the price of a ticket from Calcutta to Rangoon was approximately Rs. 18 and from Madras it was Rs. 25. In 1881-82, when an agreement was reached between the two companies, the price went down to Rs. 7-8 (from Calcutta) and Rs. 15-0 (from Madras). In 1882-83, with the payment of government subsidy the price further went down to Rs.5-0 (from Calcutta) and Rs. 10 (from Madras). Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940*, 120.

In 1887, of the major districts of origin in the Madras Presidency, agricultural laborers earned the highest wages in Vizagapatam. Their earnings were Rs. 6 per month, or Rs. 72 per year. In Rangoon in the same year the average wage for industrial workers was Rs. 22.5 per month, or Rs. 270 per year. An agricultural laborer in lower Burma received about Rs. 15 per month in 1887, or Rs. 180 per year. Thus, the annual increment to an industrial laborer’s income (minus Rs. 30 for transport) was Rs. 168, while for the agricultural laborer it was Rs. 78. As Michael Adas points out, the higher cost of living in Rangoon reduced somewhat the real amount of additional wages received. However, if one takes into consideration the fact that most laborers remained in Burma from three to five years, the increment for both industrial and agricultural labors would have been relatively greater. Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 92.

houses with twenty-five to thirty fellow coolies to a room. Under such conditions of work and with such low remuneration rates, no Burmese labor was forthcoming.⁷⁰

The city and the province also drew scores of bankers, merchants and entrepreneurs, predominantly British and Indian, but also Jewish, Armenian, Chinese, French and German, Anglo-Burmans, Eurasians from India as well as local Eurasians of Portuguese and French descent. Most of the Eurasians worked in the railways, telegraph and postal department.⁷¹ But a sizeable proportion of the population constituted the steady stream of seasonal labors that came to Burma to work in the paddy fields, rice mills, timber mills, factories and the docks. The 1881 census showed that of the 139,408 residents in Rangoon, 66,838 were Burmese, 66,077 Indian (around 44 percent), 3,752 Chinese, 2,570 European and 171 Karen. In 1921, Indian residents of Rangoon had increased to fifty five percent and less than half of the total population had been born in the city.⁷² Many of the Indians were incorporated into the service class in the city as *durwans* (guards), *dhobies* (or laundry washers), tailors, barbers, and household servants to European and Indian families, sweepers and sanitation workers. The harvest season in February, March and April brought in workers from the Madras, Ganjam and Calcutta ports, and many stayed on during the agricultural off-season to work as casual laborers in ports and other miscellaneous unskilled jobs. Apart from unskilled laborers, a literate and skilled workforce was required to work as clerks in companies, private offices and in government. The colonial

⁷⁰ B. R. Pearn, *The Indian in Burma* (Ledbury: Le Play House, 1946), 131.

⁷¹ Sarah Heminway Maxim, "The Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon." Ph. D. Dissertation, Cornell University (1992), 61.

⁷² N. R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 23.

economy in Rangoon and the lower Burma delta thus attracted a diverse array of people.⁷³

By the late nineteenth century, the colonial economic and political stakes in Burma were too high to let it remain a part of an informal empire. The Bombay Burma Trading Corporation and other big merchant houses with huge investments in Burma demanded more concessions that the Burmese court (given its own declining political and economic standing) was no longer able to provide. The Burmese court under King Mindon during this time was increasingly facing a financial and administrative crisis, to the extent that the government was forced to borrow large amounts of cash from private individuals.⁷⁴ This was simultaneous with the large-scale changes taking place in the Burmese economy. New taxes were imposed in the countryside in Upper Burma (particularly the *Thathameda* tax), which placed pressure on the rural economy to produce increasing amounts of cash. The requirements of cash were huge because by the 1870s, if not earlier, Upper Burma was trading at a large deficit with lower Burma, a deficit paid for in silver.

Thus, global economic forces had created a wave of changes that were incompatible with the older Burmese political structure. More and more people had become producers for world markets and attendant dependence on international prices and structural changes in the economy fuelled emigration, weakened traditional bonds, and threw up new groups of traders and moneylenders cashing in on upper Burma's insertion into the world economy. The early 1880s, with their poor rice harvests and increasing trade deficit were a difficult time for ordinary people, including those who had become heavily indebted and were now perhaps paying higher interest

⁷³ J. J. Bennison (Government of India), *Report into the Enquiry into the Standard and Cost of Living of the Working Classes in Rangoon* (Rangoon Statistics Bureau, 1928), 3-12.

⁷⁴ In early 1880s a certain Moola Ismail lent the government 160,000 rupees. Thant Myint, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 167.

rates. A contemporary Burmese source, ascribed the collapse of state authorities to a number of factors: inability of local officials to provide basic security of person, unfair taxation practices where poor people were forced to pay the brunt of higher taxes, the growing position of self-serving traders, neglect of irrigation works, moneylenders combining with local officers to demand exorbitant interest rates from poor classes and finally the loss of position by hereditary leaders.⁷⁵

Simultaneous to the internal collapse of the Burmese state, the ruling class was faced with political and diplomatic problems. The growing French interest in Thibaw's kingdom and the re-emergence of Anglo-French rivalry in the Southeast Asian region created an increasingly tense situation with the British authorities in India. French power on the mainland had developed rapidly as a result of a victorious war against Cambodia in 1862 and French protectorates in Tonkin, Annam and Laos (1893). Emissaries from Burmese court were sent to conclude treaties with the French government on commercial matters including establishment of the Bank of Burma and the possibility of laying down railways connecting Hanoi to Mandalay. These developments alarmed the official circles of Rangoon and Calcutta. For the British administrators in India, annexation had become inevitable.⁷⁶

The actual pretext for declaration of war in October 1885 was a dispute between the Burmese government and the Bombay Burma Trading Company over illegal logging. The company had allegedly been logging in areas beyond their agreed license and the provincial governor had demanded compensation. The company refused and appealed to Mandalay (the capital of the Burmese kingdom). The matter was taken to the king's privy council but even

⁷⁵ Ibid., 184-85.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 185.

during the discussions, Calcutta intervened and issued an ultimatum. The British Indian government demanded not only that the provincial ruling be overturned but that Mandalay hand over all future foreign relations to their control.⁷⁷

In early November 1885, a Burma Field Force of about 10,000 troops was organized into three infantry brigades and placed under the command of Major-General Sir Harry Prendergast. After a very brief battle, Myingyan fell on November 25, Ava and Sagaing on November 26 and 27, and Mandalay (the capital of Burmese kingdom) itself on November 28th, 1885. Thibaw and his two principal queens, accompanied by an official escort, were taken immediately to Rangoon and then to Madras. Suddenly the Konbaung dynasty, as rulers of Burma had ceased to exist. The determination of the future political status of Burma was left in large measure to the decision of the Indian viceroy, who visited Burma in person early in 1886. Instead of the installation of a rival prince under Calcutta's protection, Lord Dufferin (governor-general of British India) gave orders for direct rule as a puppet king of the Burmese type would prove very expensive and troublesome without any real advantages.⁷⁸ On 1st March 1886, the entire country (except the Shan states) was brought under direct British administration as part of British Indian Empire.

Conclusion

In this chapter, through a broad sketch or outline of prior multi-faced connections

⁷⁷ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 116-121.

The basic problem as stated by a one-time British governor of Burma was: "the ultimate cause of intervention was the apprehension lest France or some other European power should establish a preponderant influence in upper Burma and create a situation which would render our position in lower Burma intolerable." Herbert Thirkell White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* (London: E. Arnold, 1913), 102-103.

⁷⁸ Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 186-198.

between the subcontinent and different parts of the Bay of Bengal, my aim was to provide a baseline or a starting point from where it would be possible for us to locate the kind of changes that became apparent with the introduction of colonial political structure and economy in this region. One of the first major changes was the introduction of the steamship in the Indian Ocean arena. The change in technology from the wind sail to the steam power radically reduced the time to transport people and commodities. Travellers and merchants freed from the vagaries of the weather were no longer dependent on monsoons and winds to reach their destinations. Shorter journeys also contributed to the on-going globalization process, bringing products from far-off lands to the sub-continent and to Southeast Asia. Burma was very much part of this process of international exchange during the earlier period, which quickened considerably in the course of the nineteenth century as the delta region opened up for commercial agriculture and export of raw materials. The number of Indians who traveled to work in the rice fields or rice mills or in various administrative niches in Burma increased manifold. Describing his first experiences of the city Rangoon, Alister McCrae was struck by how many Indians resided in the city and the impact this had on its way of living and the linguistic landscape. From the servant to the clerical class – everyone was Indian.

I had a strange feeling in first impressions of Rangoon, a feeling that I had only one foot in Burma, the other in India. Lower Burma had been flooded with Indian clerks, servants, laborers and others after the 1852 annexation, and the legacy in 1933 was that half of Rangoon's population of 400,000 was Indian. There was no mistaking in Rangoon that Burma was part of the Indian Empire and that much of life was influenced by the customs in India.

Before going to the office the morning after my arrival there appeared at the chummary (employee quarters) my *munshi* (secretary) to give me my first lesson in Hindustani. An Indian gentleman, courteous and patient, he was to come every morning for the next three months to prepare me to appear for the government examination in colloquial Hindustani in October; this, he assured me, would be possible if I followed his instructions to the letter. Hindustani was the *lingua franca* of Rangoon, imported with the influx of Indians, and attention had to be given to it first so that I could communicate

with the *durwans* (doorkeepers) with whom I was to work in the cash department, and with the Chittagonian crews in the fleet.⁷⁹

- Alister McCrae, *Scots in Burma*.

Change had also taken place in the manner in which Europeans in Burma and the indigenous people perceived Indians in their midst: it came to be defined purely by their work or place in the colonial economy. In the next chapter, I explore the arrival of the steamship as the mode of transport in the Bay of Bengal, the various experiences of travel and how this history shaped the category of the migrant. Particularly, I focus on the experiences of the middle-class Indian passenger who traveled to Burma and his reactions on being labeled as the coolie laborer from India.

⁷⁹ Alister McCrae, *Scots in Burma: Golden Times in a Golden Land* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1990), 70.

CHAPTER TWO

Narratives of Travel: The Indian Passenger on the Steamship to Burma

Introduction

Having read your advertisement regarding the vaccination, I put my complaints before your committee.

Last year on 14th September 1916, I started from Calcutta for Rangoon with my wife, child and cousin. When the steamer arrived and was little far from the shore, all the third class passengers were compelled to get down with their luggage in the launch, where the policemen were ordering the passengers to go beneath the launch (a very dark and unventilated place) except for men who paid some money. I myself paid eight annas.

When the launch arrived at shore all the male passengers were compelled to go in one godown [storage place for goods and cargo] while the females in the other. After going there the customs officer examined our luggage so hastily that they did not allow us to pack one and open the other box. Following the customs examination we were ordered to go into the next room for vaccination, leaving our luggage. We also had to pay some money to the police to look after our luggage.

In the vaccination hall, we were ordered to stand in a line just like coolies and unclothe. My dear sir, the government has issued this rule only for unvaccinated coolies and not for high-class people and traders like myself. I cannot understand whether the officers are misusing their powers or they cannot recognize people of high and low classes with their own eyes.

I strictly and heartily hate this system and wish your committee would abolish it and satisfy the public.¹

- Complaint made by Managi B. Mehta, Jeweller,
to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (October 1917).

Managi B. Mehta was one of the many middle-class passengers who submitted their

¹ Managi B. Mehta, Jeweller, No. 14, Mogul Street, to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee, Rangoon, dated the 2nd October 1917 in Medical Department Government of Burma, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination, Under the Provisions of Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909, of Laborers Arriving in Rangoon by Sea* (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1918), 61. For the sake of brevity and readability, I have edited the text. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(a).

complaints to a government enquiry against the manner in which they (and their families) were treated at the Rangoon port for the purposes of medical examination and vaccination. When he was summoned before the vaccination committee to answer questions on his recorded statement, he reiterated his grievances on the discomfort, delay and the fact that he had to pay money to the police. He further added: "...vaccination as I believe, is intended for coolies and as we belong to the trading class and are respectable people they should make inquiries first before submitting us to all this inconvenience and hardship."² Thus, for the middle-class Indian passenger on the steamship to Burma, the most humiliating part of being subjected to the quarantine rule (disrobing and being examined in public) was the indignity of standing in the same line as the laboring coolie poor and being treated on par with him.

Expanding on this narrative, this chapter focuses on three sets of questions: first, how did the Indian traveller see himself on the voyage on the steamship to Burma and what role did his class (and caste) play in this process of self-description? In his account of Indians in Rangoon, Furnivall remarks: "one has but to watch the arrival of a few boats to realize that Indians...constitute the great majority of passengers."³ By posing this problem, I question the presumed homogenous category of the Indian immigrant constructed in the colonial archives and in the descriptions of European voyagers and explorers traveling through Burma and Asia. Rather, as I argue in this dissertation that the category of the immigrant is divided along lines of caste and class. Second, I focus on the importance of the official statistical count, inspections and discussion on the disease, health and hygiene of the Indian passengers and the latter's presumed responsibility for causing epidemics and spreading communicable disease to Rangoon and

² Ibid., 61.

³ J.S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma* (Rangoon: Peoples' Literature Committee & House, 1957), 88.

Burma. This information was thereafter used in legislative council debates of Burma in order to police the migrant.

Finally, I seek to place this experience of travel beyond the confines of the steamship from the port of departure (in India) to the migrant's arrival in the city of Rangoon. Why did the Indian migrant choose to go to Burma in the first place? What were his expectations in Burma and how and to what extent did the reality (once he arrived there) match his expectations? In the imagination of Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938) travel to Rangoon for work, despite its pecuniary benefits, assumed the metaphor of "exile" for the Bengali middle class clerk.⁴ It was a journey fraught with difficulties: loss of caste, physical hardships and being subjected to humiliating quarantine rules and forcible inoculation. But beyond the physical journey itself aboard the ship, life in Rangoon itself was full of challenges: coping with unfamiliar surroundings, homesickness and a hostile environment. At the same time, travel could also be a process of self-discovery. For the Bengali novelist, travel to Rangoon is an eye opener for his middle-class (high caste) protagonist. For the first time, he encounters blatant racism at the hands of British authorities in public spaces (as a member of a colonized race). No one comes to his aid and he has no hope of redress. He is forced to acknowledge his own failure to deal with disease (smallpox). And his middle-class sensibilities are shocked when he encounters his poor fellow countrymen living in the coolie quarters in Rangoon in abject poverty, filth and promiscuity. Thus, travel to Burma though full of hardship and therefore a land of "exile" for the middle-class novelist, was still a space (in his utopian vision) where self-discovery and self-

⁴ A prolific writer, Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938) has been acclaimed as one of the most important literary figures in early twentieth century Bengal. Amongst his works, the novels *Srikanta* and *Pather Dabi* have been reckoned as semi-autobiographical and based in Rangoon, Burma. Sukumar Sen (Edited) *Compilation of Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya's Works at his Centenary Birthday* (Kolkata: Ananda Publications, 1986). *Srikanta* was written in four parts in 1917, 1918, 1927 and 1933 (Vol. I) *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way) was published in April-May 1926 (Vol. II).

transformation of the middle class Indian migrant was possible.

By exploring these questions, I reiterate the main argument of this dissertation, which is to understand the very specific processes through which the archival and linguistic category of the Indian immigrant was created during the colonial period. The very act of boarding the ship brought the Indian traveler under the colonial gaze and record keeping and created certain very specific stereotypes of Indians. In this case, the Indian passenger came to be identified in medical terms: by his unhygienic habits and the germs of the (supposed) diseases he was carrying that would create health hazard in Rangoon, Burma. Further, I show how this statistical information was used in Legislative Council debates on restrictions on immigration to Burma. Finally, I examine how the middle-class Indian passenger himself saw these medical examination procedures, and his objections to these medical examinations chiefly, on account of being categorized with lower class Indians.

The chapter is divided into three sections: In the first section, I will layout briefly, the introduction of steamship technology to the Indian Ocean and the massive transformation it brought in the number of people who could travel to Burma for work. The technology of the railways and the steamship in the Indian Ocean arena had on one hand made possible immense imperial expansion. At the same time, it exponentially increased the numbers of lower and middle class Indians who now traveled long distances from the hinterlands to the ports and beyond for work and pilgrimage. In the second section, I present a series of depositions made by middle class travellers recording their complaints made against the undignified treatment they were subjected to at the ports (during departure and arrival) and on the ship. I use these quarantine reports along with the semi-autobiographical novel *Srikanta* by a middle-class Bengali novelist in order to understand the perspective of Indian passengers (as different from

the official/colonial version) and their perception of their own poorer countrymen. The third section will be on the middle-class experience in the city Rangoon. In the novel *Pather Dabi* by Chattopadhyaya, the protagonist Apurba travels to Burma after graduation to work as a clerk in one of the British firms in Rangoon. While the voice of the middle-class migrant cannot be representative of the experiences of every single person who went to Burma, it still provides an important and interesting insight into what travel and life meant for the migrant in a foreign land.

I. Steamship Companies as Agents of Empire

After the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, which added the lower Burma to East India Company's possessions, the government of Bengal presidency was reviewing arrangements for communications with the newly acquired territory. In September 1856, a modest beginning was made when the newly formed Calcutta and Burmah Steam Navigation Company (a Scottish firm later renamed as the British India Steam Navigation Company) began a monthly single steamship line between Calcutta and Burmese rice ports to deliver official and private mail.⁵ During its early years, the company was fraught with financial and technological difficulties.⁶ As British imperial interests in opening up this unexplored frontier area became

⁵ J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and His Business Network, 1823-93* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003), 37.

⁶ See chapter two: "The British India Steam Navigation Company, 1856-70" in *Ibid.*, 35-68. By the middle of the 1850s a transition from sail to steam in maritime transport and communications was underway around the coasts of Europe and North America and on the shorter North Atlantic crossings. However, the steamship built of wood or iron and driven by paddle or screw propeller was still a rare sight in the Indian Ocean and its adjoining seas. They were used in small numbers by the Bengal Marine and the Indian Navy (Bombay Marine) for coastal communications and by the Peninsular & Orient Steam Navigation Company for the mail service.

Change however was gradually on the offing. Reductions in costs of ship construction, the introduction of the surface condenser, and the invention of the compound engine by marine engineers all held out the prospect of improvements in the commercial viability of the steam shipping, even in the less favorable conditions of the Indian Ocean. By 1854, the Bombay Steam Navigation Company, owned by Parsi and European merchants in the city, had

more pronounced, regular and reliable transportation for the passage of cargo and persons became economically viable. Because there were no railway connections between Burma and Bengal, the passenger traffic went entirely by sea and among those who traveled, the third class on the steamship, from the very beginning, had become synonymous with Indian or native passengers.

In the 1860s, lines from Calcutta to the ports of Chittagong, Akyab, Rangoon and Moulmein occupied a sizeable proportion of BI's tonnage. The BISN Co. also entered into strategic business partnerships in Rangoon and Indian ports (for example with Bullock Brothers, a leading rice milling and export firm in Rangoon and the Binny's, a cotton export firm in Madras) and at times installed their own agents at smaller ports. In 1869, with the opening of the Suez Canal, the overseas export of rice increased manifold (the main commodity of export from Burma during this time) leading to a significant rise in demand for labor in the Delta region to work in the rice mills. By 1870, with the increased frequency of contract services, there were over 100 sailings a year between Calcutta, Akyab and Rangoon. However, it was not till the 1880s when the monopoly on conveying Indians to and from Burma (by the British India Steam

opened up a regular service to Karachi. In Calcutta around the same time the Apcars, a family firm of Armenian origin, introduced two steamers into the small fleet of opium clippers with which they conducted the shipping of opium to Southeast Asia and to China. Thus, when William Mackinnon and Jamie Hall (owners of shipping business based in Glasgow and Liverpool) made their entry into steam shipping in September 1856, they were catching a tide in favor of the development of steamship lines in Indian waters.

The origins of the British India Steam Navigation Company, which would eventually become one of the world's largest shipping concerns, lay in this little enterprise - a single steamship line between Calcutta and the Burmese rice ports, worked by a couple of inefficient second-hand steamers owned by a company with an initial capital of only 20,000 pounds. The company was a pioneering venture, fraught with difficulties and problems, including severe conflicts within the company's board. Finally, a well-timed financial boom (as the company got the contracts for the Bombay-Karachi and Bombay-Persian Gulf transport in 1862) gave the impetus for change in the name of the company from the Calcutta and Burma S.N. Co to the British India Steam Navigation Company. But it was also due to change in government policy - a new vision of the use of steampower that was surfacing in government circles of India. Perceptions of a modern, steam-driven and government-supported mercantile marine in Indian waters, able to do the bidding of the government in times of civil or military emergency, were attractive to a ruling elite operating at some considerable distance from the metropolitan sources of new technology. Steamship lines and railways were not only tools of economic development, extending and deepening markets and bringing profits to those who funded and managed them, but also tools for the attainment of broader political and administrative objectives and governments were willing to pay well for access to these new tools of Empire.

Navigation Company or BISN) was broken by the Asiatic Steam Navigation Company that travel to Burma became commonplace. The resulting competition between the two companies led to a reduction of fares by about 50 percent. The following table shows the approximate fare that the steamship companies charged from its passengers during 1870s and 1880s and the resultant increase in the number of people traveling on board. During the beginning of harvest season of 1880-81 record number of 40,000 coolies (double the year before) boarded the steamer and landed in Pegu.⁷

⁷ Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 117-121.

Table 1⁸**The Effect of Changing Fare Prices of Steamship on the Number of Immigrants**

Year	Rates Paid by Deck Passengers from						Number of Immigrants by Sea
	Calcutta		Ganjam Ports		Madras Ports		
	Rs.	As.	Rs.	As	Rs.	As	
1877-78, before the Asiatic line of Steamers competed with the B.I.S.N. line	18.	0	18.	0	25.	0	16,000
1881-82, when an agreement was reached between the two companies	7.	8	12.	0	15.	0	39,500
In 1882-83, during payment of government subsidy	5.	0	8.	0	10.	0	72,300
1883-84, during payment of government subsidy	5.	0	8.	0	10.	0	83,000
1884-85, after cessation of subsidy	10.	0	10.	0	17.	0	56,000

⁸ Ibid., 121. Before the subsidies, the government launched immigration schemes to encourage migrants from India. In 1874, the “Bengal Immigration Scheme” was launched when famine raged in that presidency. The local government of Burma set aside a sum of four to five lakhs to meet various expenses incurred in implementing the scheme and prospective immigrants were promised work before land would eventually be distributed among them for cultivation. In 1876 when the scheme was eventually abandoned, it was discovered that of the total number of recruits, only a small proportion came from the famine stricken districts of Patna, Monghyr and Sarun. The majority were town dwellers recruited in an around Calcutta by licensed recruiters who wanted to earn their four-rupees-per-recruit pay without too much trouble. Most of them were eventually employed by the Public Works Department and some worked in the towns as rice mill coolies, domestic servants or casual laborers. Only a handful attempted to settle in Burma by acquiring land for cultivation.

The failure of the Bengal scheme led to the decision to switch the field of recruitment to Madras, from where most of the unassisted immigrants came. In January 1876, a Labor Law was passed to regulate the methods of recruitment, transport, and employment and to safeguard the welfare of immigrants. Under this Act an emigration agent and a medical inspector of Emigrants were appointed at the port of Coconada [Kakinada] in Madras Presidency. The scheme too ended in failure, as many employers preferred to make arrangements with private contractors to import coolies would be much easier to manage.

The authorities took note of the effectiveness of reduced fares in attracting immigrants and decided to promote immigration by bearing part of the cost of every immigrant's passage. In 1882, the government offered to contribute Rs. 1-8-0 (one rupee and 8 *annas*) for every deck passenger from Calcutta and Rs. 2-8-0 for those from the Madras coast on the condition that the two steamship companies in their turn would make some reduction in fares. The number of immigrants rose from 39,500 in 1881-82 to 72,300 in 1882-83 and to 83,000 in 1883-84. With this large and rapid increase in number the government decided to withdraw a subsidy in 1884. Although there was a temporary decline to about 50,000, by 1888 the number had arisen again to 87,000 and steadily increased to well over 400,000 annually over the following years.⁹

Besides the labor recruited by the contractor or his agent in India, the BISN Co, which was interested in the passenger traffic between India and Burma (from the Coromandel coast), employed a large number of agents in districts (from which the migrants came in large numbers) to canvass passengers. For the sake of the commission they got for each customer booked through them, the agents stationed at Gopalpur, Buruva, Kalingapatnam, Bhimlipatnam, Vizagapatnam and Cocanada ports, sent large number of sub-agents into the interior to influence as many people as possible to go over to Burma.¹⁰ Many passengers could not afford to pay for their passage to Burma. A labor contractor called a *maistry* (the recruiter) would pay the fares for them till the worker could repay the debt.¹¹ Thumb impressions were obtained on either printed

⁹ Ibid., 121-122.

¹⁰ A Narayana Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma* (Rangoon, 1933), 27.

¹¹ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 98. The recruitment system as it developed with this increased immigration was the *maistry* system (the middleman system). *Maistries* were usually experienced Indian workers who were hired by mill owners or shipping agents in Burma to recruit laborers in India. New *maistries*' employers often gave them advances to finance recruiting operations. Established *maistries* could normally pay the costs of recruiting labor from personal funds derived from earlier operations. A single *maistry* usually recruited, directed the transportation of, and acted as an overseer for a gang of workers. The number of laborers in a gang

forms or on blank sheets of paper in which the laborer acknowledged his debt and promised to return the due amount with interest. Usually the actual amount of the debt and the terms of service were left blank to be filled in later by the maistry who thus had a strong hold over the laborers.¹² After compulsory inspection for disease, especially during years of plague and other contagious infections, the migrant was finally allowed to board with some luggage and small amount of food (and utensils) for the crossing. The journey (from the east coast of India) typically took forty-eight hours (but more in case of stops along the way) and ended at the Rangoon port and other smaller ports of Burma, where the passenger was subjected to further medical examination and entered into colonial records of immigration.

Patterns of Migration

In 1824, when the British-Indian forces temporarily occupied Rangoon during the first Anglo-Burman War, it was a village of some 1,500 houses and 9,000 people. In 1852, when Lower Burma was finally annexed to British India, an estimated 30,000 were living in Rangoon in all kinds of timber and bamboo huts built on muddy grounds, swamps and waterlogged areas. Over the next two decades, the city expanded with growing trade and agriculture. Indian

varied - the average number during this period was twenty to fifty workers, but some gangs had as many as five hundred members. In the case of the latter size, the head *maistry* would have subordinates.

The *maistry* paid the steamship fare and supplied food to the members of his gang during the trip from India to Burma (after thumb impressions on contract papers). On their arrival in Rangoon, he provided food and lodging and placed them in positions, which had been arranged with the managers of a rice mill or shipping firm. The *maistry's* advances to his gang were repaid with interest from the wages, which they received in Burma. The interest rates were agreed upon before the *maistry* signed the worker on and were fixed by the contract. Interest charges were apparently not too high in the first phase of economic development. The *maistry* also received a commission from the mill or firm, which he served which varied according to the number of laborers he provided. He also derived profit from his ability to buy steamship tickets at bulk rates. The *maistry* however, charged the members of his gang the full fare and retained the difference as a charge for service.

¹² Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940*, 123-124.

moneylenders, businessmen, contractors, and speculators began to invest heavily in lands and buildings with expectations of big profits. According to the 1872 census, Indians were a small minority of 16,000 persons, about 16 percent of Rangoon residents. In the 1901 census, the number had increased to 120,000 persons, constituting about half of the population of the city.¹³

Contemporary official reports and secondary literature identify three classes of Indians who came to live, work, or seek their fortune in Burma. First, the capitalist or trading class, a very small number thoroughly conversant with methods of international trade, banking, commerce, and industry, and willing to invest heavily in Burma.¹⁴ The second class consisted of teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and accountants, clerical and administrative staff. They together with Europeans (filling the higher ranks in all branches of administration) were responsible for making up the colonial educational, medical, executive, judicial, revenue and municipal systems of administration in Burma. The laboring poor, both skilled and unskilled workers formed the third class. Indians contributed to more than half of the technical or skilled personnel in the economy. They were essential workers in railways, inland water transport, road transport, electricity, post, telegraph telephone and radio communications, and exploitation of natural resources, including minerals, mineral oil, timber, rice and other agricultural products. In trade, Indians constituted about 17.3 percent of the total workers. Except for those who were prominent in trade and urban areas, the great majority of the Indian traders and shop assistants were small shopkeepers (including also some bazaar sellers and hawkers). Indians were also employed as menial workers, as servants and sweepers in households and the city municipal

¹³ Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Published for Institute of Race Relations, Oxford University Press, 1971).7-8.

¹⁴ Along with big European firms (primarily Scottish) there were Parsis, Jews and Chettiars from India.

corporation.¹⁵

While the official narrative of the process of recruitment, passage to Burma and life in Rangoon has been replicated in much of the secondary literature, I hope to bring to light the migrant's perspective. In the next section, I use Bengali novels with narratives of the voyage and colonial reports with recorded statements from incoming migrants on the health inspection system to understand how the middle-class migrant saw the journey to Burma.

II. “*Nirbāsana/Exile*” to Burma in the Literary Imagination of the Bengali Novelist¹⁶

Srikanta

Academics have described fiction as a historical source material as unreliable and unobjective and thus treated them with considerable skepticism. But this does not mean that social historians have eschewed using fiction. As John Tosh writes, historians in their descriptions of the past, “are striving to create in their readers the illusion of direct experience, by evoking an atmosphere or setting a scene... It requires imaginative powers and an eye for detail not unlike

¹⁵ Ibid., 30-34. A large proportion of the migrants were unskilled agricultural laborers who came to Burma for seasonal employment. Many arrived in Burma in November to work in the rice fields and mills. While many returned home in India in the month of April, a large proportion of them stayed behind in the off-season, often unemployed and sometimes temporarily engaged in casual work: rickshaw pulling, earth moving, roadwork or other manual work.

¹⁶ I use the term “*Nirbāsana/Exile*” in the sense of self-inflicted punishment (leaving his/her home, a familiar life, work, family and friends) that the migrant undergoes in search of a better employment and a new identity. For the middle-class author (Chattopadhyaya), the decision to go to Burma is a way of escape. He does not see it as a permanent or irrevocable action but a sort of banishment that he had to undergo in order to make a living and seek out a new life. He hopes that after a certain length of time, when he has fulfilled his desire for adventure and earned sufficient money, he will be able to make his way back home.

those of the novelist or poet.”¹⁷ Drawing upon the work of novelists and poets is one way of evoking such atmosphere.

Postmodern insights, however, suggest that fiction can have more substantive uses as historical source material. According to the postmodern model of history, a novel is just another text in a world of texts, a world where objectivity is unattainable, where distinctions between primary and secondary sources have blurred, where material reality and discourses are entwined. Some texts are, of course, more significant than others, and fiction requires more complex interrogation than “factual” sources, but all texts deserve scrutiny and consideration. There is something to be gleaned from even the most ephemeral sources.¹⁸ But even more importantly and perhaps more profoundly it gives us an insight into the mental world of the ordinary people who read it. The text—what people read, be it a newspaper, a political pamphlet, or a novel—can show us what shaped and influenced the reader’s viewpoints of the world in particular social setting.¹⁹

I use the novel *Srikanta* by Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, in this section, as a potential historical source to glimpse what the middle-class Bengali thought of his journey and life in Rangoon, Burma. Born in 1876 into an impoverished Brahmin household in a small village in Bengal, Saratchandra went on to become one of the most popular Bengali novelists and short-story writers of the twentieth century. From an early age, Saratchandra had a streak of

¹⁷ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 2002), 141.

¹⁸ Keith Thomas, *History and Literature: The Ernest Hughes Memorial Lecture* (Swansea, U.K.: Swansea University College, 1988), 3-4.

¹⁹ James Smith Allen, “History and the Novel: Mentalité in Modern Popular Fiction,” *History and Theory* 22 (1983): 233-252. Also, Martin Johnes, “Texts, Audiences and Postmodernism: the Novel as Source in Sport History,” *Journal of Sport History* 34 (2007): 121-33

wanderlust in him and since childhood would often disappear from home from time to time to join *jatra dals* (parties of itinerant performers) and was even in the company of *sadhus* (wandering mendicants). At the age of 26, after an altercation with his father and number of temporary jobs, Saratchandra decided to try his luck in Rangoon, where he hoped to emulate his brother-in-law's successful legal career. Although the legal career never really took off, the voyage to Rangoon and his experiences in Burma collectively formed the backdrop to a number of his novels – *Charitraheen* (Characterless), *Srikanta* (the main character's name) and *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way). One cannot claim that the viewpoints expressed in these writings are the representative opinion of the entire Bengali, clerical middleclass who boarded the ship. And yet the wide acceptance of these novels, where travel (to Burma) offers the possibility of break-off from social conservatism and tradition, is indicative of popular reading taste in the genre of travel literature and contemporary social commentaries.²⁰

In the novel *Srikanta* by Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, the narrator and protagonist, Srikanta, a Bengali high-caste Brahmin is an aimless drifter, a passive spectator of life until impoverished circumstances force him to take a decision to leave for Burma. An acquaintance tells him that a distant relative had made a fortune in Burma. He describes it as, “Burma - a land whose cities had streets paved with gold and where Bengalis were at such a premium that they were lifted bodily from ships carrying them the moment the latter touched the shore, and carried away by Englishmen to be showered with jobs, money, power and prestige.”²¹ Srikanta is enthused not so much by the description of wealth and status, but the idea of travel to the fabled land that could be reached by crossing an infinite stretch of wild and violent sea. He longed to

²⁰ Narasingha P. Sil, *The Life of Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya: Drifter and Dreamer* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012).

²¹ Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, *Srikanta*, trans. Aruna Chakravarti (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), 109.

go. Before leaving, he goes to meet Pyari bai (a *nautch*/dancing girl with whom he has a relationship). She is immediately apprehensive, “people who go to Burma never return. Do you know that?”²² She begs him to take her with him as she too wants to seek a new identity (far from being a dancing girl) in this land but Srikanta is adamant that he will go alone.

His description of the journey is colored by a sense of fascination with the sight of passengers being queued up at the jetty and the heaving and rolling of ships in the turbulent storms that raged on the high seas. According to biographers and scholars who have read his personal correspondence, Saratchandra described the passengers as a motley crowd – elderly men who traveled to Burma regularly on business, several pairs of lovers eloping to Arakan or Burma in a bid to escape the severe social pressures of their native environment, and many fortune seekers like him looking forward to a break and a fresh lease of life in a new country.²³ The novel *Srikanta*, pronounced by many critics as semi-autobiographical, describes this journey undertaken by the author.

Travel to Burma marks a new phase in the life of Srikanta, to a place where he hopes no one knows him and he can build a new life. One foggy morning, a week later, as he stepped off the train at the Koilaghat (literally translated coal loading jetty) area of Calcutta a khaki-clad coolie (porter) swooped down on his tin trunk and bedroll like some bird of prey and vanished with them in the blink of an eye. He scanned the crowd in fury and panic, but it was several hours before the coolie reappeared. As the train was entering the station, he observed, “herd upon herd of motley-colored animals packed between the road and the jetty. Coming closer he recognized them for what they were – not animals but men, women and children who had spent

²² Ibid., 114.

²³ Aruna Chakravarti, *Saratchandra: Rebel and Humanist* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1985), 25.

the night in the cold and the fog in the hope of securing some space to sit in on the boat that was to carry them across the black water. He had a reservation for the deck but his heart quaked at the thought of forcing his way through this turbulent sea of humanity to the entrance of the jetty.”²⁴

There were people from the length and breadth of India – from the north most Kabul to the southernmost point. There were foreigners too. A group of Chinamen in black vests dominated the scene. Suddenly, as if at a signal, the fifteen or sixteen hundred people stood up and started forming lines, “as meek and docile as a gigantic flock of sheep. Srikanta wondered why, for, as far as he could see, there was no sign of a ship, not even in the distant horizon. He asked a man in the crowd, “what is happening? Why has everyone stood up?” “*Dog-tori,*” he mumbled. On asking again, “*Dog-tori. For the Pi-lage.*”²⁵ Srikanta still confused wedged himself somewhere in the line. Some Muslim travelers from the Khidirpur district who worked as tailors in Rangoon told him that they had made the trip several times. They explained to him that all the passengers were required to go through a medical examination because the authorities feared that some might be carrying plague.

After what seemed hours, a “white” (European) doctor and his assistant were seen approaching and the examination began. As the line diminished, he noticed that the examination involved stripping of the body down to the hips and a probing into all those private parts that might conceal a lump. He heard the exclamations of fear and pain, as men women, and children were subjected to the insensitivity and ruthlessness that characterized the white race in its dealings with the colored people. Srikanta cursed the passivity that had bred in the Hindu Bengali from time immemorial. After being made to wait for hours like sheep and goats he was

²⁴ Chattopadhyaya, *Srikanta*, 120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 121. Doctor examining the passengers for plague symptoms.

subjected to untold humiliation. When his turn came, he shut his eyes and surrendered to the inevitable. Mercifully it lasted for only a few minutes. He was declared fit to travel. The next step was to find a place in the boat.²⁶

The author describes Srikanta's struggle to get into the ship. "One who has never mounted the deck of a ship has no idea of how it is done. Packed into a congealed mass of stinking bodies, I was alternately pulled forward and pushed backwards in a series of jerks that bore a closer resemblance to the motion of a giant machine than to the movement of human beings."²⁷ He reached the deck, almost swooning from the lack of air, but there was no way he could even for a moment stop there. The relentless pressure from behind propelled him to a gaping hole, down a flight of dark steps that led to the monstrous cavern of the ship's hold. For a few moments, he almost lost consciousness. When he could breathe again, he found himself standing dazed while his traveling companions were already seated. The floor of the hold was miraculously partitioned into thousands of segments with sheets and blankets, steel trunks and wooden crates. It was at this moment that his porter reappeared. Movement was impossible without stepping on people's bedding and stumbling over their possessions for, barring the few inches of space on which his feet were planted, there was not a spot of unoccupied territory on the floor of the hold. The coolie gripped his hand and with commendable speed and efficiency, leading him to his tin trunk and bedroll, he took his tip and departed."²⁸ From the perspective of the first time passenger the entire process of boarding the ship is at once bewildering and extremely uncomfortable. [Figure 2 is a photograph of an Indian family waiting patiently to

²⁶ Ibid., 121.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

embark on the ship from the Madras to Burma].

Saratchandra's own experience at the port where third class passengers were herded like sheep and cattle reinforced in his mind the discrimination that Indians faced at the hands of colonial medical and administrative staff at the ports. Originating from Bombay, plague had broken out in the city of Calcutta at the time the author left it in 1902. Authorities anxious to restrict any further spread, conducted medical examinations of passengers before they boarded the ship and made them undergo a ten-day quarantine upon arrival. The examinations though necessary, were often insensitively conducted humiliating experiences. During a night of torrential rain in the midst of a cyclonic storm in the Bay of Bengal, all third-class passengers were removed from the deck and ordered to enter the hold of the ship.²⁹ Srikanta meanwhile was lucky to find refuge amidst crates containing poultry and other animals (near a first class cabin) and when he emerged the next morning and descended the steps down to the hold, he was greeted by the stench of vomit and feces.³⁰

²⁹ The "hold of a ship", is the very lower apartment or division in the bottom of the ship.

³⁰ Chattopadhyaya, *Srikanta*, 131.

Figure 4³¹

Embarking at Madras on S.S. Erinpura for Rangoon, 1928



³¹ Patterson, David A, Photographer [Embarking at Madras on S.S. Erinpura for Rangoon, 1928]. Photograph. Patterson Papers box 2, part 5, 8 (20). Reproduced with permission from the Cambridge South Asian Archive, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge.

There are several travelogues by Europeans traveling in the first class cabins on the steamship describing the native traveler in their travelogues: his diet and unclean habits, family life, the makeshift shelters, the chaos and the conviviality in the temporary bazaar shop.³² But on the whole, from their point of view, the shipping companies had provided adequate provisions for the third class Indian passenger. But the reality (as one of the scholars wrote on the plight of the Indian laborers) was far different: “the ships which carried Indians, at their cost, between India and Burma – a journey covering five to six days (with stops in between) – were not fit to be used even as cattle hold through they transported their human cargo in thousands during all seasons.”³³ Recollecting his impression of the journey to Burma on one of these ships Gandhi wrote:

³² F.A. Hook, “Coolies,” in *Shades of Gold and Green: Anecdotes of Colonial Burmah 1886-1948*, ed. Nicholas Greenwood (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1998).

On board the *Ethiopia*. This is a six-thousand-ton turbine steamer, very smart, clean and well run, with excellent accommodation. She has on board nineteen first and thirty-two second-class passengers, fifteen thousand packages of general cargo and, what is of especial interest, a thousand and sixty-two collie passengers who are traveling to Rangoon for the Burma rice harvest.

The deck passenger pays fourteen rupees to the British India Steamship Company for the three days’ passage of a thousand miles from Madras to Rangoon, and two rupees four tax on entry into Burma. He brings his own food, supplements it by purchases at the bazaar on the main deck and, moreover, provided with a galley in which he may do his cooking. In the bazaar we found the storekeeper, a fine old Hindu with flowing white beard and mane, and laughing, old brown eyes, sitting among his wares. Close by, his assistants handed out portions of food from their cooking vessels in exchange of tickets previously purchased from their chief. A plate of cooked rice and curry for four *annas*, served in a palm-leaf plate, which is thrown overboard after use, did not seem dear.

We observed carefully the conditions in which these people were traveling. Throughout the voyage, except in monsoon weather, they lie or squat on deck or on the hatches (a coveted place), and on embarking, sort themselves, by a process of natural selection, into three classes, the superior class in one deck section, where the others do not seek places, a middle class, and a third class. The difference in dress, character and belongings of the three classes were strikingly apparent. Judging by one’s observation of their dwellings ashore, the conditions in which they travel at sea are distinctly superior to those of their home life. Proper latrine and sanitary arrangements, and an unlimited supply of running fresh water are supplied. But owing to the universal practice of chewing betel nut or leaf and spitting anywhere and everywhere, to keep their quarters decently cleansed calls for some effort on the part of the chief officer and his men. Having selected their pitch on deck, some of them make an effort at privacy by attaching sheets to a stanchion or any handy upright object. One proud young husband, traveling with a wife in purdah, showed uncommon ingenuity in this respect.

In a special gallery, there are six huge steam-heated rice boilers, ready for use, but these people prefer the smaller and more primitive galley before-mentioned and their own small pots and pans. We found the native crew’s quarters clean and tidy, and the rooms of the purser’s men beyond reproach.

³³ Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*, 46.

There is deck accommodation on board SS Arnoda for about 1,500 persons, though in the busy season this limitation is over-looked. There are for the use of these 1,500 passengers (or more) two tiny bathrooms and 12 latrines (restrooms) in sets of 4 for men and two bathrooms and 8 latrines for women. This gives an average of one latrine to 75 passengers and one bathroom to 375 passengers. There is only a seawater tap in the bathroom but no fresh water tap, not any facility whatever for keeping clothes in a dry place while one is bathing. Either the bathrooms have no latches or the latter are out of repair...the space used as urinal is open to view and is not curtained by any partition...there is a sort of a running corridor in front of each set of latrines through which the bathroom also lies. Dirty water and urine from the latrines flow into this corridor and owing to faulty drainage, instead of discharging itself through the drain, the foul water continues to roll to and fro on the floor with the rolling of the ship...The lower most deck is nothing better than a black hole. It is dark and dingy and stuffy and hot to the point of suffocation...there is no access to the sea-air...there are no refuse-bins or receptacles for the rubbish. So the passengers spit, squirt their betel-nut chew and throw orange peel and such rubbish on the floor...³⁴

After spending five-six days on one of these ships in such trying conditions, the Indian migrant to Rangoon was subjected to further medical scrutiny at the port in order to ascertain that he was not feverish, nausea[ed] or displaying any other symptoms that could be indicative of some contagious disease. The protagonist, Srikanta (in the novel) relates his experience of arriving at the port of Burma: “quarantine under the British regime, is a form of imprisonment fit only for the lowest of the low. And anyone who cannot pay more than the minimum ten rupees for a passage to Burma is automatically relegated to that category. And since people have few or no possessions (as the authorities believed) it is perfectly in order that they carry their own luggage through the half-mile walk from the jetty to the encampment.”³⁵ Srikanta further says: “the reality of being off-loaded on the burning sands of a strange river with an alien sun raining its fiery beams on my head and the steaming air clogging my lungs, was too much for me. Some of the more resourceful, experienced passengers were able to navigate their way to the

³⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, April 11, 1929 cited in *Ibid.*, 46-47.

³⁵ Chattopadhyaya, *Srikanta*, 139.

encampment with their belongings on their heads or their backs.”³⁶ The protagonist himself was left with his few fellow companions from the ship, one of whom had been rendered so weak by prolonged dysentery, fever and fatigue that he was barely capable of sitting up, let alone walking.

Testimonies by Middle-Class Indian Passengers to the Vaccination Committee in Rangoon

In 1918, a committee was appointed to “investigate the alleged hardships caused by the compulsory vaccination under the provisions of section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act 1909 on laborers arriving in Rangoon by sea.”³⁷ The basic premise of the Act was as follows: “when a vessel arrives at the port of Rangoon, or any other port to which the local government may extend the Act, [it] requires any person who has travelled on board the vessel for the purpose of coming to Burma to work as a laborer to be inspected and if on inspection s/he is found to be unprotected to be vaccinated.” Further as a sub-section: “every person who when so requested fails to show by documentary or other evidence that he is not a laborer shall be deemed to have traveled on board the vessel for the purpose of coming to Burma to work as a laborer.”³⁸ The report summarized the various difficulties that had emerged with the implementation with the Act. Broadly, the two problems were: first, the medical examination itself contributed to considerable delay and discomfort for all passengers. The subject who had been traveling for three to five days on a steamer and even a few days before that (to reach the port) was likely to be reduced in vitality by sea-sickness. In this condition, vaccination would

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

³⁷ Government of Burma, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination, Under the Provisions of Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909, of Laborers Arriving in Rangoon by Sea.*

³⁸ Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909.

cause ill health instead of preventing it. The second grievance, which seemed to excite considerable bitterness amongst the witnesses who appeared before the committee was that the papers had mentioned only coolies were to be medically examined and vaccinated. But in reality, no attempt was made to discriminate between those who were coolies and those who were not. *The burden of proof was thus on the passenger.* The presumption was that the first and second-class passenger (the majority of them being Europeans) was not a laborer but all third class Indian passengers (even though they may be a respectable merchant or clerk) were universally laborers. Therefore, the middle class Indian traveller had no recourse except his protestations to prove that he was not on his way to Burma to work as a working poor.³⁹

³⁹Government of Burma, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination, Under the Provisions of Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909, of Laborers Arriving in Rangoon by Sea*, 1.

See Chapter “Adult Morbidity and Mortality and the Development of Public Health in Burma” in Judith L. Richell, *Disease and Demography in Colonial Burma* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 165-216. Richell points out an incident in 1899: a ship arriving at the Rangoon port carrying two men who were dying of plague set in motion a series of regulations, some of them draconian, which were eventually to establish the beginnings of a proper public health inspectorate in Burma. Between 1905 (the first year of epidemic mortality) and 1939, the number of registered plague deaths in Burma was 161,951 or just over 4,600 per year. During this period, the average number of registered deaths per annum in Burma was 244,000, of which only 1.89 per cent approximately was due to plague. However, the reason it had such a disproportionate effect on sanitary developments in Burma was because authorities feared its spread from port to port. The outbreak in Java (though not under British control) around the same time for example was traced to rat fleas from vessels trading with Burma and the Burmese source was discovered to be Calcutta. Between 1905-11 the average plague deaths per annum was 7,012, which was 3.2 percent of the total mortality and by 1932-39 this was 2,222 or 0.8 percent of total died. Plague in Burma was reported to have a definite seasonal incidence. The health authorities said that the highest number of deaths occurred between December and April each year, from April the number of deaths declined until the following November or December, when the cycle started again. Health officials divided the registered plague mortality into indigenous and imported incidences: the latter was the death of migrants who has been incubating the disease when they entered Burma. A huge proportion was identified as Indian migrants, but by the early twentieth century, Burma had become part of the world-trading network, there was little chance of escaping the infection even without the incoming migrants. The 1923 health report stated: “plague in Rangoon is closely connected to rice industry and the numerous rice mills are heavily infested with rats. Because of their heavy involvement with the rice industry, Indian migrants would have provided many of the plague victims.

As compared to plague, smallpox had a longer history in Burma and in general Southeast Asia as evidenced from mythology prevalent in the region. The practice of inoculation was well established in lower Burma before the arrival of the British, which would also imply a familiarity of the disease. In the early days of the British administration cases were misdiagnosed and often under registered. However, it was also due to the native fear of the policy of segregation that the administration was trying to impose that the people kept smallpox outbreaks a secret from the fear of being sent to the small pox hospital. The Civil Surgeon of Rangoon and the British authorities attributed to the increase in the outbreaks of the disease to infection brought in by Indian migrants. In 1897, an epidemic in Moulmein and Rangoon was blamed on unvaccinated Corringee coolies and again in 1915 and 1916, the initial outbreaks of the disease were attributed to poor, migrant Indians, many of whom were not vaccinated.

During the investigation by the vaccination committee, middle-class passengers who had traveled to from India to Burma on one of the ships were asked to give depositions on the treatment they received when they landed at the Rangoon port at the hands of quarantine authorities. In one such a testimony before the committee, Maganlal Ramchandra Bhagatji (a permanent resident in India with a temporary address of Rangoon) described his hardships on board and after landing with the vaccination authorities.

In a word one may say that the treatment offered to passengers when they are brought out from the steamers to the vaccination *godown* [warehouse/storeroom] is really cruel.

I traveled by S.S. Bangala, which started from Calcutta on 19th June 1916 and arrived here (Rangoon) on the 22nd of June 1916. In this journey, my family and children accompanied me. To my utter surprise when the steamer arrived in the port we were one and all asked to mount in a steam launch. The chief characteristic to be noted in this was that she was too small to accommodate all passengers. We were all huddled together in the hull where it was extremely dark and the absence of light and air, which was really disgusting. She was then brought to the Lewis Street Jetty where we all landed and were to be vaccinated by officers in charge. Males were made half-naked and females were separated from males for vaccination and were there examined. This lasted for about one to one hour and a half and we had to wait in the vaccination godown in the time being. While we were in this state we all had to suffer from pushes from passengers and officers who treated us in the most unsatisfactory manner.

We had journeyed for three or four days were hungry and thirsty and were all seasick and this being added to the above sufferings was really inhuman and hence it is the prime essential that this difficulty should be immediately removed. I am a businessman and have to travel often from Calcutta to Rangoon and have to experience the same difficulties in all my journeys.⁴⁰

- Maghanlal Ramchandra Bhagatji,

Between 1923 and 1932, 106 cases of smallpox were identified. According to Richell, to blame such migrants for causing epidemics in a country where the disease was already endemic was far too simplistic, but as with plague and cholera, the Indians served as the “whipping boys.” (191).

Further on from the port, the authorities suggested that smallpox spread through the communication lines of the railways and rivers on a north-to-south axis. The speculation was made that the epidemics were conceived in the crowded ports of the south, as the conditions for the spread of the disease existed there helped by the influx of infected migrants and then traveled up north.

⁴⁰ Maghanlal Ramchandra Bhagatji, 33 E, Merchant Street, Rangoon, to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, Rangoon, dated 27th September 1917 in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 57. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(b).

to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

On being further questioned by the committee as to his profession and why he traveled on the coolie deck when he appeared to be a respectable man, Bhagatji replied that he was a silk cloth merchant by profession and since he was traveling with five or seven members of his family he could not afford to spend a huge lot of money in purchasing cabin tickets. The passenger further recommended that if the passengers had been vaccinated previously they should not be made to undergo the entire process again at the wharf on arrival. [In the second illustration, a photograph taken on the Rangoon port shows the small dinghy boats, which were used to transport passengers from the ship to the harbor].

Figure 5⁴¹

Leaving Port Rangoon to Visit Calcutta by S.S. Arnada A.B.I. Boat at Morning Loading and Unloading



⁴¹ Patterson, David A, Photographer "Leaving Rangoon Harbour to visit Calcutta by S.S. Aronda. A.B.I. board at Moorings Loading or Unloading" 1928]. Photograph. Patterson Papers box 2, part 5, 8 (26). Reproduced with permission of the Cambridge South Asian Archive, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge

The indignity of being made to stand amongst poorer classes and be examined publicly was unacceptable to many upper class passengers. A certain M.V. Mehta from Mogul Street Rangoon described his experience on one of the British India Navigation Steam Company Steamers, the S.S. Bangala

On the 1st April, I left Calcutta by the S.S. Bangala. This was the first time I was coming to Burma and so I did not know the regulations of the Port as well as on the steamer. On the morning of the 4th April, the steamer came to Phyare Street jetty. All the passengers were made to land and were kept in the godown where officers from the vaccination department and the doctor brought all the passengers to a single line without any distinction. Afterwards, the doctor ordered them to take off their clothes. After that, the doctor examined the vaccinated marks. Those who had no vaccination marks were compelled to have vaccination without any pity whether the man was suffering from seasickness or whether the person had any place to stay in. After examining one by one, the doctor came to me. At that time, I did not take off my clothes, as I had some jewels and cash in my pocket. In fact, I was afraid to take off my clothes, as my neighbors were almost all coolies and I was afraid that they would come and rob me, but I opened my coat and showed the vaccinated marks to the doctor but he was not satisfied and told me to take off the coat. A number of people lost their things in the process. Besides that, I want to draw your attention to the fact that the lady passengers are separated from their relations and they have to stand for a long time alone among strangers, which is not their custom. A few days ago, I read in the paper that only coolies were to be vaccinated. I do not understand why they compel merchants like me and other respectable men to undergo such inspection. When they put the vaccination marks, they do not easily dry up and so, people like me have to come to town without our coats on, which is very disgraceful.

When I landed, it was about 8 A.M. and it was 3 P.M. when I had the opportunity to go home. On account of vaccination, we had to stand for hours doing nothing.⁴²

- M. V. Mehta to the Chairman
of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

Most middle and upper class passengers repeatedly raised the question of respectability and the need to distinguish between the middle and upper class passengers: “Vaccination was

⁴² M. V. Mehta, 14, Mogul Street, Rangoon to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, 1917 in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 58. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(c).

only meant for the coolie class". They protested against being forced to remove their own clothing and wear dirty garments (meant for ease in medical examination while their clothes were being disinfected) similar to those worn by the working classes. Moreover, male passengers traveling with families complained to the authorities that their wives and children had been separated from them, which was disrespectful towards their family and community customs. In a deposition by a certain Labhshankar Roopji Trivedi:

I arrived on March 17th last year with my wife and landed on the Sparks Street wharf. As soon as we disembarked, male and female passengers were separated and required to go into separate sheds for health examination. Accordingly my wife had to separate from me to attend to the female doctor. As to myself after the customs inspection was over, I with other male passengers (most of whom were coolies) had to stand in a batch of about 75 passengers for vaccination examination. Before commencing examination we were told to put off all clothes and directed to wear only a small indigo cloth supplied by the department. This indigo cloth, besides being dirty, was so small in size that it could not sufficiently cover my lower half body; naturally I felt it to be disgusting to put it on and requested the official either to let me go unexamined or allow me to have my *dhotar* (lower garment for men) on. But my request was turned down and I had to follow orders against my will. After the examination was over I had to undergo the next hardship; the clothes, which I had put off before examination, were taken away to the vapor room to treat them and consequently I had to undergo considerable pains and trouble to find them as they were mixed with hundreds of other clothes belonging to passengers of the same steamer.

After suffering the above hardships at last I went to the gate to find my wife and to my surprise, I found her weeping after waiting for me for hours. The cause of her weeping was that she had to attend to the examination before a doctor who was quite a stranger to her and besides this, when I came she was alone during the long interval as other female passengers had left the wharf. What grieves me is that females are separated from their male attendants, required to put off their clothes before strangers and that too in open places like the wharf. Such a treatment is an insult to the customs and respectability of both Hindu and Muslim families, not something necessarily understood by medical officials.⁴³

- Labhshankar Roopji Trivedi to the Chairman

⁴³ Labhshankar Roopji Trivedi, 49 Merchant Street, Rangoon to the President, Vaccination Committee, Rangoon dated the 26th September 1917 in Government of Burma, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination, Under the Provisions of Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909, of Laborers Arriving in Rangoon by Sea*, 59-60. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(d).

of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

Some of the middle-class passengers also complained that European doctors had refused to give them letters of exemption despite marks to prove that they had undergone prior vaccination at the ports. However, such letters were easily given to first and second-class passengers. In one such deposition two members of the same family, Pratap Singh and Hathe Singh Barot gave a deposition before the committee:

The following is my experience regarding the troubles I had undergone during my journey to Burma in 1916 and 1917. Me and the other passengers were put in a launch. At that time, almost all were suffering from seasickness etc. and then the launch was brought to the Lewis Street jetty. All the passengers were kept in a godown just like a cage. The police officers and vaccinating officers made us take off the shirts and coats. We had to keep our entire luggage aside, which was mixed up with others.

During this year, I came by S.S. Bangala to Rangoon. At that time, goats and buffaloes were in it. On account of that and of not taking food, I was not feeling well. In June 1916, after my vaccination experience, I asked the European doctor to give me a letter as he used to give to first and second-class passengers but he refused to do so. So again, I had to undergo lot of trouble. This is all my experience and I think something should be done for the respectable passengers.⁴⁴

- Pratap Singh and Hathe Singh Barot
to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

Lower class passengers were seldom invited by the vaccination committee to record their statements. But in a rare documented testimony, one of the middle-class passengers recounted the treatment poorer classes went through at the port. Most of them were made to stand in a line for hours after being handed slips of paper or some sort of receipt. Being unable to read what

⁴⁴ Pratap Singh and Hathe Singh Barot, Rangoon to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, 1917 in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 58-59. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(e).

was written on the paper or the purpose for which they had been singled out, many were frightened that they were being sent somewhere for lock-up. Moreover, the complainant (P.S. Ramprasad) mentioned that all passengers were not treated equally as there existed a nexus between the police officers, the medical men and some of the passengers who could afford to pay and therefore could avoid the entire quarantine procedure.

I was one of the deck passengers of the British India Boat S.S. Coconada which landed passengers at the Sparks Jetty, on the 28th June 1917. Many passengers, even though with noticeable vaccination marks were sent for re-vaccination. Poor ignorant passengers who were removed for the purpose, were served each with a slip of paper, and not being able to read what was written on it, held on to it and were standing for hours together, at one side of the shed, and they were called one by one in order to get vaccinated. The passengers, unaware of the purpose of the paper in their hands had been issued were frightened of being sent somewhere for lock up and some of the passengers in fact, bribed the police constable near them and got out of the situation. I was one of the victims of this illegitimate practice by the doctor and the authorities. We were kept up till that evening, without food and drink, and when I asked the policeman and the doctor to let me go out for a few minutes to refresh myself at the shop a few paces by, I was refused. The wait lasted till evening till five o' clock and we were treated like prisoners, who have been committed for a serious criminal offence. After the check up, the sickly passengers (who were merely feverish after days on the ship) were rounded up and sent to the plague hospitals in heavy rain and severe cold. The police constables were protected themselves from the elements but drove us by foot to the plague hospital and handed us over to the hospital assistant.⁴⁵

-P.S. Ramprasad, Rangoon to the
Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

Despite the obvious vulnerability of these lower-class migrants, the government and health officials described the quarantine regulations as essential, particularly in the light of

⁴⁵ P.S. Ramprasad, Address: 43, Lewis Street, Rangoon to Lieut. Col. Obbard I.A. President, Vaccination Committee, Secretariat Buildings, Rangoon – dated the 26th September 1917 in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 62. For the original transcript, please see appendix 1(f).

recurrent threat of smallpox epidemics that seemed to plague Rangoon. In reality, the Act was responsible for creating the figure of the diseased and the poor migrant even before he landed on the shores of Burma. The spokesperson for the vaccination committee explained that while every effort was made to enforce vaccination within the city of Rangoon itself but the Lieutenant Governor, after a careful examination of the question, was constrained to agree with the municipal committee that the efforts were inadequate and that further powers were required if the “special class of population” (the laboring population of the city) were to be effectively protected.⁴⁶ For their own protection and welfare, the unprotected coolies from India needed to be vaccinated on or before their arrival in Rangoon. “It is not alleged that these immigrants ordinarily bring small-pox with them from India. It may be admitted that in most cases they catch the disease in Burma, but their habits are such that it spreads rapidly among them and constantly tends to become epidemic. They arrive in Rangoon periodically in great numbers and form a large floating population, crowded together in barracks, lodging-houses and factories in manner, which must be conducive to the spread of any contagious disease. In their unprotected condition they are undoubtedly the principal means of spreading small-pox in an epidemic form throughout the town.”⁴⁷

Thus, during the early part of the twentieth century in Burma, the lower class passenger on the steamship to Burma was perceived to be a source of unclean habits (because of ignorance), contamination and health hazard to fellow (upper class) passengers on the ship and ultimately to the city. In support of their recommendations, the committee cited three methods of

⁴⁶ “In the four months from the 20th January 1906 to the 19th May 1906, 3,630 cases and 997 deaths were registered in Rangoon, that there appears to be no good reason to anticipate that similar epidemic will not occur.” Letter no. 836 dated 26th January 1907, to the Government of India, Home Department in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

infection to which the province was exposed through the agency of Indian immigrants: (i) infection from immigrants suffering from the disease on landing (ii) infection from immigrants carrying the disease (but exhibiting no symptoms) (iii) infection from immigrants unprotected by vaccination. In order to emphasize the danger of infection from the first of these sources, the report presented statistics - during the period 1902-06, when immigrants were detained under the plague regulations, an average of 7.8 immigrants (per annum) developed small-pox during the period of segregation. However, in the absence of such examinations during 1910 and then 1912-15, the number had risen to 43 immigrants.⁴⁸

But beyond the immediate perceived threat of disease, the quarantine examination at the port proved to be another source of information on the incoming travelers (single or with family, place of origin, health condition and so on) and was repeatedly used in legislative council discussions on the large number of laborers coming to Burma for the purposes of employment. For example, as early as in 1925, the Finance Minister put forward the proposal of a Sea Passengers' Tax Bill in the council citing the large number of migrant laborers who come to Burma by sea. These itinerant workers had no particular place to stay and moved between districts and the city and conveniently escaped all taxation. He proposed that everyone who entered Burma by sea should be charged five rupees per head.⁴⁹ There was severe opposition from several of the prominent Indian members in the Council, particularly labor leader A. Narayana Rao who pointed out that the Indian workers in Burma were already heavily indebted, especially to the steamship companies and the middlemen who had financed the voyage and their initial stay. The migrant laborer had to cope up with the exorbitant cost of living in Rangoon,

⁴⁸ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination*, 3.

⁴⁹ Finance Member, "The Burma Tax on Sea Passengers Bill" *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (10th March 1925), 43.

secure employment and save enough money to repay the debt with interest. Rao questioned the justice of the legal Act where the migrant laborer was expected pay money even before he had earned anything in Burma. Moreover, the new tax would only add to the financial burdens of the migrant poor who were already starving trying to make ends meet.⁵⁰

Although the Bill was scrapped in 1925, it raised an important set of questions and an agenda for future debates on the floor of the council regarding the number of incoming migrant laborers from India to Burma, their health condition and the spread of epidemic diseases, and the kind of work they were doing in Burma. As one of the Burmese councilors U Maung Thaw recounted, there were several reasons why it was necessary that the migrant Indian should be made to pay as he came in rather than (as suggested by some) when he left. “A large number of Indians who come to Burma do so on a cyclical basis i.e., they arrive during the rice harvesting season and then leave at the end of the season or stay on for another year. If the worker could afford to pay steamship fare for himself, he could certainly pay the tax. Also, since he sends a good deal of money through the post office and in many ways back home, showing that he could in practice pay tax to the province he is earning from. Moreover, this would prove to be discouragement to large number of riff-raffs, beggars, lame or those affected by various diseases, come into Burma and to live on the charity of the people.”⁵¹

Thus, travel to Burma aboard the steamship was on one hand an “exile,” as envisaged by the Bengali novelist for the middle class Indian passenger, because of the sheer hardship associated with the experience. But travel in the mind of this particular author (to a distant land) could also be an opportunity for self-discovery. In the next section, I will use another novel

⁵⁰ A Narayana Rao, “The Burma Tax on Sea Passengers Bill” *BLCP*, (10th March 1925), 46-47.

⁵¹ U Maung Thaw, “The Burma Tax on Sea Passengers Bill” *BLCP*, (10th March 1925), 53-56.

Pather Dabi by Chattopadhyaya in order to illustrate the experiences for the middle-class migrant in Rangoon and how this what role did his class (and caste) play in this process of self-description?

III. Creating the Indian Middle Class Identity in Rangoon, Burma

Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)

In the novel *Pather Dabi* by Chattopadhyaya, the protagonist, Apurba is the youngest son in a middle-class but high caste Brahmin family (a Bengali *bhadralok*) who lives with his widowed mother (Karunamayee) and elder brothers and their wives in Calcutta. After passing his college examinations, he is offered a job in a European firm in Rangoon, Burma. The starting salary is four hundred rupees a month, besides house rent, followed by an increase of two hundred rupees after six months. Hearing the news, Apurba's mother is alarmed at the prospect of letting her youngest child go to a foreign land: "Is that a place to go? I am told that it is an absolutely irreligious country, inhabited by barbarians. How could you think I would agree to send you there? I have no need for such money!"⁵² But jobs being scarce for even college graduates and in face of opposition from her elder sons, Karunamayee has no choice but to let Apurba go to Rangoon. Apurba follows his mother's more conservative rules and hence, agrees to take an old Brahmin cook (named Tiwari) along with him. On the steamer, Apurba eats only the little food they were able to take with them and refuses all water offered on board. Thus, while he manages to keep his Brahminhood intact, he is extremely weak by the time he reaches

⁵² Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, trans. Prasenjit Mukherjee (Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1993), 18-19.

the port and finally the city.⁵³

On reaching his new apartment, Apurba is disappointed not only by the drab condition of the building and his own quarters, but on hearing that his nearest neighbors, one of whom is a Chinese gentleman and the other one, an Anglo-Indian family. His religious and caste scruples are raised yet again but he is unable to protest. His arrival in Rangoon is marred by two immediate incidents, which determine the future course of events and shape to a large extent Apurba's self-identity in a foreign place. The first one is an altercation with his upstairs European neighbor who in a fit of drunken revelry pours buckets full of dirty water through the chinks of the floor into Apurba's living room, destroying his food and other items. On protesting against such crude behavior, instead of an apology (which Apurba expected) he is threatened by the sahib with harassing his wife and daughter when he (the sahib) was indisposed. Further, his neighbor goes on to instigate a criminal case against Apurba and his servant and Apurba is summoned to the courts. Despite being completely innocent he is forced to pay a fine of twenty rupees as he was a native and could not possibly challenge a European. Just when he was recovering from the ignominy of being summoned to a court of law, he faces a second incident that shakes him to the core and makes him question his decision to come to Burma. Apurba arrives at the train station where he sits down on a wooden bench at the platform. Suddenly, he is given a rough shove and pushed off by a group of Anglo-Indian boys who further insult him, call him names (describing him as a native Indian milkman) and enjoy humiliating him. Apurba attempts to retaliate but the altercation attracts the attention of a couple of Indian workmen who

⁵³ Narasingha P. Sil, *The Life of Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya: Drifter and Dreamer* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012). The experience of the journey on board the steamship is a repeated motif in Saratchandra's novels as his own travel experiences left a deep imprint on him. He left for Rangoon sometime in January 1903 and arrived four days later in a somewhat semi-starved state. To make matters worse for the unsuspecting newcomer, Rangoon city had been infected with a plague epidemic (the plague virus having been determined to have come from Bombay where the ship had anchored prior to reaching Calcutta and then to Rangoon). "Saratchandra's steamer was crowded with laborers, easy victim to infection, and all passengers were quarantined at a forested corner on the shore for a week." (31).

intervene and in fact, push him off of the platform reminding him of the consequences of getting into a fight with a sahib. Hurt and humiliated, Apurba makes a complaint to the station master (who also happens to be an European) and his complaint is rejected outright on the grounds that he shouldn't have dared to sit on a bench reserved for Europeans in the first place.⁵⁴ Despite coming from a colonial set up in Calcutta, Apurba for the first time in his life is subjected to blatant racism and discrimination. He is unable to comprehend why despite his education, upper class upbringing and respectable demeanor; he is denied respect and justice by the authorities.

I would like to end this chapter with thoughts on how travel is an eye-opener for the middle-class, high-caste character in these novels. Beyond the ship itself, life in the city and his experiences was part of this travel. Like *Srikanta*, the story of *Pather Dabi* is autobiographical, in the sense that the author (Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya) uses his own experiences of travel and work in Rangoon to inform his novels.⁵⁵ But the narratives also reflect the social and political sensibilities of the author and the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist message that he wanted to convey to his readers.

Apurba having lived a sheltered existence with his family feels alone and inadequate to face a hostile and alien city and its people and he continuously falls short of coping with the mundane day-to-day problems. He is unable to take care of his servant Tiwari when he comes down with smallpox.⁵⁶ Further, when Apurba steps into the Indian migrant coolie quarters in

⁵⁴ Chattopadhyaya, *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, 48-50.

⁵⁵ The story was first serialized in a monthly journal, *Bangabani* between February-March 1922 and April-May 1926, the government took note of the bitter criticism of the British rule contained in it, the highly inflammatory tone of the writing, and the insurgency that it advocated. The government planned to impose the Censorship Act on the author and bring charges of sedition to the publisher as the latter wanted to transform the serialized stories into a published novel. When the novel was eventually published in August 1936, the book became immensely popular and the first five thousand copies were sold out within the first week.

⁵⁶ Chattopadhyaya, *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, 88-93.

Rangoon he is shocked by the abject poverty, disease and vices that he could never imagine in his middle-class existence. “These workmen’s quarters (near the factory) were made of broken planks/boards and tin-sheets. A number of water-taps stood in front, and to the back were rows of toilets built of tin-sheets. Originally these may have been fitted with doors; now only jute cloth hung there. These were the Indian coolie lines. Punjabis, South Indians, Burmese, Bengalis, Oriyas, Hindus and Muslims, men and women – nearly a thousand of them – lived in these conditions day after, month after month, year after year.”⁵⁷ Seeing his curiosity, his companion remarks: “Today is a holiday for them. Else you would have witnessed one or two brawls near these water taps.”⁵⁸ This was a place in Rangoon where water was a scarce commodity and there was no privacy when using the washroom.

He is appalled at the nonchalant manner in which these people seemed to have accepted their condition in life. When he visits a workman’s hut, he and his companion discover the worker (Manik) drunk on the floor unable to get up and receive them. The older of two children, a ten or twelve year old girl takes care of all the cooking, cleaning the utensils and even looks after the younger brother, while at the same time fetching a bottle of liquor for her father. The mother of the children had left them to live openly with a lover in another part of the city and there was no one to left to take care of the house.⁵⁹

Apurba’s middle class sensibilities are deeply shaken and he is unable to stay in the filthy and dingy room any longer. They visit other homes and Apurba encounters more such scenes, each one leaving him more disturbed than before. In another shed, he finds the worker (and the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 165.

household earner) unable to get back to work because of an accident on a machine in the factory. And yet he desperately needs the work in order to buy medicine and food for his children who are ill with dysentery. Apurba asks the worker (Panchkari), “doesn’t the manager of the factory offer compensation?”⁶⁰ Panchkari replies, “what compensation for a day laborer? I am being told to vacate this room if I am unable to go to work. They will allot me a room again when I return to work. Where can I go in this condition? Maybe if I plead with the younger sahib, they will let me stay for a week more. I have been working here for such a long time and this is what I get.”⁶¹ Apurba is clearly distressed and tries to help by giving a few rupees but he is stopped (by his acquaintance) because any financial help would only be spent on alcohol and not medicines.

Such human degradation and depravity are beyond Apurba’s experience and imagination. It makes him question (and through him the author poses this question for the readers) who was to blame for the manner in which the Indian migrant poor is forced to live in Rangoon. Through the protagonist, the author wants the reader to question whether the coolie poor was solely responsible for the poverty and vice that he lives in or whether the colonial capitalist class which had created this exploitative and discriminatory structure in the first place and his (and his own class’s) culpability in all this.

Conclusion

This chapter tries to bring together these different narratives or voices on the steamship to Burma and the initial landing. The journey across the ocean was a physical hardship because of the various quarantine rules imposed by the colonial authorities. At the same time, it was an

⁶⁰ Chattopadhyaya, *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, 167.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

emotional experience for thousands who fearfully waited to get back safely on land. On the wharf, the delay and the humiliation of being probed and examined publicly was experienced by both the coolie laboring poor and the middle class Indian passenger. But the middle class passengers had the opportunity to voice their grievances on an official platform and therefore one can hear their opinions and experiences, while the voice of the coolie laborer is lost in the din. I would like to describe this journey to Burma as more than just boarding a ship and crossing the waters. Rather, travel is an experience of hardship, discovery, a new opportunity and Burma is a place (at least in the mind of this prominent middle-class Bengali author) where the middle-class Bengali clerk through this crossing, discovers his own inadequacies and is forced to confront the prejudices that the Indian (upper class and caste Hindu) society harbors and to question who needs to take the responsibility to remove them.

The identification of the Indian passenger as a carrier of germs and disease during these quarantine examinations is a prelude to the larger medical discourses that the Indian migrant is subjected to when he arrives in Rangoon. The migrant urban worker is forced to live in cramped and unhygienic quarters because of prevailing high rents and lack of suitable accommodation. But the colonial administration and medical authorities attribute this to his unhygienic habits and deliberate desire to live in poverty, disease and squalor so that he could save money and send it back home. In the next chapter, I explore how during 1920s and 1930s, city planners and council members in the Burma Legislative Council use the information gathered on Indian migrants in Rangoon living in these low-income tenements and propose to bring specific immigration restrictions against manual laborers coming to Burma for reasons of employment.

CHAPTER THREE

Low Income Housing, City Planning and Immigration Debates in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma

Introduction

Commenting on the situation in Burma during the 1930s, British colonial official, J. S. Furnivall described it as a “plural society” where different ethnic and socio-economic groups came together only in the marketplace with no common or shared values. He observed that the interest of the Burman majority was subordinated to the interests of the immigrant or the foreign ethnic minority.¹ Following Furnivall’s interpretation, anti-Indian rhetoric and immigration restrictions against Indians in 1930s Burma have been read as a reaction to the racial tensions in this “plural society” in a situation of economic crisis within a colonial setup.² While recognizing the importance of Furnivall’s theoretical paradigm on colonial societies and particularly Burmese colonial society in the early twentieth century, this chapter focuses on a very specific local concern and tries to understand how the discourse on low-income housing created conditions for anti-Indian xenophobic nationalism in Rangoon, and ultimately led to creation of immigration restrictions against manual laborers from India traveling to Burma for reasons of employment. By focusing on this specific issue, I challenge the one-dimensional reading of race being the determining factor in the interactions within the plural society, but rather suggest how it was complicated by the dynamics of class. Further, while acknowledging the power of the colonial economy and the bureaucratic apparatus, my argument brings together many other forces – the growing tide of nationalism, prevalent discourses on scientific city planning and disease, and

¹ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, 311.

² Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*.

perceptions of immigrants and immigration restrictions in early twentieth century across many cities in Asia and the world. In doing so, I hope to highlight the specificities in the particular case of Rangoon and the manner in which it led to the creation of a negative stereotype of the Indian immigrant, but at the same time place this case study amidst similar developments in a global context.

In the previous chapter, I traced the journey of the Indian migrant abroad the steamship to Burma and the various medical examinations he was subjected to at the port of arrival. Through this process, the coolie passenger was declared to be a source of unclean habits (because of ignorance), contamination and health hazard to fellow (upper class) passengers on the ship and ultimately to the city. In this chapter, I take this argument further and show how in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burmese, Indian and European elite in the city impute the shortage of affordable and clean housing to the Indian migrant laboring poor. Moreover, I demonstrate how these different groups use this particular local issue during immigration debates in the legislative council and the public sphere in Burma and India in order to create immigration restrictions against the lower class Indian migrant. The complex process of contestation and negotiation on class lines (across ethnic divide) during these debates reaffirms the need to question the presumed homogenous category of the immigrant and understand the specific process through which it is fashioned.

The chapter is organized thematically into four sections: in the first section, I describe the attempts by city councilors to find a solution to the housing shortage in the city Rangoon and the economic crisis that loomed in Burma during 1920s and 1930s. This background will help to situate how and why the Indian poor entered the discussions in the immigration restrictions in Burma. I place the specifics in Rangoon amidst similar endeavors in many other cities of the

British Empire such as Bombay, Colombo, and Singapore and note the manner in which it in fact created a land crisis in Rangoon. The task of cleaning and beautifying all these cities and constructing new buildings was entrusted to a new organization called the Development Trust created specifically for this purpose. The work of the Trust involved clearing out unhygienic, poorly constructed, ill-ventilated low-income houses situated in areas, which were previously swamps and were therefore conducive to spread of disease. Also, the Trust was assigned to advise the government on alternative living arrangements for inhabitants of low-income housing. I argue that in the context of Rangoon, the activities of the Trust itself and the trade depression that followed the First World War caused a huge rise in the prices of land throughout the city causing the concentration of property in a few hands and forcing tenants to pay high rents. The failure of the Trust to solve the housing crisis and generate sufficient finances for the cause raised several questions in the Legislative Council of Burma: who were the main occupants of these tenements and how much did the city authorities owe to subsidize and provide for their housing? Apart from the avowed civic roles of the councilors, I argue that the true motive behind the urgency to find a solution to the housing problem in Rangoon lay in the economic interests of the councilors themselves. Many of them were builders; landlords, tenants or sub-tenants in the city and attempts at rent control or providing subsidies affected them directly or indirectly. Amidst these divergent interests and voices, a consensus gradually emerged which identified the migrant laborer especially those from certain Indian provinces as the primary occupants in this low-income tenement housing.

In the second section, I focus on how a scientific city planning discourse arose in Rangoon and in many other port cities of the world and how it led to an environment of racial stereotyping of migrants. Extensive surveys, technical and statistical reports were published

during the 1920s about the labor and housing question in Rangoon. As part of the norm of scientific urban planning in the early twentieth century, medical experts gathered evidence on the comparative dietary habits, expenditure behaviors and budgets of Burmese and Indian single and family units. This was a process of knowledge production about the Indian laboring poor in Burma: where did they come from in India? Where did they live in Burma? Were they married or single? How many children did they have? When did they come to Burma and why? What kind of jobs did they work in? How much did they earn in Burma as compared to in India? What did they wear? What were their household expenditures? What were their eating, drinking and smoking habits (as compared to Burmese households) and so on? These conclusions backed by statistical figures could then be selectively used in public and Council debates as supporting data for arguments that aimed to distinguish the Indian migrant from indigenous Burmese labor. Over a period of time, it came to be established that the migrant labor lived in cheaper dwellings, economized on food and other necessities in order to save money to send back home. Such reports and representations were also accompanied by frequent literary and visual images in print media that identified “unclean” and “unhygienic” and “immoral” as characteristics typical of the unskilled migrant Indian laborer in Burma. Using these scientific and statistical data and a growing popular consensus, an argument emerged whereby the shortage of clean and affordable housing was no longer seen as a responsibility of the Rangoon Development Trust or the employers, but the result of the habits of the migrant laborers themselves. Particularly, it was emphasized that the Indian immigrant *willingly* accepted bad living conditions and overcrowding in order to save money to take back home.

In the third section, I shift to the various political developments in Burma during the 1930s, particularly the growing national movement for self-determination and separation from

British India and how the Indian migrant became a central figure for anti-colonial and anti-foreigner nationalism in Burma. The large influx of outside migrant labor and particularly Indian labor during this period was resented by Burmese workforce and there were increasing demands by Burmese nationalists to restrict them. The housing question therefore, was no longer merely a local civic question but was converted into a political question. In 1931-32, the *Rangoon Labor Housing Conference* was held to find a solution to the housing problems in the city. Several groups were represented at the conference: members of the Legislative Council, representatives of Indian communities in Burma, British administrators, delegates from the Rangoon Development Trust, members of the Municipal Council of Rangoon, Rent Enquiry Committee and the Public Health Committee. The spokesperson for the Conference defined the housing problem as essentially a problem of “housing of the immigrant Indian laborers in Rangoon.... but such a definition obscured the general problem of Indian labor immigration from which the particular problem could not be separated.”³ Both in official and unofficial circles, the figure of the inhabitant of the low-income tenements in the city of Rangoon was transformed from being a poor laborer from certain provinces of India into an unwanted immigrant who was not only responsible for disease and filth in the center of the city but was also responsible for displacing the Burmese labor in the economy. Both could be countered by restricting the immigrant labor.

In the final section, I discuss the specific immigration restrictions that were brought into place against migrant labor from India and how Indian community leaders protested against it while defending their own class interests. On the eve of proposal for separation of Burma from India (1935), an official proposal was put forward, based on the statistics generated on the number of persons entering Burma annually to create the legal categories: “resident domiciled”

³ *Report of the Rangoon Labor Housing Conference with Appendices and Minutes of Dissent* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery, Burma, 1933) [IOR: V/27/780/18], 18.

and “resident non-domiciled.” Thus, persons who had been “resident” in Burma for a specific number of years, and could provide permanent residential qualifications like property-tax, income-tax, rent receipts and so on would be considered “domiciled.” The proposed plan for Burma as a separate province further recommended that the Legislative Council pass a statute and introduce a Bill advocating immigration restrictions against persons who were “resident” in Burma but “domiciled” in India, which meant that they were in Burma for a very short period of time (less than three years) or made frequent trips between India and Burma or were in transitory occupation (moving from town to town within Burma).

The proposal met with outrage and strong opposition from Indian representatives to the Council. In a speech in 1935, Indian representative Rai Bahadur R. K. Ghose declared it to be “a humiliation upon the whole Indian nation...no self-respecting Indian can possibly subscribe to some of the provisions referring to Indians embodied in the Joint Select Committee Report.”⁴ The indignation was not so much because low-income laboring poor were being restricted from freely coming to Burma, but because the Indian community as a whole had been singled out for these controls. Further, it was argued that this could be made a ruse for restricting “men of good standing” in the community, especially businessmen, from entering into Burma. As S.A.S. Tyabji added to the debate, “by stating that it would be reasonable to give powers to regulate immigration of labor, advantage is taken and that is now made a reason for including the whole of the Indian population and *to place all of them in the same level...*”⁵ The anti-immigration debates were therefore not simply about ethnicities and foreignness or Burmese against Indians,

⁴ R.K. Ghose, “Debate on the Joint Parliamentary Committee Report” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (19th February 1935).

⁵ S.A.S Tyabji, “Debate on the Joint Parliamentary Committee Report” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (20th February 1935).

it was as much about class and rich propertied Indians refusing to be clubbed with low-income laboring Indians.

By the mid-twentieth century, the processes of identification, border control, and standardized immigration restrictions had become integral parts of the function of modern nation-state. In 1937, with the official separation of Burma from the provinces of India, official procedures were put in place to restrict laborers from visiting Burma for reasons of seasonal employment. By 1940, permits of travel were divided into ‘A’ and ‘B’ categories. The ‘A’ permit was available only for persons of substantial means, who could pass literacy tests and could show residential qualifications. Thus, the Indian Council members and the propertied elites could continue to travel and reside in Burma without hindrance. The ‘B’ category referred to unskilled laborers with limited means who intended to visit Burma for a short period of time in order to earn money and return home. The ‘B’ permit was to be for the maximum period of three years and with a substantial sum of deposit and fees to be paid by the employer.⁶ Thus, after Burma separated from British India in 1937, the Burmese government legally restricted Indian immigrants from entering Burma for reasons of employment. This chapter draws a parallel between the process by which migrants in low-income tenements were removed from the city commercial center and their ultimate removal from the emerging Burmese nation.

⁶ Satyamurti, *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement: A Nation in Revolt* (New Delhi: Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941), 22-30.

I. The Rangoon Development Trust, the “Housing Crisis” and the Question of Responsibility in the Burma Legislative Council Debates

The whole aim of the Rangoon Development Trust is to make Rangoon a better place to live in not only for the rich but also for those who are less rich and also for the poor, and the only way of doing so is to reclaim and sell the land which is near the heart of the city [where the poor currently work and live] at high market prices and to purchase land, build and improve communications for the poor who can be moved away from the heart of the city.

Finance Member, Burma Legislative Council, explaining the reason for loan of rupees ten lakhs (one million rupees) by the government to the Rangoon Improvement Trust.⁷

In a laudatory article in the journal *Town Planning Review*, the Municipal Commissioner of Rangoon, Morgan Webb, announced the inauguration of a new era in the history of planning in Rangoon with the introduction of Improvement Trust in 1921. Following the example of many other cities of the British Indian Empire, he claimed that Rangoon had finally decided to regulate its future expansion in accordance with the modern accepted principles of town planning.⁸ The Trust was formed with the express intention of clearing the center of the town of overcrowded

⁷ Finance Member, “Demand for Grants” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (1923) (henceforth *BLCP*).

⁸ Morgan Webb, “The Development of Rangoon,” *The Town Planning Review* 10:1 (Jan 1923).

On 29th January 1921, an article was published in the popular Burmese newspaper *Thuriya* (The Sun), “How to make Rangoon Healthy and Beautiful.” It discussed the future prospects of the city under the Rangoon Development Trust. A committee had been instituted under Sir Morgan Webb as the President/Chairman and fourteen other members. It however had only two Burmese members (both already part of the Municipal Corporation), one Indian and no Chinese members. The main work at hand was to level the ground and drain the waterlogged land in order to build new buildings. The problem until that date had been to find the required funds. In 1914, an attempt had been made under a municipal committee and money was raised (nearly one million) by land sale. But the land had been sold too cheaply. The article claimed that the task which the new Trust had to face were manifold: first, to reclaim the water-logged land and unsanitary settlements in both the eastern and western part of Rangoon and second, to provide accommodation for the housing of the poorer classes in dilapidated neighborhoods, who had to be removed to a new location and third, to construct new roads which would enable the suburbs to develop. The areas under reclamation work were: in the east, the land near Monkey Point and the area between the town proper, the Pazundaung Creak, and the proposed race course at Kyaikasan and in the west as far as Kemmedine. Other important suburban road developments (the University Avenue and Voyle Road), trams and railway lines have been proposed to link suburban areas in the north.

insanitary housing, reclaiming water-logged lands and developing roads leading to the suburban areas where the urban underclass could reside in cheaper, safer and more sanitary dwellings. The administrators were influenced by the vigorous town planning movement in Britain, which had been developing from the turn of the century and had culminated in the passing of the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909. This reformist zeal was transmitted to several cities of the British Empire where increases in the urban population coincided with virulent bubonic plague scares in the same period.⁹ In Bombay the perception of a “threat to public health” posed by the squalid housing conditions of the laboring classes seems to have been a major factor in the formation of the City Improvement Trust (1898).¹⁰ Similar Trusts and housing ordinances emerged in Calcutta (1912), Colombo (1915) and Rangoon (1920) in the space of few years.¹¹ The outcome however fell short of expectations in most cases: the Trusts were faced with persistent shortage of resources and unable to create alternative affordable accommodation. Often the result was simply the demolition of low-income neighborhoods and rise in land prices that benefited the land-owning class. The laboring classes were simply displaced into overcrowded tenements in other areas with even higher rents.

⁹ At the *Second All India Sanitary Conference*, held in 1912 in Madras, the “introduction on modern lines of town planning schemes” was declared to be among “the most urgently required sanitary needs in India.” Resolution passed at the All Indian Sanitary Conference, Madras, 11-16 November 1912, in *Parliamentary Papers, East India (Sanitary Measures), Report on Sanitary Measures in India, Sessions: 1911-12, Vol. LXIII*, CD. 7113, 73 cited in Nandini Gooptu, *The politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Prashant Kidambi, "Housing the Poor in a Colonial City: Bombay Improvement Trust 1898-1918," *Studies in History* 17:1 (2001): 57-91.

¹¹ See Nihal Perera, “Indigenizing the Colonial City: Late 19th-century Colombo and its Landscape,” *Urban Studies* 39: 9 (2002): 1703-1721; “The Planners' City: the Construction of a Town Planning Perception of Colombo,” *Environment and Planning A* 40-1 (2008): 57-73; “Importing Problems: The Impact of a Housing Ordinance on Colombo, Sri Lanka,” *The Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde Arabe* 8:1-2 (2005): 61-76. Also, see Richard Harris, “Housing Policy for the Colonial City: The British and Dutch Experience Compared, 1901-1949,” *Urban Geography* 30:8 (2009): 815-837. John Griffiths, “Were there Municipal Networks in the British World c. 1890–1939?” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37:4 (December 2009): 575–597.

The consequences in the case of Rangoon were discernibly similar. The process of reclaiming waterlogged land in the city required equipment and labor power and consequently substantial sums of money.¹² It was recommended that money be raised through taxation. The cost of such renovations was therefore transferred in the form of taxes or rents to the persons residing in houses living on such lands. As a result of these initiatives, there was a substantial increase between 300 to 400 percent, in rents in some central commercial parts of Rangoon.¹³ In many cases, owners of the houses, mostly of Burmese origin, were forced to part with their land and were evicted on default of payments. In many cases they were forced to sell it to the Development Trust. Thus, the Development Trust, along with certain other big housing and construction companies like the Pazundaung Bazaar Company and Soortee Burra Bazaar Company, emerged as the biggest landowners in Rangoon.¹⁴ The work of the Development Trust had only aggravated the problem of housing and high rents of housing in Rangoon since the First World War and the consequent trade depression. While there was a growing demand for housing and space for construction, the building infrastructure within the city or the suburbs had remained the same.

If the Development Trust's attempts at town planning had increased the rents manifold,

¹² B. R. Pearn, *A History of Rangoon* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1939), 281. In the beginning it was found that some of the reclaimed land was being occupied before it had been equipped with drains and sanitation. It was also found that large areas of reclaimed land was coming into the hands of builders and speculators who were utilizing the buildings for commercial purposes or for letting it to tenants. So no relief was afforded to the shortage of housing in the town. Another difficulty was that the system of drainage introduced in East Rangoon proved defective. A complaint was made in the Municipal Report of 1903-04 that in even moderately heavy rain, much of East Rangoon flooded worse than prior to the drainage scheme. Also, prior to the institution of the Trust the reclamation schemes had met with substantial financial difficulties as a result of maladministration.

¹³ *BLCP, 1926*. In a place called Yegyaw, people had been previously paying rents from Rs. 4 to Rs. 6. The rent had increased in the range of Rs. 400-463. In the case of Stockade Road, tenants had been paying Rs. 4 to Rs. 12; after the rent increase they had to pay Rs. 375 a quarter. In the case of Culvert Road, the previous rent was Rs. 10, and they had to pay Rs. 108. In the 118th Street, they used to pay Rs. 9 and they had to pay Rs. 129.

¹⁴ During these years the Rangoon Court was deluged by a number of cases where Companies in Rangoon had turned into building owners with tenants and sub-tenants and was in the process of evicting them by raising the rent.

the effect of the First World War and the consequent trade depression severely hit lower-middle class and the poor working class in Rangoon and their capacity to pay this inflated rent. In the countryside, the combined efforts and salaries of all the adult members of a laborer's household were often not sufficient to meet rising living costs. Consequently, many agricultural laborers were forced to migrate to cities to work part-time as carters or coolies and many others turned to crime in their struggle to survive in an economy that was increasingly unfavorable for persons engaged in agrarian production.¹⁵ But the city was not immune from the effects of economic retrenchment and was incapable of accommodating this new migrant population.

In 1914, in Rangoon, approximately 70 percent of the population was in some manner or the other associated with the rice trade. Rice mills on the whole employed about one-third of the total industrial labor force and the salaries of these large numbers of people, who were paid on a weekly or a monthly basis, depended on the timely sale of the rice harvest. These salaried workers employed in the factory or the mills were strongly affected by the fluctuation in the price of rice. During 1917, the price of milled rice declined from Rs. 130-140 per 100 baskets to Rs. 80. At the end of September 1917, more than one million tonnes of rice, or about 40 percent of the country's exportable surplus for the year remained in the hands of millers and middlemen, as there was a embargo against ships from Burma to other parts of Asia and Europe.¹⁶ The War years had not only led to a decline in incomes but had also led to steep inflation and an increase in the cost of living in the city. The retail prices of essential dietary commodities (with the exception of rice) had almost doubled (see Table 1).

¹⁵ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 153.

¹⁶ Paul H. Krastoska, "The British Empire and the Southeast Asian Rice Crisis of 1919-1921," *Modern Asian Studies* 24:1 (1990): 115-146.

Table 2¹⁷

Retail Price-levels (index numbers) of Certain Articles in Rangoon for the years 1913 and 1919

Year	Rice (Common sort)	Rice (Best sort)	Wheat	Arhar Dal (Pulses)	Salt	General Average
1913	153	168	112	118	121	134
1919	133	159	236	369	210	221

Retrenchment was the order of the day in most government and private offices. The salaried class had to depend on the continuous monthly loans and advances (with large sums of interests) in order to sustain itself. Writing on the lower-middle class in Rangoon in the early decades of the Twentieth century, U Thein Pe Myint described the plight of the Burmese clerical class. The protagonist of his story is a clerk in the (government) Secretariat office. “He was always in debt. In the beginning he thought he was the only one in debt. In fact, the whole community of the clerks was swimming in debt. It was only the third day of the month. Already there was not a *paise* (penny) left from his salary. He would have to visit the moneylender again. The house rent had to be paid, and monthly provisions had to be paid for...”¹⁸ The feeling was echoed in popular cartoons in Rangoon around this time. In the following cartoon published in the newspaper *Thuriya* in 1918 (figure 1), the protagonist is the clerk who is hounded by creditors as soon as he gets his monthly salary, and while he is forced to pay them off, he returns

¹⁷ E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labor in Rangoon* (London, Oxford University Press, 1933), appendix II.

¹⁸ Thein Pe Myint, *Sweet and Sour: Burmese Short Stories* (translated by Usha Narayanan) (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999). Thein Pe Myint or *Thakin* Thein Pe သခင် သိန်းဝင်း (July 1914 – 15 January 1978) was an influential Burmese politician, writer and journalist.

home empty handed to his wife.

Figure 6¹⁹

“The Life of a Burmese Clerk in Rangoon” by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



As the clerk gets his pay cheque, he is hounded by creditors (Burmese, Indian and Chinese). He drowns himself in alcohol with whatever small change he is left with. While at home, the clerk’s wife is waiting late into the night expecting her husband to bring his pay cheque.

¹⁹ *Thuriya* (May 1918).

The effect of the deteriorating economic condition was also felt on the rents on commercial establishments owned by petty shopkeepers and traders as well as the rooms occupied by small petty clerks, low-income employees and factory and rice mill laborers in the commercial center of the city. In this second cartoon (Figure 2) published in the popular *Deedok Weekly Journal* the cartoonist describes the tenant's problems in retaining a roof over their heads in Rangoon.

The average rent of a 12½ ft. by 40 ft. floor-space room in a small tenement was between Rs. 30 to Rs. 50 per month.²⁰ An overview of the index number of cost of living, particularly rents in some of these low-income tenements in Rangoon between the years 1913 and 1928 will indicate the high rents prevailing in the city during these years (Table 2) while the salaries of these people had not grown concurrently. A worker in the Rangoon rice mill in 1916 could earn approximately a daily wage 8 *annas*-5*paise* and the maximum wage of one *rupee* - 8 *annas*, whereas a worker in a saw-mill would earn approx. 7 *annas*-6 *paise* and maximum amount of a rupee.²¹ If in a month, these workers were earning in the range of Rs. 15-20, even after sharing this small room with (at times) thirty to forty people to offset the costs, a substantial portion would be devoted to house rent. Thus, rather than an actual shortage of housing, the post-1920 housing problem was that rents continued to increase, seemingly unabated, despite the falling international price of rice, falling wages, and rising unemployment.

²⁰ A. Narayan Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma*, 121.

²¹ N. R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 45.

Figure 7²²

“The Tenant’s Problems in Rangoon” by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



The tenants are unable to pay the monthly rent. The landlord and the landlady throw out everything on the street. It is a huge trouble living in Rangoon.

²² *Deedok Weekly Journal* (December 1935).

Table 3²³**Index Number for Rents in Rangoon between 1913-1928**

Years	Index number for rent rate during the years	Average monthly salary of a rice mill worker in Rangoon
1913 (Base Year)	100	-
1914	103	-
1915	108	-
1916	117	-
1917	125	-
1918	134	Rs. 18-20 (approx.)*
1919-26 (Years of rent control)	140	-
1927	180	-
1928	180	Rs. 21-14-0*

Thousands of factory laborers, clerks and lower-middle class staff in employed government offices and private firms lived in tenement housing spread in these areas -- most notably in the streets from No. 1 in Lanmadaw to No. 44 in East Rangoon and in Botataung and in Lower and Upper Pazundaung (See map of Rangoon, figure 3). Most of these were the areas surrounding big rice and timber mills near the Rangoon River.²⁴ Table 3 shows the occupational distribution of the urban underclass in Rangoon during the 1920s. This is however, only the

²³ E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*, Appendix XLIII. * Both figures are approximate estimates.

²⁴ A. Narayan Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma*, 121.

official figure; in reality, there was a huge casual labor in Rangoon, which was also dependent on the tenement housing. Thus, rickshaw-pullers, hand-cart pullers and bullock-cart drivers, laborers working in the coal yards, sampans (dock workers) in the docks, coolie laborers in salt godowns (storages) and other casual laborers in Rangoon was badly effected due to the economic recession.

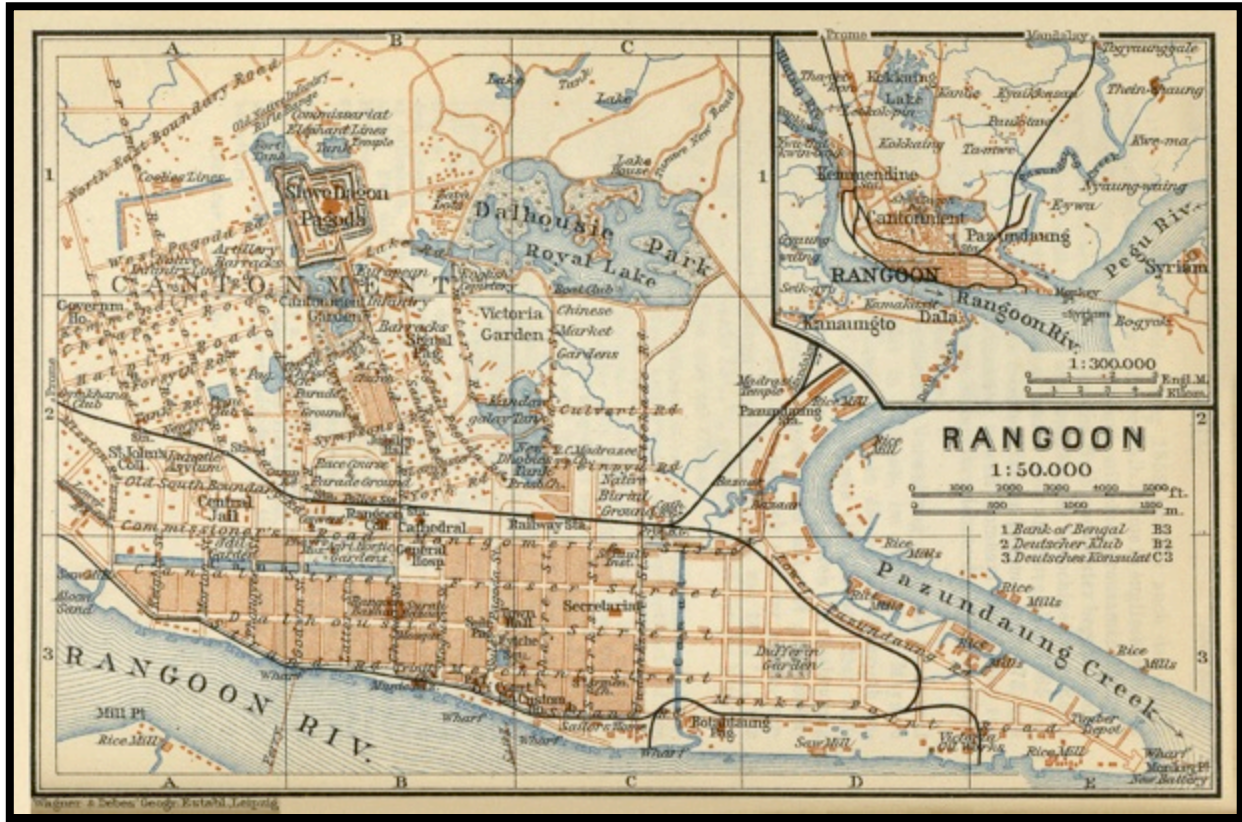
Table 4²⁵

Average Daily Number of Persons Employed in Principal Factories in Rangoon District in 1928

Category of Occupation	Roughly Numbers Employed
Government Docks	1,100
Government Printing	1,086
Minerals and metals	3,253
Engineering	6,000
Ice and Aerated Waters	480
Printing and Binding	1,225
Saw Mills	6,594
Rice Mills	11,991
Matches	1,718
Petroleum Refineries	1,951

²⁵ Ibid.,118.

Figure 8²⁶
 Map of Rangoon (1914)



In the above map, the marked area around the Pazundaung creek (near the Rangoon river) is the commercial center of the town (around the rice mills), inhabited by laboring classes as well as lower-middle class income groups.

²⁶ Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. The scanned map is part of the book *Indien: Handbuch Für Reisende* published by Verlag von Karl Baedeker in Leipzig, 1914.

O.H.K. Spate and L.W. Trueblood, "Rangoon: A Study in Urban Geography," *Geographical Review*, 31:1 (January, 1942): 56-73. The business concentration of Rangoon was small areas in East and West Town circles. Marked concentration occurred in the streets and by-lanes: near the Courts almost every entrance had lawyers' boards, and the lower part of the Mogul Street (in downtown Rangoon) which lay between Sule Pagoda and the bazaars, was lined with the offices and shops of Chettiers (Indian bankers and moneylenders), rice brokers and speculators, and jewelers. Further up the street, druggists and doctors of various qualifications and repute monopolized the frontages. Apart from this, all the main streets had continuous rows of petty retailers and artisans and many Indian shopkeepers.

In order to offset the “housing crisis” in Rangoon and prevent a further rise in rent, the Rent Act was introduced in the city in 1920. Under the Act, a ceiling was placed on the annual rise in the rent of tenement housing and commercial buildings. With the amendment in the Rent Act by a ruling in 1922, landlords were allowed to increase the rent by up to 25 percent in all cases where they could prove to the satisfaction of the Rent Controller that the rent of the building had been fixed too low in the first instance. They were also given a free hand to charge whatever rent they wished in any new buildings erected by them since the passing of the Act.²⁷

Thus, the housing question as it entered the Burma Legislative Council in 1923, became a site for contestation between various interest groups and lobbies some of whose representatives has seats on the Council. On one hand, there was a new class of landlords who had recently invested their money in housing property in Rangoon. In anticipation of the likely increment of house rents after the war, the new class of landlords had offered attractive prices to the owners of the houses, who were mostly Burmese, and succeeded in getting the property transferred to themselves. House rent was subsequently increased and the value of the houses became greater according to the rent it fetched. Following the work of the Rangoon Development Trust, the process was repeated all over again. The original homeowners who had sold their property for the fraction of post-War prices were pushed to the suburbs. On the other hand, a new rich class of people came to occupy the housing property in the city center of Rangoon who leased it out for commercial purposes. However, these landlords and builders did not have ownership of the land but only had the legal lease to the buildings (legally they were defined as “squatters”). In reality, the lands belonged to the government, and in this case, the Rangoon Development Trust and the new landlords were tenants to the Trust. Thus, the increasing monthly rent that the

²⁷ Burma Legislative Department, *An Act to Restrict the Increase the Rent in Rangoon* [Burma Act no. II of 1920] (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1921).

landowners and building companies owed to the Trust could only be paid with the building being parceled out (divided into many units) and sub-tenanted.

This vicious cycle of rent increase and split tenancy led to an increasing number of court cases being registered at the Rangoon Small Cause court. Between 1920 and 23, 649 ejection suits were filed on behalf of the landlords, out of which 445 were decreed, 143 dismissed and the remainder either compromised or withdrawn and 51 suits were still pending in 1923.²⁸ In 70 percent of the cases, the landlords were actually successful in obtaining decrees for eviction. Although the Rent Act was introduced, this did not deter the landlords from taking their chance in the Court. They filed suits against the tenants in the court claiming that they wanted to develop the land. For example in 1919, in the Tatmye quarter in Rangoon, the Pazundaung Bazaar Company (one of the building companies in Rangoon), gave notices of eviction to two to three thousand tenants and sub-tenants (mostly Burmese) who resided in *pakka* buildings (brick structures) on the land owned by the Company. After two previous rent increases, when the Company had tried to increase the rent again, they met with resistance by the residents who were unable to pay the new raised rent. The landlord threatened to pull down the houses, which brought about a violent confrontation between the two groups as the residents claimed that they were tenants in perpetuity and had been living on the land for several generations. The Municipal Commissioner of Rangoon had to intervene and arbitrate amongst the disputing parties. In order to resolve such increasing number of conflicts between owners and tenants in the city the Government was forced to pass the Rent Act in 1920 in the Legislative Council of Burma.²⁹

Several representatives from this class of tenants and subtenants in the council claimed

²⁸ *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1923.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

that if the Rent Act were allowed to relapse (as it had been implemented for a specified time to alleviate the spiraling rent in the city), it would lead to large number of people being rendered homeless.³⁰ There were also complaints about extortion rackets being operated in the name of Trust activities. In one case, with the death of the main tenant, the landlord company tried to dispossess the relatives on the ground that the lease had ended. Knowing well that the case would not hold up in court, as according to the Rent Act the legal category “tenant” would include relatives as well, the company sought to reach an out-of-court settlement with the family by increasing the rent.³¹

Apart from rendering people homeless, the Trust was also seen as a disruptive force in the social and religious life of the city. For example, in 1934, the Trust sought to demolish a temple in Rangoon, situated at the corner of Voyle Road and Boundary Road. Over the years, the temple had also become a site of popular festivals and celebrations. The Act was seen as especially wounding the religious sentiments of the lower-caste Hindu laboring poor in Rangoon who visited the temple in large numbers. According to a petition filed by the worshipers, the military authorities gave them the site around 1870 or 1875 (at about Rs. 20) when the Indian regiments had arrived in Rangoon. Since then, the site had been a center of popular worship for the soldiers, followers, and their descendants and other people in the locality (and even nearby villages). The reason given for demolition was to extend the golf link course in the city. As the day for demolition of the temple premises drew nearer, there seemed to be a stalemate in the negotiations between the two parties (the temple management committee and the Trust) again forcing the Municipal Council had to intervene. The Trust proposed an alternative site for the Temple where the Management committee could remove the temple’s images and the Trust

³⁰ “Rangoon Rent Amendment Bill” *BLCP*, (1926).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

would pay a compensation of Rs. 80. In the end, the temple, amongst many other similar places of worship, was razed to the ground by the Trust and it further raised uncomfortable questions amongst city residents as to the limits for the Trust's activities.³²

Civic concern and altruism may have been part of the stimulus for the renewal of the Rent Act and restraint on Trust's activities, but there were certainly larger interests at play in the Legislative Council. Several Councilors belonged to the upper middle class and upper sections of Rangoon society. They were also landlords or tenants or sub-tenants in some form or other and had signed leases with building companies and the Rangoon Development Trust. For example, A. V. Joseph (representative from East Rangoon) defended the position of landlords and recommended that a sub-committee be appointed to find out whether it was really required to extend the Rent Act any further and with what amendments. He argued, "surely the War had brought construction and development work in the city to a standstill but there was no reason now railway lines, tramlines etc. could not be built in the suburbs and the low-income groups from the city could not be gradually shifted there." As a landlord in Rangoon he further recounted his own experiences with the tenant population:

You know what the poorer class of people and the middle class of people are. They do not want to look beyond their own houses...they are only clamoring for their rents to be reduced *at the expense of the landlord*. Now under the Rent Control they have only to pay pre-war rates or an increase of 25 percent. If the tenant refuses to pay we have to go to the court. The court says, "Go to the Rent Controller"; and when we go to the Rent Controller, the case is kept pending for six months and during the period, the tenants do not even pay the rent. We cannot evict the tenant and there is no remedy. The rent deposited with the Rent Controller is much below the pre-war rate.³³

³² *BLCP, 1935*.

³³ "Rangoon Development Trust" *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (1923).

C. H. Campagnac (Burma Legislative Council Debate 11th March 1925). This however did not prevent landlords or the big builder companies to take refuge under the provisions of the Rent Control Act. In 1924-25, Mr. Patail, representative of the Soortee Bazaar Company moved the Rangoon Small Cause Court against the Rangoon Development Trust. The Company happened to be a tenant of the Trust on a particular land and when the Trust tried

There were other objections from representatives of the Burmese and Chinese Chambers of Commerce who were worried about how the continuation of Rent Control in the post-War years would hamper the commercial development of the city. Particular concern was raised about the rent being fixed on the basis of the 1918 rates, the 15 percent increase that had been allowed since then was in their view far too small considering the outlay on the initial cost of the building. This was particularly frustrating to these businessmen, because in many other cities of the British Empire, like in London and Calcutta, rent control had been removed and free market forces had been left to level the demand and supply.³⁴ As one of the members stated it clearly: “the lower middle-class and the laboring poor were simply fighting against the economic forces of the times, which had affected many other cities of the world. To retain them in the commercial center of the city would be only to add to their sufferings. The proper solution was to move them to a cheaper place elsewhere.”³⁵

Many members were also on the boards of professional organizations and municipal bodies in Rangoon and were associated with the work of the Trust. The Finance Minister, for

to increase the rent (or make them purchase it) because the existing rent was too low the Company took shelter under the Rangoon Rent Act.

³⁴ In London, Rent Restriction had been brought into effect as a wartime measure, but had been removed by 1924. Further, on becoming vacant, houses were to be free of the Rent Control Act and landlords who had owned houses since December 1921 were to be allowed to gain possession for themselves or their children without any condition of giving three months' notice to the tenants. In Calcutta, the continuation of the Rent Act was met with severe opposition from the Bengal Chamber of Commerce (the vote was carried by 17 to 9) and would be scrapped within a year.

³⁵ “Rangoon Development Trust” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (1923). In Kanpur for example, the Development Trust was established in early 1920s with the twin aims of clearing urban congestion and protecting the ‘superior’ residences’ or ‘better residential and commercial areas’ from insanitary conditions. The schemes to implement these aims began to displace large number of poor from their existing dwellings. The Annual report of the Lucknow Improvement Trust in 1922 admitted that ‘dehousing’ was a new but unavoidable, problem arising from the Trust’s activities. In 1929, a census was taken of those who would be ‘dehoused’ as consequence of the Trust’s schemes in twenty-seven slums. The census showed that 9,351 people living in 2,400 houses would be dislodged, of whom 3,200 were mill workers, 4,191 general laborers, 376 ekka-tonga drivers (drivers of horse-drawn hackney carriages) and the remaining 1,584 petty shop-keepers, domestic workers and others, possibly casual manual laborers and such self-employed groups as milkmen, carpenters or metal smiths. Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 92.

example, was vocal in his defense of the role of the Rangoon Development Trust and the need for financial gains for the continuation of the work. Previous bodies like the Rangoon Land Sale and Rent Fund had to discontinue their efforts in improving the city precisely because of the lack of sufficient profits.

The Development Trust takes a piece of land, which during the rains is several feet under water. They reclaim it at great expense with clean earth and then spend a lot more money putting in expensive water equipment and then still more money equipping it with sewers and yet the members of this Council say that when fixing the final capital value of the land they have no business to take into consideration any of the money spent on this reclamation and equipment. It is perfectly obvious that on those principles (of financial sacrifice) the reclamation and equipment of unsanitary areas will rapidly come to an end.³⁶

On a public platform, arguments in favor of private commercial interests and the necessity of raising sufficient revenue had to be balanced with declarations of responsibility towards the civic welfare of the city residents particularly as the members had been elected to the council. In 1923, following the implementation of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in Burma, the principle of election was introduced for the first time in the legislature.³⁷ The main issue on

³⁶ *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings, 1923*. Also, *Rangoon Development Trust Report, 1936-37*. Out of the total area of 3,821 acres comprised in the government estate (in the district Rangoon) 3,100 acres were taken over by the Rangoon Development Trust from the Town Reclamation Fund, and no cost was incurred by the Trust on its acquisition, although for account purposes a book value was placed on it of Rs. 33,36,923. The remaining area of 721 acres was acquired by the Trust by purchase or under the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act, and the amount so spent was Rs. 27,17,386 (2.7 million). The amount spent on equipment and reclamation within the area controlled by the Trust was Rs. 1,08,80,804 (10.8 million) and the amount spent on general improvement in was Rs. 72,40,027 (7.2 million). Thus, by 1937 the average cost per acre land held by the Trust was approx. Rs. 6237. The portion of land leased to private owners (industrial leases and squatters) was around 1,267.5 acres and the total income derived from the Trust in 1936-37 was Rs. 14,28,957 (1.4 million).

³⁷ This experiment in governmental reform was inaugurated in Burma in 1922-23. The main provisions were: (a) introduction of the system of Dyarchy, which divided the subjects of administration into "Transferred" and "Reserved." The former was to be under the control of elected "native" representatives and the latter under British government control. Under Burma's 1922 constitution, 58 of the 79 elected members of the legislative council were chosen in general constituencies. Fifteen were elected communally (8 Indians, 5 Karens, one Anglo-Indian, and one British), while the remaining 7 represented various business groups and the university. The governor nominated an additional 23 members, including 2 ex-officio members of the executive council and one member to represent labor. Under the Dyarchy arrangement only those members of the governor's council of ministers in charge of the

which the elections were fought in Rangoon was on the issue whether or not the Rent Act was to be extended and every member elected by a Rangoon constituency gave a pledge to his electorate (the middle-class tax paying public) that he would be in favor of extending the Act. In fact, one of the candidates was unseated shortly before the elections because he presided at a meeting of landlords at which a resolution was passed to work for the repeal of the Rent Act of 1920, and there were other candidates who failed to obtain election seats because they would not give an unequivocal answer to the question put to them by the electorate whether or not they were in favor of extending the Rent Act or not.

Thus, while the Council members in their public proclamations displayed civic concern and accountability towards the inhabitants of the town, commercial development and private property interests still guided their decisions and crucial votes. Many of them were builders; landlords, tenants or sub-tenants in the city and attempts at rent control or providing subsidies affected them directly or indirectly. Between 1920-26, when the Rent Bill was in operation in Rangoon the argument veered to the following issues. First, to identify and place responsibility

transferred subjects (agriculture, excise, health, public works [except irrigation], forestry, and education) were responsible to the Legislative Council. The “reserved subjects”, which were controlled by ministers responsible directly to the governor, included general administrative direction, law and order, land revenue, labor, and finance. Defense and external relations together with currency and coinage, communications and transpiration controls, income tax, and civil and criminal law were the concern of the Central Indian Government at Delhi.

The governor’s control of financial policy severely limited any discretionary power, which ministers in charge of transferred subjects could exercise. The result was that the activities of the ministers of transferred subjects were largely political, not administrative, in character. Any new proposal for so-called “nation-building” objectives invariably involved expenditures, and it could therefore be countered by financial stringency or by increasing taxation.

The suffrage for the forty-four general constituencies created in 1922 was based on the payment of the direct capitation or *thathameda* taxes, averaging around 5 rupees per household. Voters must be at least eighteen years of age. In the fourteen urban constituencies, the suffrage rolls were virtually identical with the municipal election voting lists, which included persons paying taxes on immovable property and others assessed an income tax of 4 rupees or more. In proportion to the total population, the urban centers were considerably overrepresented.

Memorandum of the Government of Burma for the Statutory Commission, Part III (Maymyo: Government Press, 1928), 4. Eight Indian representatives were elected on a communal basis from the eight Indian constituencies in five big cities of Burma – four representatives from Rangoon and one each from Akyab, Bassein, Moulmein and Mandalay. Indian voters in these five cities totaled about 30,325, about 10 percent of the 300,000 Indians living those cities or about 3 percent of the total Indian population of approximately one million in Burma.

on a real or perceived source of the housing problem. Second, to highlight the consequences of shortage of housing on public health in the city before the newspaper reading public and third, sources of revenue that could be generated through taxation in order to construct more buildings and solve the housing crisis.

II. Debating by Numbers: Creating the Racial Stereotype of the Migrant Laborer

Builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation...there are virtually no other facts for the state than those that are contained in the documents.

- James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (1998)³⁸

As the discussion on the housing problem gathered momentum in the Legislative Council and the Burmese public sphere it came to be seen not simply as a shortage of living space but a *deliberate* condition created by the poor “standard of living” and “racial habits” of the tenants themselves. This was the result of two simultaneous processes: first, an increasing zeal amongst municipal officers, health inspectors and policy makers, both in Europe and several cities of the British Empire to incorporate scientific knowledge about diseases, spaces and environment towards city planning. Second, use of scientific/statistical knowledge to produce a corpus of data on the urban poor, particularly migrant urban workers and their impact on the city, its infrastructure, living standards, and distinguish them from indigenous residents and workers.

The impetus towards scientific city planning in cities in the Empire following the First

³⁸ James Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 82.

World War came from similar initiatives in Britain.³⁹ It was emphasized that if city governments were to succeed in their aim of improving the health of their inhabitants, then city planning needed to be undertaken by trained experts and executed using the latest scientific knowledge. First, this would guarantee that health and environmental problems would be dealt with as efficiently as possible. Second, municipal health policies, which were anchored in scientific knowledge, would be “value free” and therefore would not serve any special interests or political causes. The use of scientific knowledge would enable public health officials, so it was argued, to analyze and organize the life of the city in a way, which was above class antagonisms and ethnic tensions, serving the best interests of the whole community.⁴⁰

³⁹ A huge role in this town planning movement in the subcontinent was played by Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) a Scottish biologist, sociologist, geographer, and philanthropist and pioneering town planner. His work in improving the slums of Edinburgh led to an invitation from Lord Pentland (then Governor of Madras) to travel to India to advise on emerging urban planning issues, in particular, how to mediate ‘between the need for public improvement and respect for existing social standards.’ For this, Geddes prepared an exhibition on ‘City and Town Planning’. An exhibit was prepared for display in the Senate Hall of Madras University (1915). This was near the time of the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress and Pentland hoped the exhibit would demonstrate the benefits of British rule. Geddes lectured and worked with Indian surveyors and travelled to Bombay where he held a position in Sociology and Civics at Bombay University from 1919 to 1925. Between 1915 and 1919 Geddes wrote a series of ‘exhaustive town planning reports’ on at least eighteen British Indian cities, a selection of which has been collected together in Jacqueline Tyrwhitt’s *Patrick Geddes in India* (London, L. Humphries, 1947). See Volker M. Welter and James Lawson (eds.) *The City after Patrick Geddes* (Oxford: P. Lang, 2000). Also, H.V. Lanchester, *Talks on Town Planning* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1924).

⁴⁰ As part of this “value free” scientific urban planning discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mathematical and statistical language was developed as a strategy of communication. Voluminous reports produced by the colonial state with numbers, tables, graphs and formulas were all part of this strategy. They were printed to convey results in a *familiar, standardized form*, or to explain how a piece of work was done in a way that can be understood far away. They conveniently *summarize* a multitude of complex events and transactions. See T. M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 1995), preface. Also, Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Social quantification in the field of urban planning, I would like to argue, created a growing corpus of familiar standardized knowledge, a shared common template (on occupations, salaries, dietary habits, expenditures, living conditions, diseases, crime and so on) that could be used by different interest-groups (even with opposing viewpoints) during debates on housing and urban planning in the early twentieth century. Further, this knowledge could be exported to different sites and used as a prototype to accumulate more information and in fact, test and establish theories of scientific urban development. Therefore, restructuring the urban built environment as part of the scientific city planning movement of the twentieth century not only entailed transformation of the physical landscape (new sewage systems, roads, parks and so on), but creating a set of social technologies, as strategies of power to incorporate, categorize, discipline, control and reform the inhabitants of the city. This process of restructuring, as in the case of Rangoon, amongst other cities of the British Empire, produced a number of templates that came to be used in the debates on low-income housing in Legislative Council and the public sphere in Rangoon

Thus, during early twentieth century, municipal sanitary surveillance, demographic surveys on migrant labor and coverage of living conditions of laboring poor had emerged as an established practice in various port cities in Britain, in the United States and Asian cities like Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong and Calcutta. Statistical information through decennial census reports was repeatedly cited to demonstrate the presence of large number of persons from outside the city (in the case of Burma, outside the province) who had come for reasons of employment and whose stay in the city was temporary.⁴¹ Not only a substantial demographic had taken change in the city Rangoon but also, this increasing population was seen to contribute to the

during the 1920s and 1930s. See Marjaana Niemi, *Public Health and Municipal Policy Making: Britain and Sweden 1900-1940* (England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007). Niemi examines the impact of different political aims and pressures on “value free scientific” health policies through the analysis of public health programs in two case studies, one in Birmingham and the other in Gothenburg.

⁴¹ Rangoon as a port city had been developed since the second half of the nineteenth century primarily to service the colonial rice export economy, and as census officials and administrators described it, the demographic composition of the city was now based strictly on economic lines. People (from all races) came only for reasons of employment and not because they necessarily wanted to live there. As one of the Council members, Maung Po Yin Si in his speech in 1923 said: The residents of Rangoon may be classed under three categories: (i) moneyed classes, traders and merchants, (ii) salary and wage earners, and (iii) those in search of employment. Classes two and three usually do not own the houses they occupy although some of those belonging to class one may own houses. People do not ordinarily come and stay at Rangoon for the sake of pleasure. They have to stay here to earn their livelihoods, although they may find employment, the cost of living is inordinately heavy. House rent is a big item on the expenditure side and one would prefer to stay on half-salary in the district and to live an easier life there if possible. Moreover, the sojourn of these people was brief and even seasonal. Most prominent amongst these were the laborers working in the rice mills who came to Burma came from the ports of the Madras presidency (in India) around October and November and worked through the peak of the rice harvesting season and departed in April and May. These were also the months in which the housing conditions in the city were at its worst because of inability to accommodate surplus demand.

Further, it was established that over the years, there had been an increase in the rate of immigration over emigration i.e., more and more of these people, particularly, the unskilled laboring population had stayed behind and were working as casual laborers in the city or had drifted into other towns and to the countryside (even during the rainy season from May till October). Thus, the biggest demographic change that had taken place in Rangoon over the decades had been this increasing temporary or “floating” population for which the civic authorities were hard pressed to find adequate housing.

Approximately, there was an annual increase of about 15,000 persons between 1901-1921. There was also a change in the racial composition of the town residents. In the 1872 Census, the Burmese population of Rangoon was 68,000 constituting about 70 percent of the residents. And Indians constituted a small minority of 16,000 persons or about 16 percent of the population. By 1921, number of Indians had increased to 120,000 respectively, constituting about half of the population of the city. On the other hands, the Burmese were about 33 percent. The rate of growth of the indigenous population had not been able to match the growth in this population coming from outside the province. According to the 1921 census, there were 1,07,843 laborers in the province, employed in establishments with ten or more persons. Out of the total labor force Indians supplied 57.4 percent of the unskilled labor population.

problems of overcrowding, filthy living conditions, shortage of housing, disease and mortality. Participants in the housing debate in Burma stated that the cause of these civic problems could not be blamed on insufficient city infrastructure alone, rather as scientific information and studies in different cities across the world had proved, it in reality was due to the living habits of the urban migrant poor who were identified as the primary occupants of these low-income tenements. Colonial officers, medical men, Burmese representatives cited such statistics on daily expenditure and diet, and the prevalence of diseases to argue that the Indian worker intentionally chose to overcrowd and live in rundown buildings and contribute to squalor and insanitary conditions, in order to save money and send it home as the stay of these migrant workers in Burma was temporary. The housing problem was therefore the consequence of an essential racial and class characteristic.

The argument that this large migrant population was not only a hindrance to planning and aesthetic beauty of the city, but also posed a serious risk to the health of its inhabitants, including themselves, gave the housing problem a far more ominous dimension. Descriptions like: “dark, ill-ventilated houses on sites perennially flooded with rain or tide waters or with stagnant pools of household sullage [?] waste, with scarcely a ray of direct sunshine in the inner room, inhabited by hundreds and thousands of the poor class of the community,” became a template for low-income migrant housing in municipal reports, individual surveys carried out by legislative council members and medical voluntary organizations for the working poor.⁴² These portrayals

⁴² By the second decade of the twentieth century, the connection between defective, overcrowded housing and incidence of disease in Rangoon (as in many other cities) had become well established. Colonial medical and sanitary officials interpreted the causes of the principal epidemic diseases primarily in terms of a localist framework that accorded causal primacy to polluted urban space and filth. In *Annual Reports on Public Health* published in Bombay, Rangoon, Calcutta and Singapore reveal that medical experts writing about diseases prevailing in the city were consistently attributing them to the effects of a localized miasma produced by contaminated air, water or soil. This environmental pollution, which was linked to poor sanitary conditions both within the dwellings and in entire neighborhoods, was held to be the principal predisposing cause of disease. Within dwellings, the presence of a localized miasma was principally attributed to defective ventilation and over crowding. Defective ventilation was

were accompanied by statistical evidence on congestion, diseases and mortality rates and the presence of Indian migrants in these localities and their daily regime was highlighted in each case.⁴³ In the 1926 report of the Rangoon Social Service League, members (including middle and upper class Indian representatives) highlighted the acute condition of housing accommodation in the city and the incoming migrants adding to this scarcity:

seen to prevent the circulation of fresh air, leading thereby to the inhalation of putrid air by those who resided within. The fearful compression within tenements was seen to result in the inhalation of stale and poisonous air, thereby lowering the vitality of the individuals who dwelt therein. Outside the dwellings, the localist perspective associated disease with the environmental pollution caused by poor drainage; the dampness produced by high levels of sub-soil water and a general accumulation of filth in urban public spaces. Chapter Three “A Disease of Locality’: Plague and the Crisis of Sanitary Order” in Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Localist doctrines related to communicable diseases seem to be entrenched within the discourse of medical and sanitary officials in these colonial cities during early twentieth century precisely because they appeared to provide a plausible explanation for the higher mortality rates in the city’s slums’ as well of greater susceptibility of the poor to epidemic diseases. Also see, Ira Klein, “Urban Development and Death: Bombay City, 1870-1914,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 20:4 (1986), 725-754. Prashant Kidambi, “An Infection of locality’: Plague, Pythogenesis and the Poor in Bombay, c. 1896–1905,” *Urban History*, 31: 2 (2004), 249-267.

The situation in Rangoon was a typical case of such disease-creating environment. Describing the living space of Indian working poor in Rangoon, Indian representative to the Council A. Narayana Rao wrote: “These people occupy rooms 12-½ ft. by 40 ft. of floor space. A middleman, gang maistry or some person who wields some influence with men takes the room for lease and crams, say, thirty to forty in that room. During the summer months, many of the boarders had to sleep on the streets and on the pavements and near open drains. During the monsoon rains, the situation became even worse. If there were any further increase in the number of people into these rooms, it would be catastrophic.” A. Narayana Rao, *Indian Labor in Burma*, 121-122.

⁴³ While the city area (in acres) remained the same, the population had increased from 73,309 to 80, 942 between 1901 and 1911 and the density per square mile had increased from 100,102 to 110,524. In some parts of the town, the density was as high as 524 persons per square mile. In the same period, the average number of deaths per thousand was 38.95, the worst years being 1905 and 1906 when owing to a severe plague epidemic; the mortality was 45.9 and 47.57 per thousand respectively. E.L.J. Andrew, *Indian Labor in Rangoon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 170. In the succeeding decade (1911-1921), the average mortality was 36.18 per thousand, the worst years being 1918 and 1919, the years of influenza epidemic, when the death rate was 47.84 and 47.68 respectively. From 1921 to 1931, the average death rate was 33.81.

A Narayana Rao, Chapter “Housing Conditions” in A. Narayan Rao, *Indian Labor in Burma*, 126-127. Lack of ventilation and proper sanitary conditions in low-income tenements in Rangoon were also linked to respiratory diseases, tuberculosis and bowel complaint which, accounted for 4,843 deaths out of a toll of 12,373 or 40 percent of the deaths in Rangoon between 1925-1930. Out of this a huge proportion was the lower-class Indian migrant labor. The highest number of deaths due to Tuberculosis had taken place in the Taroktan and Lanmadaw circles (zones) in the Rangoon city during 1925 - where the density of population and the maximum number of people living were Indian migrants. In 1928-29, the Public Health Department of the Municipal Corporation had embarked on the coercive policy to fine overcrowded low-income tenements of the city. But it failed to provide a long-term solution to the problem at hand and as Rao put it, “it would only result in driving the people from place to place or to the public highways.”

Rangoon passes every week through an acute condition on account of the incoming and outgoing passengers. Madras brings a shipload of passengers; the Coromandel Coast brings 3000 to 4000 in the busy seasons, and from Chittagong come thousands of passengers, and all these have to be provided in the already overcrowded rooms in Rangoon.⁴⁴

Writing on Rangoon in the pre-Second World War period, contemporary observers noted:

In the east are perhaps the most wretched slums of Rangoon, inhabited by (amongst others) the *dhobis*, or Indians washermen. The circle is very mixed racially. It has the third highest death rate and the highest infantile-mortality rate in Rangoon. Yet even here there are contrasts in amenity: the Burmese streets, for example, however poor, are distinctly cleaner than the Indian.⁴⁵

On the other hand, even though middle and upper class Indian medical officers, social workers and legislative representatives were sympathetic to the problems that the Indian laborers faced, they were vocal in their disapproval of the ignorance, apathy and lack of civic mindedness of the Indian lower class inhabitants in Rangoon. While they resented the racial stereotyping of the Indian migrant but even in their own descriptions, they used the same statistics on work, diet, cramped living quarters, disease and even vices to re-stereotype the lower-class Indian worker and how there was an urgent need to materially and morally uplift him and acclimatize him to the correct habits of living in the city. For example, in the *Annual Report of the Health officer of Rangoon* (1925), Dr. Dalal, an Indian medical practitioner in Rangoon (also a member of Legislative Council) wrote, "Personal hygiene and cleanliness are practically unknown to the laboring class; their utter ignorance is a further handicap in lowering their standard of health and

⁴⁴ Cited in "Rangoon Rent Amendment Bill" *BLCP* (September 1926), 179.

⁴⁵ O.H.K. Spate and L.W. Trueblood, "Rangoon: A Study in Urban Geography," *Geographical Review* (January 1942), 71.

their ability to resist disease.”⁴⁶ In another instance, Indian (and European) members of the Social Service League writing about nightly visits (as part of city surveys) to several localities in various parts of the town where the Indian working class lived seemed to be transfixed and filled with contempt by the spectacle of the filth of the immigrant’s quarters.

Walking, he (the social worker or the researcher) will find progress difficult; he will not infrequently have to pick his way over or between the bodies of the sleeping coolies; if a car or other mode of locomotion were employed on such an excursion it would have to be abandoned, as progress in it would be impossible.... as soon as we arrived intimation was passed rapidly that a visit of some persons in authority was taking place and the sleepers swarmed out from the rooms like bees from a hive. The meaning of this is that all the rooms were being over-crowded, and that if the occupiers had remained in them then the owner or the lessee of the room would have been liable to prosecution.⁴⁷

Beyond official tracts, the Indian migrant and his propensity for lack of cleanliness and diseases seem to have become a part of everyday city discourse. In 1929-30, in a series of advertisements published in the national newspaper *Thuriya* (The Sun) for the “Wright Coal Tar Soap” sold in Rangoon, Indian men and women (particularly of the laboring class) were portrayed using the soap as an effective agent for cleaning dirt from their bodies. The advertisement further claimed that if the soap could work its miracles on the Indian skin, it could certainly do its work on Burmese skin. In a similar vein, advertisements (by Angier’s Emulsion) in Newspaper *Thuriya* (1929-30) claimed relief for various diseases that the general public (and particularly the Indian laboring poor) was afflicted with in Rangoon.


⁴⁶ *Annual Report of the Health officer of Rangoon* (Rangoon: Superintendent Printing Press, 1925), 148-49.

⁴⁷ Chapter 20 “Housing and Sanitation” in E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (London, 1933), 167-171.

Figure 9⁴⁸

Advertisements for Wright Coal Tar Soap

ထိခိုက်သောများကို ကုးစေ
ပြန်ပွားခြင်းမှ ကာကွယ်
နိုင်စေ
စေခြင်း



WRIGHT'S
COAL TAR
SOAP

ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ
ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ
ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ
ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ

၇၂-ဂေါ်လ်-ထောင်-အင်း-ရန်-လှိုင်-မြို့

(*) သူတို့အားသော်လည်းကောင်း၊ သူတို့ကိုယ်တိုင်လည်းကောင်း



ဤဆင်ခြင်သည့်အထောက်အကူကို
ကာကွယ်ပါသည်။

မိုက်ရိုးပိတ်စားဆေးပြာသည် မိုက်ရိုးပိတ်စားဆေးပြာ
မှောင်မိုက်စားဆေးပြာနှင့် မိုက်ရိုးပိတ်စားဆေးပြာ
သည့်ကုသမှုတို့၏ ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ
ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ ထောက်ပံ့ပေးပြီး ထွက်စင်စင်ပြာ



WRIGHT'S
COAL TAR
SOAP

The Soap of Golden Colour.

⁴⁸ Thuriya (The Sun) (1929-30).

Burmese short stories from this period (roughly 1920s and 1930s) written with Indian protagonists seem to dwell on their lack of cleanliness and the need for Indians to learn city dwelling habits. In a short story by U Thein Pe Myint, “These are Illusions After All” the main character is an Indian working poor in Rangoon who had dabbled in all kinds of jobs until he got the present one as a gardener and cleaner.⁵⁰ His last job had been to work as a barber at his roadside hut. “It was one of the hovels which had blacked the beauty of the great capital - Rangoon.” The dwellings had been the cause of filth and mosquitoes in the city. One day the municipal authorities demolished the houses and his hair-cutting salon to build barrack housing for cheap rent. He was left without a job or a home. He was happy to finally land up his present job as a gardener in a swimming pool club in an elite residential area in Rangoon. The club, meant exclusively for European use was a place beyond the reach or the imagination of the working poor. The swimmers could enjoy themselves in privacy and utmost freedom. What stood out most was the aesthetic beauty of the place: “beautifully well-placed bamboo fences and tall rubber plants like umbrellas protecting the swimmers from the sun and the well-kept lawns served as large green carpets.”

The protagonist seemed to be overwhelmed by the surroundings, and “though he could not himself swim in the pool, he could feel its coolness by just looking at it.” He appreciated the job too as compared to his previous occupation of hair cutting. In the previous job, one would get dirty and stuck with pieces of hair from customers but now it was limited to mowing and weeding the lawn and replacing the water of the pool. It was also a moment of realization for his protagonist, “having seen and witnessed the clean surroundings and fresh air, he could now

⁵⁰ Thein Pe Myint, “These are Illusions after all” in *Sweet and Sour: Burmese Short Stories* (translated by Usha Narayanan) (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999), 1-10.

really see and feel the dirt and filth he was living in before. He even felt that the attitude of the municipal authorities was right; he could not find fault with them for demolishing the houses and their filth and squalor and forcing them to move out.”⁵¹

The consequences of housing shortage were not confined to merely the lack of sanitation and widespread diseases. The shortage was also seen as a major contributor to lack of a moral life amongst the inhabitants (liquor, opium addiction and visit to brothels). According to the accounts of the Social Service League members: “their one purpose in emigrating (from India) is to earn a livelihood and to save as much as they can to take back to their homes. This prevents the men to bring their wives and families along with them and hence, the huge disparity in the sex ratio among them. It is therefore not surprising that prostitution is rife among them, resulting in prevalence of venereal diseases.”⁵² The League members then proceeded to offer vivid descriptions of cases (during their nightly investigative visits) where they found “single women hidden away underneath a cot on which a male was sleeping and having alongside of them the usual lines of males who are presumably without their wives. Occasionally, a woman in these such circumstances would drift into promiscuous relations with more than one man in the group and be recognized as their common wife.”⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 2

⁵² Chapter 21 “Sex Relation and Drink” in in E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labor in Rangoon*, 182-183.

⁵³ Ibid., Chapter 20. Also, according to the *Manual of Madras Administration* “women go in numbers for the purpose of prostitution to Rangoon, and stay some years. A temple was built at Coringa in the Godavary district (Madras presidency in India) at a cost of Rs 10,000 by a woman of this class who had saved money and returned to Madras” cited in Adapa Satyanarayana, “Birds of Passage”: Migration of South Indian Laborers to Southeast Asia, *Critical Asian Studies*, 34:1 (2002), 89-115.

John Cowen, “Public Prostitution in Rangoon: Report to the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene on Brothel-Keeping, Prostitution, Segregation and Immoral Conditions in Rangoon and Other Towns and Stations in Burma.” *Rangoon Brothels/Prostitution in Rangoon*. (1916) IOR L/PJ/6/1448. During the early part of the twentieth century, volunteer organizations like the Women’s Wing of the Rangoon Social Service League and Christian groups took upon themselves to write detailed pamphlets in order to appraise the European public on the manifold increase in prostitution in the city due to the incoming immigrant clients as well as women who were being trafficked.

While the pitiful picture of the unclean and diseased migrant (both men and women) forced to live in filthy and cramped conditions became symbolic of the housing crisis in Rangoon, middle and upper class councilors, social service league members and health inspectors claimed that more was at stake than trying to reform bad habits, ignorance, and lack of civic initiative or provide housing. They argued that in reality, the lower-class immigrant deliberately lived in overcrowded rooms, as he was naturally used to an inferior way of life (in his native village) for centuries. Moreover, his only purpose to come to Rangoon was to work and earn money and therefore, he was saving as much he could by living in decrepit conditions so that he could return home.⁵⁴ In order to support this claim, detailed statistics on migrant's income, monthly budget, taxes paid, food, clothing, rent, lighting, fuel, household expenditures, and other miscellaneous items were presented during discussions on public policy in the council. These demonstrated firstly, that Indian laborers readily accepted lower wages than his Burmese counterparts in order to seize all unskilled jobs available and secondly, he lived far more frugally than the Burmese workers.⁵⁵ Through this ostensibly scientific and value free method, the lower

Also, Bulkeley, Sybil Mary Dorothy. "Papers of Sybil Mary Dorothy Bulkeley (b 1889), President, National Council of Women in Burma, Wife of John Preston Bulkeley, Indian Education Service, Relating to Her Work for Women's Organizations in Burma and Sunday School Teaching Mss Eur D1230," 1970 1921. *India Office Records and Private Papers. British Library*. Bulkeley, Sybil Mary Dorothy. "Report by the National Council of Women in Burma on Conditions Affecting Labor in and Near Rangoon MSS Eur D 1230/6," October 1929. *India Office Records and Private Papers. British Library*.

⁵⁴ The opinion of the immigrant being used to an inferior way of life and deliberately contributing to the bad living conditions was prevalent in many other cities during this time. It was the result of "Asiatic habits" (Chinese, Indians and other migrants) in Singapore and the old world standards of wave of new migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe in the United States in early twentieth century. See Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003) and Yoosun Park and Susan P. Kemp, "'Little Alien Colonies': Representations of Immigrants and Their Neighborhoods in Social Work Discourse, 1875-1924," *Social Service Review* 80:4 (December 2006), 705-734.

⁵⁵ Each of the above mentioned items were further broken down into minute categories - calories consumed per day, spices (whether or not used in cooking), kind of oil used, sparsely vegetarian food or non-vegetarian items like fowl, fish and so on in diet, type of cloth worn, kind of cigarette smoked, betel and tobacco consumed, articles used on a daily basis like charpoy or mat, blankets, cooking pots, mosquito nets, pillows and sheets. Further, expenditures on marriages and funerals and money given as rent to the *maistry* or the middleman and loans that needed to be paid back at interest were recorded and tallied. In 1928, *Enquiry into the Standard and Cost of Living of the Working*

standard of living by the Indian laborer was given concrete shape.⁵⁶ Further, councilors asserted that the large sum of money saved by the migrants by living frugally was being sent regularly back to their relatives in India. According to a rough estimate, in the 1930s, nearly thirty million rupees was sent annually by money order alone.⁵⁷ In his findings on Indian labor, E.L.J. Andrew describes: the contrast in the appearances when the migrant workers first arrive and at the time of their departure (after approximately three years when they have earned substantial money) was an indication of their relative prosperity in Burma (and their real purchasing power) which allowed them to spend on consumer goods they previously could not afford.

Ninety percent of Indian laborers who come to Burma from the Madras presidency arrive with only a mat and an earthen receptacle, which contained food for their voyage. They are generally very lightly clad. The men wear a dirty cloth covering their loins and similar strip wound round their heads; their women are clothed only in an old *sari*. On their return to their homes they are generally better clad; the men are dressed in shirts, coats, *dhotis* or loin cloths and turbans, while the women are clothed in clean petticoats and *saris* and wear jackets.⁵⁸

Classes in Rangoon was published followed by the *Report of the Royal Commission on Indian Labor* in 1931. These were followed by several other similar official and unofficial efforts, E.L.J. Andrew's, *Indian Labor in Rangoon* (1933) and A. Narayana Rao's, *Indian Labor in Burma* (1933).

Michael Adas provides a comparison of the wages earned by the Indian worker in Madras presidency and Burma. In 1887, of the major districts of origin in the Madras presidency, agricultural laborers earned the highest wages in Vizagapatam. Their earnings were Rs. 6 per month, or Rs. 72 per year. In Rangoon in the same year the average wage for industrial workers was Rs. 22.5 per month, or Rs. 270 per year. An agricultural laborer in Lower Burma received about Rs. 15 per month in 1887, or Rs. 180 per year. Thus, the annual increment to an industrial laborer's income (minus Rs. 30 for shipping transport) was Rs. 168, while that of the agricultural laborer was Rs. 78. The higher cost of living in Rangoon reduced the real amount of additional wages received. Moreover, the worker usually owed a large amount of debt along with interests to middlemen who had financed their journey and stay in Rangoon. See, Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 92. On the other hand, the fact that most laborers remained in Burma from three to five years, the increment for both industrial and agricultural laborers would have been far greater. Most of this money would have been either remitted to India or carried home when the laborers themselves returned from Burma.

⁵⁶ This is not to say that investigation into single and family budgets of Indian laborers was only confined to Rangoon. Similar surveys were for example being carried out in Bombay *Report on an Enquiry into the Working Class in Bombay* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1923 and 1935) *Report on an Enquiry into Middle Class Family Budgets in the Bombay City* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1928).

⁵⁷ Andrus J. Russell. *Burmese Economic Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 182. Also, N. R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma* (London, Oxford University Press, 1971), 75-76.

⁵⁸ E.L.J. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*, 20.

To conclude, scientific methods of city planning and surveys during 1920s and 1930s in Rangoon Burma created certain racial stereotypes and definitive conclusions (based on statistics) that could be repeated and cited for reference in future without any room for question. The immediate effect was its use against Indian migrants in contemporary political debates. In 1932, amidst the economic crisis and widespread unemployment (following the Great Depression in 1929) and the constitutional debate raging over separation of Burma from India in the Burma Round Table Conference in London, the statistics on migrant living in low-income housing in Rangoon was used to argue against Indian presence in Burma. Councilors questioned the rationale of trying to provide civic amenities to a large group of people who deliberately lived frugally, who did not pay any taxes and further, who moved from one place to the other and were not a permanent member, but merely a temporary resident in the city. And while Indian representatives protested against discrimination against all Indians, they acquiesced to the problem of unregulated labor coming to Burma from India and need for some directive. Prominent labor leader A. Narayana Rao commented on this problem in his book:

Unless immigration is restricted to the actual number for whom work could be found throughout the year (that is, the number of casual laborers coming to Rangoon is restricted), and until housing accommodation to the proper extent, is provided by the joint efforts of all concerned, all attempts to solve this problem of over-crowding, by means of enforcing lodging house rules (restricting the number of people who could reside in a single room), are doomed to failure.⁵⁹

The second and more far-reaching impact has been on history writing about Indians in Burma. Later inquiries on Indian immigration to Burma like James Baxter's *Report on Indian*

⁵⁹ A. Narayana Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma*, 142.

Immigration (1941), M. M. Rafi's *The Problem of Indian Settlers in Burma* (1946), B. R. Pearn's *History of Rangoon* (1939) and *The Indian in Burma* (1946) have directly quoted these statistical and survey reports to prove the lower standard of living by Indians and their acceptance of lower wages as the established reason for preponderance of Indian unskilled laborers in Burma.⁶⁰ The figure of the lower-class Indian immigrant as a mere statistic in the colonial archive has been preserved over the decades even into contemporary writing.⁶¹ In the next section, I will focus on how these perceptions against Indian migrant poor residing in Rangoon are caught in the vortex of political developments of the times and lead to proposal for immigration restriction specifically against low-class Indian migrants to Burma.

III. The Lower Class Indian Migrant in the Imagined Burmese Nation

When we carefully compare the present condition of Burma and the condition ten years ago (or more) we find that Burma's condition has worsened. Does the prosperity of Burma mean that Burmans have become prosperous? Rangoon is a big city but all the lands and houses in Rangoon are the property of the Indians and the Chinese. These groups are mostly owners of the houses in the center of the city and Indians are the majority tenants. The Burmans have nowhere else to go but move to the suburbs. (...) [Further into the same speech] If a comparison is made between the conditions of Burmans and Indians, it will be found that that Indians are predominant in every sphere of life, i.e., from the lowest rung of the sweeper up to such high positions as High Court, Doctors and Lawyers. We must look for the cause of this Indian predominance. It is not because of Burman's lack of learning or of money. Their number is continuously increasing on account of their hard work and simple mode of living, which is quite different to that of the Burmans. They have firmly entrenched their position in Burma.

⁶⁰ James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration* (Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent Government Printing and Stationery Burma, 1946). B. R. Pearn, *A History of Rangoon* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1939) and *Indian in Burma* [Ledbury, Herefordshire, England: Le Play House (for The Racial Relations Group), 1946].

⁶¹ Adapa Satyanarayana, "Birds of Passage: Migration of South Indian Laborers to Southeast Asia," *Critical Asian Studies* 34:1 (2002), 89-115. Amarjit Kaur, "Indian Labor, Labor Standards, and Workers' Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900 -1940," *Modern Asian Studies* 40:2 (2006), 425-475.

- U Ba Than making a speech in the Burma Legislative Council during the motion regarding Separation from India⁶²

The severe economic crisis, which struck the economy of Burma in 1929-30, formed an essential backdrop to the political debates of 1930-33. The economic collapse and resultant scarcities made people more receptive to an aggressive nationalist demand for separation from British India, provincial political autonomy and restrictions against free movement of laborers from India to Burma. In this context, I show how the discussion on housing shortage in Rangoon brought the Indian migrant to the forefront of anti-colonial and anti-foreign nationalism in Burma. But beyond a crisis in plural society (according to Michael Adas) I demonstrate how European, Burmese and Indian representatives during the Burma Round Table Conference (1931-32) debated and defined what did it mean to be domiciled in Burma (who should be allowed to stay in Burma and who should not), the evident class interests in such a debate and what were the consequences for the lower-class Indian laboring poor.

In August 1931, the Rangoon Labor Housing Bill was introduced in the Burma Legislative Council in August 1931, with the view that it would authorize the Rangoon Development Trust to proceed with housing schemes and provide them with a fund for this purpose by means of taxation. However, with no consensus in sight for the kind or amount of taxation, *the Rangoon Labor Housing Conference* was held in 1931-32. Several groups were represented at the conference: members of the Legislative Council, representatives of Indian community in Burma, British administrators, delegates from the Rangoon Development Trust, members of the Municipal Council of Rangoon, Rent Enquiry Committee and the Public Health Committee. As the discussion progressed, the representatives to the conference took a step

⁶² “Motion regarding Separation”, *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (29th April, 1933).

further by declaring that a housing scheme would not be a solution to the larger problem at hand. According to the conference report: “would not the housing schemes in Rangoon be entirely unrelated to the labor question in Burma as a whole? In other words, was not the problem a provincial one rather than a mere local problem of the City of Rangoon, and even in the case of Rangoon did not the question go far beyond a mere housing scheme?”⁶³ The Indian migrant poor in the low-income houses in Rangoon was no longer only responsible for causing a shortage of housing or creating filth and spreading diseases in the city but was a symbol for the economic and political difficulties that had gripped the nation.

The analysis of the conference members was based on the fact that there had been a significant change in the structure of the rice economy following the Depression years (1929-30) and the proportion of labor that was permanently (or on a contract basis) engaged to work in rice mills had declined substantially.⁶⁴ Unemployment was rampant and Rangoon had swelled with a large number of casual Indian workers looking to work as short-term coolie labor. At the same

⁶³ *Report of the Rangoon Labour Housing Conference with Appendices and Minutes of Dissent*, 11.

⁶⁴ The sharp drop in the value of rice on the world market in 1929-30 touched off a series of chain reactions in various sectors of the rice industry that greatly accelerated the existing economic problems. Between 1925 and 1929 the volume of Burma's annual rice exports decreased from 3,100,000 tons to 2,800,000 tons, and the wholesale price of one hundred baskets of paddy at Rangoon fell from Rs. 195 to Rs. 160. In the following year, during the early months the price plummeted from Rs. 130 per one hundred baskets to Rs. 75. Although cultivators produced as much as or surplus paddy than they had in the previous season, its market value was nearly halved. Tenant farmers were unable to meet their rent payment, or even to pay even the interest on loans taken prior to the market collapse. The market slump also led to a great contraction in the volume of credit extended to agriculturalists by both private and government agencies. In most areas Chettiar moneylenders pressed for repayment of loans, which they had merely collected the interest on for years. The inability of landowners to repay debts led to continued cycle of land alienation, which occurred at a rapid pace in the early 1930s. The amount of the total occupied area of land in Lower Burma held by non-agriculturalists rose from 31 percent in 1929-30 to nearly 50 percent by 1934-35 (non-resident landlords who foreclosed land rose from 23 to nearly 41 percent). But rather than prosperity, a number of Chettiar firms declared bankruptcy because their debtors could not repay their loans, and these companies in turn were unable to pay back the money, which they had originally borrowed from European-owned banks. In addition to its adverse effects on the condition of the agrarian classes and the decline in the quality of rural life, many cultivators-owners and tenants who had been turned out of their lands and many laborers who could not find work sought employment in Rangoon and other urban areas where there had been an oversupply of labor since the 1920s. See Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 185-86. Also, Cheng Siok-Hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma 1852-1940*, 73.

time, the increasing indebtedness of the Burmese peasantry had in many cases led to the loss of their lands and they were being pushed out from the countryside into the city where they were forced to compete with Indian laborers. Official labor reports in 1933 (on skilled and unskilled laborers in Rangoon) created and projected a “racial” division of laborers. The statistics showed a far higher proportion of Indian laborers employed as compared to indigenous Burmese workers.

Table 5⁶⁵

“Racial” Division of Labor into Skilled and Unskilled Workers in Rangoon (1933)

Race	Skilled	Percentage	Unskilled	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Indigenous	8,048	36	19,985	23	28,033	26
Indians	12,533	55	61,983	73	74,516	69
Others	1,966	9	3,958	4	5,924	5
Total	22,547	100	85,926	100	108,473	100

The intense dissatisfaction over falling wages, shortages and unemployment found its outlet in public protests against the government which continued to increase taxes as well as against Indians who seemed as a threat holding larger share of the scarce available jobs. In a series of articles titled “What Burma Wants” in the *Thuriya* newspaper in 1930, the author raised the question of government’s responsibility in the economic crisis that had ensued in the country.

⁶⁵ E.L.J. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*, 27.

In Burma, unemployment is increasing everyday and it is regrettable that the government is doing nothing concrete to remedy the situation. With the economy completely dependent on the sale of rice in the international market, and the price of rice continuously falling, there is widespread unemployment in Rangoon and in Burma overall. Burmese people are unemployed, even young college educated men are unemployed. Some educated people don't even try for jobs. The government merely provides statistics to the huge level of unemployment in Britain and in the United States and how if this is true world over, how could Burma escape this phenomenon. Instead all they do is increase taxes on poor people. There is increase in theft, dacoity and crime in general throughout. It is the responsibility of the government to step in.⁶⁶

In the following cartoon, on the menace of taxes in Rangoon published in the *Deedok Weekly Journal* in 1935, the cartoonist U Ba Gale shows how even the poor itinerant traders and people with very little income in Rangoon are forced to pay taxes to the government which is completely unmindful of the hardships of the common people.

⁶⁶ "What Burma Wants: Government and Unemployment," *Thuriya* 12th August 1930. On 13th August 1930 in *Thuriya*, the author further wrote in the series of articles "What Burma Wants: Burma's Financial Position" the price of rice had fallen very low. The creditors and the government banks want money. The government and creditors should not ask for taxes for a year. This should be passed as a law in the Legislative Council in Burma. If such a step is not taken, it would be very difficult for people in Burma.

Figure 11⁶⁷

“The Menace of Taxes in Rangoon” by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



The economic situation is deteriorating but the taxes keep on increasing. Next year, the government will also tax itinerant traders. If this continues we will be reduced to begging on the streets. One beggar says, “I am blind, please give alms!” The other hushes him, “not so loud...otherwise we will have to pay tax to the government.”

⁶⁷ *Deedok Weekly Journal* (November, 1935).

Widespread poverty and landlessness amongst the peasant class, disruption of the traditional monastic system and neglect of village pagodas led to an economic and social crisis in the countryside compelling peasants to take up arms against the colonial state and its intermediaries. The Saya San rebellion spread from the district of Tharawaddy to neighboring districts throughout Lower Burma. It took the colonial state machinery two years to end the rebellion of several thousand Burmese agriculturalists that were armed mainly with *dahs* (swords), spears and at times obsolete firearms.⁶⁸ According to official reports, nearly a decade before the onset of the depression, a growing class of landless, homeless cultivators had been responsible for the increases in robbery and other crimes in lower Burma. In the 1930s it provided a fertile ground for persons who sought to foment rebellion and communal (anti-Indian) violence.⁶⁹

While the anger against the British administrative machinery could be understood as resentment directed against the most visible instrument of oppression, according to Michael Adas, a more critical transition had taken place in the decades preceding 1930s that underscored the violence against Indians. In his work *Burma Delta*, Adas has termed this as a crisis of the plural society, the existence of which depends on a very delicate social and economic balance among the different cultural groups, which compose it. “This balance can be sustained only as

⁶⁸ Saya San or (Hsaya San) (ဆရာတေဇံ) (1876-1931) was a noted monk, a Burmese medicine man and the leader of the Burmese peasant revolt of 1930-1931. See Robert L. Solomon, “Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion” *Modern Asian Studies*, 3:3 (1969), 209-223. James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).

⁶⁹ Government of Burma, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon, 1939), 37-39, 225-63. Also, John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958). In a recent work, *The Return of the Galon King*, Maitrii Aung-Thwin, analyzes the legal origins of the Saya San story and reconsiders the facts upon which the basic narrative and interpretations of the rebellion are based. Aung-Thwin reveals how counter-insurgency law produced and criminalized Burmese culture, contributing to the way peasant resistance was recorded in the archives, reported in the riot committee reports and understood by Southeast Asian scholars.

long as each group acquiesces in the roles or social, economic and political niches which it came to occupy during the period of the plural society's formation. When one of the groups begins to covet and compete for a larger share or control of niches held by others, the whole plural society is threatened. This threat is particularly serious if the dissident group represents the indigenous peoples who make up a large majority of the population.”⁷⁰ Thus, the competition that had developed between the Burmese and the Indians in the preceding decade intensified greatly. Unemployed Burmese laborers became more and more resentful of the Indian immigrants who had preempted most of the positions available in Rangoon. Many Burmese nationalist leaders used these resentments and frustrations to build up mass support against both British and Indians. For example, on May 30th 1930 *Dobama Asiayone* (“We Burmans Association”) commonly known as the Thakin Party came into existence. The members were mostly graduates from the Rangoon University who were imbued with the idea of delivering the country from alien rule. The main theme of their manifesto was “Burma for the Burmans” and the first opportunity that the group capitalized on to make their views prominent was the Indo-Burmese riot in 1930. In August 1930, for example, in a series of articles titled “A Word to Non-Burmans,” the author plainly said, “Indian are outsiders to Burma and while we are not going to punish them for coming here to work and make money, it would be best that they leave for their home.”⁷¹

In leading nationalist newspapers like the *Sun*, the *New Light of Burma*, and *Saithan*, Burmese writers openly wrote on the “mischief” done by Indians in Burma and to the “Indian peril” that seemed to plague the Burmese nation. In a pamphlet written in 1931, Burmese nationalist leader U Saw claimed that the Indians were “birds of passage who have come to this

⁷⁰ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 192.

⁷¹ “A Word to Non-Burmans” *Thuriya* 30th June 1930.

land to exploit by fair or foul means in the fields of labor, industry and commerce.”⁷² He reasoned that since the British refused to protect the Burmese from Indian exploitation and competition, they were forced to take matters into their own hands, hence the Saya San rebellion, which had broken out in 1930.⁷³ In 1937, an article claimed: “since the dawn of history, Indians have been the leaders of [the] attack against the Burmans on behalf of the white faces.” The author concluded ominously, “it would be better if they were not here, I do not want to see them in this country.”⁷⁴

Such aggressive propaganda in contemporary print heightened the hostile environment against Indians in Burma throughout the 1930s. On 6th May 1930, approximately 2000 Telugu (*Coringhi*) laborers, employed mostly by the British India Steam Navigation Company to stow and unload cargo at Rangoon Port, went on a strike demanding increased wages. The company brought in Burmese laborers in order to break the strike. On the 24th May, the owners of the shipping firms decided to grant the *Coringhi* laborers a pay raise and on the next day the workers returned to work. The Burmese laborers instead of being phased out gradually were dismissed at a short notice, which led to a fair amount of resentment on their part. A scuffle broke out between Burmese and *Coringhi* laborers on Lewis Street jetty and Sparks Street (outside the office of British India Steam Navigation company) that grew into a number of attacks over the next few days, leading to injuries and deaths.⁷⁵ While the riot committee report described the Burmese workers as slow and inefficient and hence the dismissal, Burmese journalist Maung Tha

⁷² Government of Burma, *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon, 1939), 36. Also, Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta*, 193-194.

⁷³ *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, 36

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 36

⁷⁵ “Rangoon Disturbances: Enquiry Committee Report” Appendices X, XI and XII in E.J.L. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon* (London, Oxford University Press, 1933).

Gi, used provocative language when he charged that “cheap and docile Indian dock laborers who are no more than skilled than the Burmese...are taking away their food.”⁷⁶

While Adas’s analysis of the crisis of the plural society, the antagonisms against Indians and hence, reactionary remarks by the Burmese nationalist leaders may hold ground, I want to complicate this picture by highlighting the kind of evidence that was brought in official (political) discussions on migrants and the responses by middle and upper-class Indian representatives in the legislative council. In 1927, the Simon Commission visited India in order to assess the functioning of Dyarchy, investigate the political situation and whether conditions were conducive for Home Rule, as Indian nationalists were demanding.⁷⁷ The Commission next

⁷⁶ Michael Adas, *Burma Delta*, 194.

⁷⁷ The Indian Statutory Commission was referred to as the Simon Commission after its chairman, Sir John Simon. In 1927, a group of seven British Members of Parliament (led by Sir John Simon) was dispatched to India in 1927 to study constitutional reform in Britain's most important colonial dependency. The Government of India Act 1919 had introduced the system of Dyarchy to govern the provinces of British India and a provision was included that the commission would be appointed after 10 years to investigate the progress of the governance scheme and suggest new steps for reform. The public in India was outraged, as the Simon Commission, which was to determine the future of India, did not include a single Indian member in it. The commission members were confronted with strikes and boycott demonstrations everywhere they went. The Indian National Congress, at its December 1927 meeting in Madras, resolved to boycott the Commission. A faction of the Muslim League, led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, also decided to follow suit. The Simon Commission's report was published in June 1930. It proposed political autonomy for the Indian provinces and the possibility of their future federation, but it argued for continued British control at the center and made no mention of future Indian dominion hood.

The appointment of the commission radicalized the Indian nationalist movement. Members of the Indian National Congress—especially Motilal Nehru and the Muslim League's Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and more moderate politicians like Tej Bahadur Sapru convened the All-Parties' Conference in early 1928 to organize a response to the commission and eventually produced the Nehru Report, a document calling for a federated dominion of India.

As a conciliatory gesture, with the backing of the newly elected Labor government, Irwin announced in October 1929 that Britain's ultimate goal was India's “attainment of Dominion Status” though he provided no timetable for such an event - and that Indians of all parties, and even from the quasi-autonomous princely states, were invited to London for a Round Table Conference in 1930 to consider not only Simon's forthcoming report but other options for India's future, too. In 1930, Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement with the Salt March to push for “home-rule”. Irwin's invitation had attracted some Indians, including the constitutionalist Sapru and the Muslim's League's Jinnah, as well as representatives from the princely states, who were anxious to secure their continued status in whatever sort of Indian polity emerged. Gandhi and the Congress, however, found Irwin's declaration unsatisfactory and resumed the Civil Disobedience campaign. See S. R. Bakshi, *Simon Commission and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1977).

On question of Burma in an Indian Federation, the Indian National Congress passed at resolution at its Karachi session in 1932 as follows: the Congress recognizes the rights of the people of Burma to claim Separation from India to establish an independent Burma State or remain an autonomous partner in a free India with the right of Separation at any time they may desire to exercise it. See *Indian Legislative Assembly Debates*, Vol. III (1932), 2173-89.

went to Burma in January 1929 in order to deliberate the possibility of Separation from India and the granting of Dominion Status. In 1930, the committee reported the plausibility of separation from India but not dominion status.⁷⁸ In order to work on the details of the separation of Burma from India, the Burma Round Table Conference was held between November 1931 and January 1932 in London.⁷⁹

Burmese delegates to the conference clearly stated that whatever useful role Indian migrant laborers may have played initially in developing Burma's agricultural and other natural resources, now they tended to dispossess the indigenous inhabitants of occupation by depressing the standard of living. The surveys and statistics generated from the housing debate in Rangoon brought the low-class Indian migrant to the center-stage. Burmese participants made repeated references to the *Report of the Royal Commission on Indian Labor* (amongst other such reports) for information on the floating Indian population (particularly Rangoon), which resides in Burma for no more than few years at the most and returns to India with its earnings. One of the conference members (Dr. Thein Maung) cited surveys on the tenants living in low-income houses in Rangoon that provided in detail the cost of living of the various types of laborers - Burmese and Indian. He claimed that the standard of living of the Burmese laborer was at least 40 percent higher than that of the Indian laborer.⁸⁰ "Burmese labor was ousted by immigrant Indian labor simply because the latter was cheap, and it was cheap simply because the standard

⁷⁸ N. R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 131. Broadly the conclusions were: (a) Burma should continue to place reliance upon the existence of the army in India (b) separation could be effected in such a way as to leave Burma with adequate resources for her present needs and a balance for development purposes (c) the economic consequences should not also stand in the way as suitable trade and labor arrangements were possible between India and Burma.

⁷⁹ It included 33 delegates: 9 British selected by the government; 13 Burmans and 11 minority representatives (2 Karens, 2 Shans, 2 Indians, 3 Europeans, 1 Anglo-Burman and 1 Chinese).

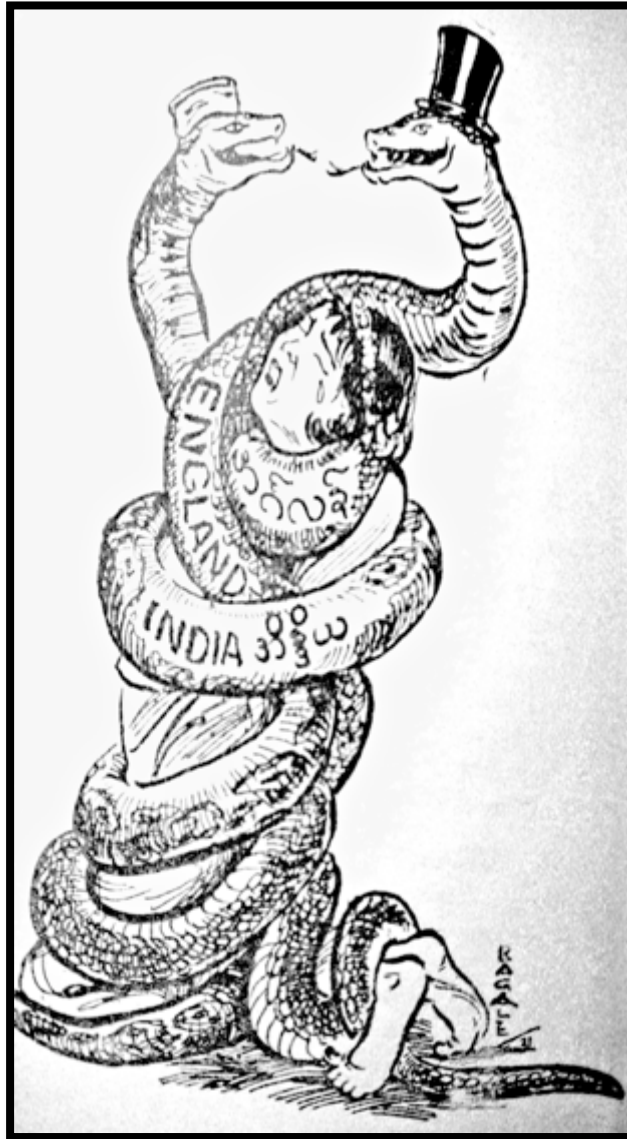
⁸⁰ *Proceedings of the Burma Round Table Conference 27th November 1931-12th January 1932 Presented by the Secretary of State of India to Parliament* (London, H. M. Stationary Office, January, 1933).

of living of the Indian laborers (particularly living in Rangoon) is very low.”⁸¹ In the following cartoon by U Ba Gale published in 1931 (figure 7), the cartoonist depicts the sentiments of the Burmese nation (Mother Burma) who is trapped between the twin exploitative forces of Britain and India (represented by pythons) and urged that the nation must be empowered to overcome being submerged racially, economically and politically by colonial forces and Indian immigrants. The second cartoon, published in 1932, shows how the newspaper reading public perceived the Indian public in Rangoon. A blind man (with a child’s help) is seen as representation of Indians coming to Burma to earn money as even beggars.

⁸¹ Ibid., 120.

Figure 12⁸²

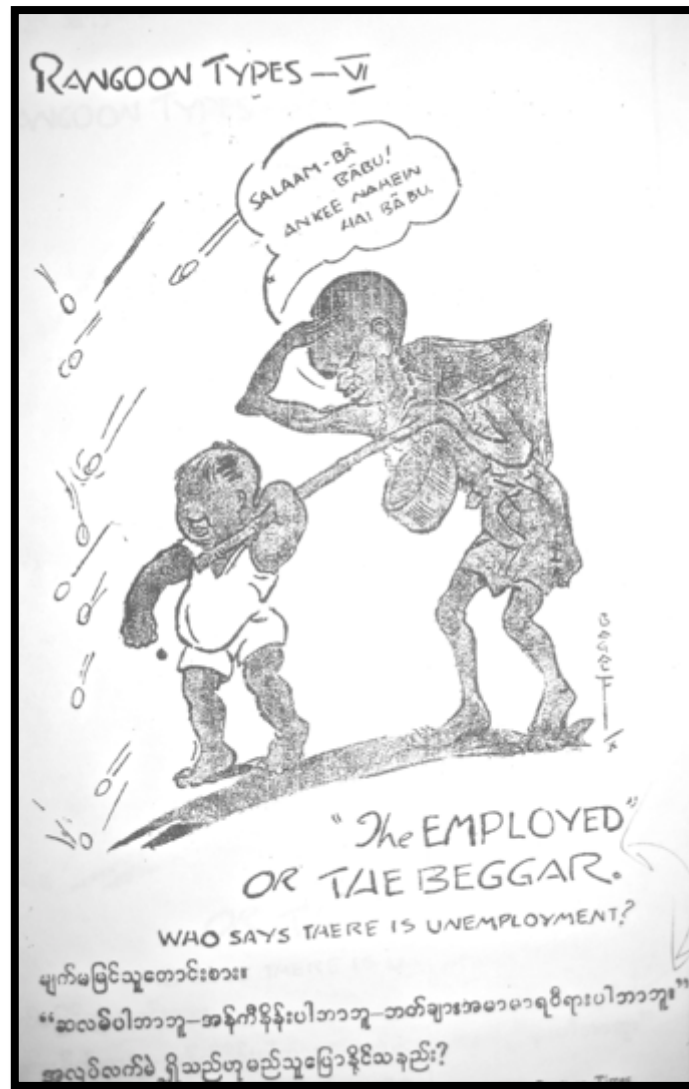
“Burma in Grip of Pythons – England and India” by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



⁸² *Myanma Alin* (December 1931).

Figure 13⁸³

“Rangoon Types: The Employed or the Beggar” by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



The beggar: “Good day to you sir! I am blind. Please help with alms!”

“Who says there is unemployment in Rangoon?”

⁸³ *The Rangoon Times* (1932).

With the official decision on separation of Burma (as a separate province) after the Round Table Conference in London (1932), a series of discussions began in the Burma Legislative Council to deliberate on various fiscal and administrative matters including movement of people between India and Burma. In 1937, the Domicile Bill was put to test in the Council, whereby a person was required to give proof of domicile so that he could buy property, invest in business, find employment, compete in government service examinations, work in an official position and contest elections for important legislative positions in Burma. However, councilors discovered that the term lacked a clearly defined meaning. Dicey's *Digest of the Law of England with Reference to the Conflicts of Laws* describes domicile (or domicil) as more than residence (a physical fact) and requires "a present intention to reside permanently, or for an indefinite period."⁸⁴ But how does government determine one's intention?

During the late 1930s, administrators in several colonies of the British Empire (including Burma and Ceylon) were considering the criteria could be used over for establishing domicile. The first of these is simply presence: a person's continued presence in a country is presumptive evidence of domicil.⁸⁵ The second is residence: residence in a country is *prima facie* evidence of intention and in many cases the main evidence of *animus manendi*.⁸⁶ Length of residence, payment of taxes, political participation, and oral expression of intention are all legal evidence of intention. Burmese members in the Burma legislative council recommended that for non-indigenous persons, a qualification similar to that laid down in the proposed Constitution of Ceylon, i.e., a literacy test combined with a property qualification and a period of residence

⁸⁴ A.B. Keith, *A Digest of the Law of England with Reference to the Conflict of Laws* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1932). Keith translates *animus manendi* as a mental intention to reside in a particular country.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

might be prescribed for determining domicile. The necessity of the times was such that a clear definition of domicile and citizenship that would legally delineate the position of non-native population present in Burma.⁸⁷

The Indian community in Rangoon represented by middle and upper class members in the legislative council and other administrative bodies was quick to counter. Several organizations were formed in Rangoon around this time to represent Indian economic and political interests - the *Burma-Indian Association*, *Burma Indian Chamber of Commerce* and the *Nattukottai Chettiar Association*. Several prominent members of the Indian community in Rangoon: A.H. Dawood, M.M. Rafi, J.K. Munshi, R.G. Aiyangar, S.A.S. Tyabji, Dr. R. Dugal and S. N. Haji, A.M.M. Vellayan Chettiar were chief coordinators in these organizations. While most had been in Burma for a long time, had residences and substantial business interests in the land but at the same time they needed to move freely between India and Burma for family and business concerns. Many of them were angry at the prospect of having to justify and prove intention to stay in Burma and make Burma their home when they had contributed to the tremendous development of the province.

I would very much like to know whether the word “domicile” means British subjects. I can understand his position if the Forest Minister was referring to something that might refer to “birds of passage” but surely when a British subject comes to Burma to invest money or wants to invest money, he is not a “bird of passage.” If he feels that he will ordinarily reside in Burma, at the time he puts his money into Burma’s forests, surely he will do so, otherwise he would not bring his money here. Isn’t that sufficient for the

⁸⁷ *Proceedings of the Burma Round Table Conference 27th November 1931 – 12th January 1932 Presented by the Secretary of State of India to Parliament* (London, H. M. Stationary Office, January, 1933).

In the case of Ceylon (another colony in the British Empire) the Donoughmore Commission (1927) recommended enfranchising all Indian Tamils who had a residence of five years and an abiding interest of staying in the country. Under Sinhalese representatives’ pressure, the Colonial secretary incorporated the following modifications: domicile of origin or choice (domicile of choice to be dependent on five years residence); literacy and property or income qualifications; and possession of a certificate of permanent settlement. See Thomas J. Barron, “The Donoughmore Commission and Ceylon National Identity” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 26 (1988), 147-57.

Forest Minister or the department under him? Or as in so many unfortunate cases, does he require each merchant to provide his domicile to the satisfaction of the government departments. And the vagaries of the government departments are great – one department says that he should have been resident for about five years in Burma, another department says his father should have been born in Burma so on and so forth.

- S.N. Haji (*Burma-Indian Chamber of Commerce*)⁸⁸

They argued that trying to put restrictions on the rights of all Indian subjects of free movement in British dominions would be an unnecessary harassment for persons who may have business firms in Burma. They could not be placed at the same level with laboring poor. What was required was regulation of *uncontrolled* movement of unskilled laboring poor into Burma.⁸⁹ The Indian leader justified that such a regulation was required for the welfare of Indian laborers themselves. “Unregulated movement creates a supply of underpaid and under-employed Indian laborers. These conditions were ideal for those who wished to exploit ill-use Indians laborers. Thus, regulation was necessary in the interest of both India and Burma.”⁹⁰

IV. Immigration Restrictions Against Unskilled Indian Laborers Coming to Burma:

“...After Separation the British and the Indians will have to admit on principle that Burmans should have the right to regulate their labor and to regulate the composition of their population.... We shall not be able to say that no Indian shall enter Burma, but we shall be able to impose certain restrictions – literacy tests, economic tests, as imposed in various dominions. We shall be able to exclude paupers of any race, cripples of any race, beggars, and people without any profession, unemployed people, from the shores of

⁸⁸ S.N. Haji in debate on “Discrimination against Non-Burmans” in *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1937.

⁸⁹ S.A.S Tyabji, “Debate on the Joint Parliamentary Committee Report” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings*, (20th February 1935).

⁹⁰ M. M. Rafi, *Problem of Indian Settlers in Burma* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of International Affairs, 1946), 31.

Burma... If there is unemployment in Burma, we shall have a right to keep our labor on the economic level. Why should we allow Indians to come and undersell our labor? Where there is cheap labor, there will always be a demand for it. The only way to eradicate the demand for cheap labor is to eradicate the supply by law...”

- U So Nyun's speech during Motion regarding Separation (1933)⁹¹

By 1937, with the separation of Burma from India specific regulations were proposed against lower-class Indian laborers. A joint statement issued by the governments of India and Burma following an official agreement in 1940 led to the creation of specific categories of people who could legally enter into Burma and stay for the purposes of employment and others who were barred. Though both countries were still under colonial rule, the discourse of citizenship was applied in this arrangement and all Indians entering Burma were asked to furnish a valid Indian passport containing their photographs and other particulars to establish their identity. The permits were divided into the categories of 'A' and 'B'. The 'A' category entitled the holder to remain in Burma for an indefinite period and to accept employment therein. Also, holders of an 'A' permit would face no difficulties on the future acquisition of a Burma domicile. 'A' permit was to be for persons whom the government of Burma considered being of sufficient financial standing, or who were likely to be suitable for permanent residence. It was also recommended that a literacy test be imposed on 'A' category applicants provided that such a test should not be made in Burmese or any language indigenous to Burma. The applicants were expected to pay fees of Rs. 500 for themselves and half this rate per dependent within the

⁹¹ U So Nyun in “Motion regarding Separation” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (2nd May 1933).

family.⁹²

The 'B' permit was assumed to be for unskilled laborers with limited means who had been visiting Burma for short period of time in order to earn money and return home. The 'B' permit was granted for a maximum period of three years and could only be extended at the discretion of the government of Burma but could not exceed a total of nine years. The entrance fee or a visa fee, of Rs. 12 plus a residential fee of Rs. 5 was to be charged every year for which the permit was valid. The liability for paying such a fees (both the visa fee and the stamp duty charged) fell on the employer where a permit was issued at his request. Also, before entry into Burma a deposit of Rs. 20 was to be made to the government of Burma who were granted 'B' permits, and by their dependents, to cover the cost of repatriating them. Repatriation was to be to the Indian ports of (a) Calcutta, (b) Chittagong, (c) Madras, (d) Vizagapatam, and (e) Gopalpur. The deposit would be refunded if the person concerned left Burma of his own accord or obtained an 'A' permit.

In addition to the above two categories there was also a category created of "privileged immigrants." The persons who were able to prove a total residence in Burma of seven calendar years between 15th July 1932 and 15th July 1941 were to be termed as "privileged immigrants." Such immigrants had the right to further employment in Burma without limit of time, but they would lose this status should they be absent from Burma for a continuous period exceeding one year after the 15th July 1941. All the classes of immigrants were to be registered with the immigration board (constituting of both British and Burmese officials), which would look into

⁹² *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941). The word "dependent" was defined as a person who was wholly and directly dependent for maintenance and support on a person who holds or is about to be granted a permit under the provisions of the agreement.

cases of any irregularities.⁹³

Reactions to the agreement poured in from all quarters of the Madras presidency, various Indian Business Chambers of Commerce and other provincial legislative assembly debates. The spokespersons for the *Madras All Parties' Protest* (a forum for all Indian leaders and associations interested in the situation in Burma) against the *Indo-Burma Agreement* expressed their disappointment and dismay at the outcome of the meetings. Though India and Burma had been politically separated in 1937, it was expected that cordial relations between the two British colonies – both political and economical would continue without any interference. As K.V. Naidu (Madras Legislative Council Leader) said, “reading the various clauses of the Agreement it would appear that Indians alone in Burma would be put into great difficulties...the European in Burma is a wanted man but Indians today are unwanted in Burma.”⁹⁴ It was felt unanimously among Indians that Indians interests had been badly let down by the Government. To begin with, commercial interests, particularly large businesses would be greatly affected, and the agreement was felt to be unfair by those who had done so much for the prosperity of Burma.

In a moving speech, T. S. Nataraja Pillay (one of the members of the *Madras All Parties Protest* representing the upper class interests in Burma) saw the agreement as a failure of the

⁹³ The set of rules introduced in the case of Burma were not isolated amongst Asian colonies. Similar guidelines were being put in place in the Malaya and Straits Settlements, which were also under British control. The Second World War and Japanese occupation proved to be temporarily disruptive to these schemes, but with the end of the war and the independence of these colonies, these were re-introduced and even more firmly implemented. In 1948, out of the 7,274 requests from Indians to enter Malaya, 3,555 were rejected on the ground that the applicants could not prove that they were beneficial to the economic life of the country. That same year, the Malayan government issued only 7,128 permits to all new immigrants, and in 1949 it reduced the number to 1,427. After much drafting and debate in the local legislature, a new immigration law was enforced on August 1st, 1953. By its provisions, immigrants were required to be in possession of guarantees of positions in Malaya paying a minimal monthly salary of Str. \$ 500, and re-entry permits would be granted only to aliens who could show proof that they had lived for seven of the preceding ten years in Malaya. See Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), 96-97.

⁹⁴ K. Venaktaswami Naidu (Deputy President, Madras Legislative Council Leader, Madras Municipal Congress Party) in *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 40-41.

Indian Foreign Office representative Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai who seemed to have let down the hopes of so many: “14 lakhs of peoples, 40 percent of whom were born and bred up there, are now deprived of their individual rights in that land and branded as emigrants who can only remain in Burma by the indulgence of the Burman and the issue of a permit with an identification photograph, more like a ticket of leave of a convict, which has to be acquired at great cost.”⁹⁵

According to the *Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry* in India, the permit system would harm Indian banking and business houses (particularly Chettiar businesses), which require a steady and continuous flow of employees (agents assisted by a trained staff of sub-agents, clerks, accountants and others), both experienced and fresh, who have to be sent out from India to Burma. The nine-year limit fixed for ‘B’ permits would involve irreparable injury by depriving these businesses of the services of experienced employees by the simple device of declining to permit them to re-enter or reside in Burma after a period of nine years. Such a provision, they argued, was unfair to the employees themselves who would be cut off, so as to speak, in mid-stream, left to drift aimlessly with little or no chance of finding new employment. The literacy test was also seen as another weapon of abuse. The requirement of a certain standard of literacy in English, for instance, which the average Indian trader or businessman may not possess; would hinder several respectable persons (persons with property) from entering Burma.

The definition of unskilled labor presented an embarrassing problem for several parties concerned in the agreement. These were mainly the Indian business community, Indian legislators and the British administrators who were trying to safeguard a number of large

⁹⁵ T.S. Nataraja Pillay in moving for the Constitution of a Committee to make representations to their Excellencies the Viceroy and Governor of Madras to suitably amend the provisions of the Agreement in *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 54-57.

economic and trade interests. Prominent Indian representatives like S.A.S. Tyabji, R. K. Ghose and S. N. Haji, (at the time of the Round Table Conference (1931), and the passing of the Government of Burma Act (1935), had expressed apprehensions at the possibility of unfair and restrictive legislation at all Indians. However, throughout the debate and frequently during negotiations, European and Burmese representatives promised check on the immigration of surplus unskilled labor coming from India and not against propertied elite. Sir, Thomas Inskip, Minister for Co-ordination and Defense, during the course of his speech in the British House of Commons made it clear: “it was all along the intention that there should be the regulation of the immigration of unskilled labor into Burma. The right of free entry of other Indians was not in question.”⁹⁶ However, the clear distinction between skilled as compared to unskilled labor was far from satisfactory (since one could merge into the other) the Indian delegation were left making half-hearted token gestures for the welfare of low-income agricultural coolie labor while defending the need for lower-grade staff in their firms. “While it can truthfully (or speciously) be urged that the uncontrolled influx of coolie labor was calculated to foster Burmese unemployment, the same cannot be said the numerous person who proceed to Burma to work in business houses and firms to render what may be called skilled services.”⁹⁷

There was some support for the questions about the uncertain future employment of the Indian laborer from members of the lower caste association in Madras (as many of these

⁹⁶ “Statement made by Sir Thomas Inskip in the Burma Round Table Conference” as an accompaniment to the representations submitted to the Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Education, Health and Lands, by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Imperial Citizenship Association and the Committee appointment by the All Parties Meeting held at Madras on the 28th July (Appendix I) in *Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 94.

⁹⁷ Memorial submitted by the appointed by the Committee appointed at the public meeting held at the Gokhale Hall, Madras on Monday 28th July 1941 in *Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 63. Cooks, attendants, watchmen and such other persons who attend upon their Indian employers and render menial personal services could not be compared to coolie laborers.

migrants came from lower castes in the society from the Madras presidency). The president of the *Madras Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation*, R. Srinivasan spoke:

The immigration of unskilled and agricultural laborers to Burma affects several lakhs of our countrymen. Most of those people who go to Burma, as laborers are extremely poor, and they belong to the scheduled castes. These laborers have contributed in a large measure to the prosperity of Burma by bringing large areas of land under cultivation. They have been treated most unfairly and their rights have not been adequately safeguarded. Regarding the provisions in the agreement with reference to unskilled labor the scale of permit fee is prohibitive. Under the agreement the laborer has to pay Rs. 17 during the first year and a repatriation deposit of Rs. 20. In addition to this, he has to incur for the purpose of proceeding to Burma, railway and shipping charges amounting to nearly Rs. 30. It is quite obvious that a poor laborer will not be in a position to raise this amount. Further, no employer will ever care to spend this amount on laborers as the labor is purely seasonal and they do not work continuously under a single employer. This is not due to the fault of the laborer but is due entirely to the want of continuous employment under the same employer. The effect of this of this provision will be to prevent entirely Indian labor from migrating Burma.⁹⁸

Despite the small voice of protest on behalf of the lower class laboring poor, when an alternative set of proposals was put before a government committee as the true summary of “What Indians Want” by the *Madras All Parties Protest* (on behalf of persons concerned with the Burma situation), the highlight was the demand for preservation of economic and political rights of upper class Indians residing in India but having property, trade, business and professional connections and other interests with Burma. The association argued that these rights should be safeguarded and that no restriction should be placed on their movement between India and Burma. Also, personal servants, cooks attendants etc. should be allowed to travel, as these staff members are necessary for day to day work in business houses. Thus, the organization supported the right of free entry granted to Indians in general, except those who come under the

⁹⁸ R. Srinivasan (President, Madras Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation, Members Round Table Conference, Burma Sub-Committee) in supporting the resolution in *Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 42-43.

category of unskilled workers. They also advocated that the literacy test should be abolished and, if that cannot be done, it should be made clear that a certain standard of literacy in the mother-tongue of the permit holder, to be vouched for by a suitable Indian authority to be considered sufficient as a standard for ascertaining the superior status of a candidate requesting permission for travel to Burma.⁹⁹

Conclusion

With the end of the Second World War and Burmese independence, Indian capital and immigration to Burma was restricted by mutual agreements between Indian and Burmese government. Thus, the immigration restrictions after 1937 in Burma were the result of several simultaneous processes: first, economic recession during the inter-war period had created severe hardships for the lower-middle and lower class in Rangoon. They were forced to cope up with steep increase in costs of everyday commodities as well as rents for housing in the city. But more than economic forces, the reason for this rent increase was due to the personal interests of the city propertied elite who wanted to remove the urban poor to the suburbs and use these residences for commercial development. Second, the developments in Rangoon need to be contextualized amidst similar processes of scientific urban planning and creating the migrant poor as an undesirable other in many cities of the world in the inter-war period (like Singapore, Bombay and Calcutta). Using statistical methods of survey and data collection, it came to be established that the scarcity of housing was due to unchecked Indian immigration to Burma (as these were the primary tenants in these houses) and the bad condition of housing and the increasing incidences of communicable diseases in these specific localities was the result of

⁹⁹ “Memorandum Submitted to the Standing Emigration Committee by the Burma Indian Delegation on 7th October 1941” in *Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement* (1941), 180-181.

unhygienic habits of the migrants themselves. In Rangoon, I argue that this racial stereotyping of the migrant provided an opportunity to many different people and interest groups - colonial officials, upper class Burmese and Indian representatives to identify lower-class migrants who needed to be removed from the city and the emerging Burmese nation. During the 1930s, with growing movement for immigration restrictions across the globe, similar proposals were brought into place in Burma as these migrants were blamed for cluttering the city as well as taking away limited jobs from indigenous working population.

The plural society has been described as a society in which different races only interact for economic reasons, as in the marketplace, and become so atomized that they lose the ability to form a common social will, thereby weakening the social demand necessary to organize activities to improve social welfare: “various people meet only in the market as competitors or as opponents, as buyers and sellers.”¹⁰⁰ The aim of this chapter has been to understand the very specific material conditions that operated in this market place. Rather than the inevitability of competition and resentment amongst groups strictly on ethnic lines, I argue how this process was complicated because of class issues. In this chapter, I show how both Indian and Burmese city elites were involved in the process of creating the figure of the lower-class Indian migrant as the outsider to the city and the nation.

In the next chapter, I continue with this critique of Furnivallian representation of plural society divided simply on ethnic lines by focusing on the gendered nature of Burmese nationalism. Incidences of inter-racial unions between Burmese women and foreign men, particularly Indian men were a common phenomenon in the early modern period. During the colonial period, the influx of predominantly male immigrants came to represent potential competition and disenfranchisement for indigenous men but also increased the demand for

¹⁰⁰ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 311.

indigenous women as partners in domestic and sexual relations. With the growth of official nationalist movement in Burma and xenophobic tendencies amidst series of economic crisis during the 1920s and 1930s, these unions became an object of social and political censure as the foreign male migrant came to be represent the temporary worker who had come to Burma only for employment and would return back to India and the woman represented Burma who was being exploited for her resources and would be abandoned once the man returned. Thus, a social concern for Burmese women came to be projected as a national question that required political intervention and immigration restrictions. I show how Burmese nationalists, Indian legislators, feminist authors and critics were participants in the creation of these different sets of stereotypes that were used during debates on mixed marriages in the legislative council of Burma and the Burmese public sphere.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I Do Not Envy You”: Mixed Marriages and Immigration Debates in the 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma

Introduction

The short story *Ah-ma-khya Paun Shin* (I Do Not Envy you) by Burmese feminist writer Ma Ma Lay revolves around a Burmese family in Rangoon. The protagonist is a Burmese woman named *Ohn Sein* (အုန်းစိန်). Her Indian husband *Supra* (စူပာ) and their only son *Sein Pya* (စိန်ပြာ) are the other principal characters.¹ *Supra* is a casual laborer/gardener who works very hard to earn money for his family and at the same time does all the household chores in the morning before leaving for his job. His Burmese wife on the other hand, sleeps late into the day, gets up only to eat the food prepared by her husband in the morning, dresses to make herself look attractive and spends all her time taking care of herself. *Ohn-Sein* in fact, feels proud of the fact that she has managed to secure a husband who provides her with everything she needs.

In comparison to her comfortable life, a group of female laborers are shown working hard on a nearby road construction, wearing tattered old clothes, skin sunburned, and their hair matted

¹ Ma Ma Lay, “Ah-ma-khya Paun Shin” (I Do Not Envy You) *Nawdé Magazine* (3rd Edition) 1 (January 1963): 262-268. *Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay* (ကျွန်းသက်ကျောင်း မဂ္ဂဇင်း) is widely acknowledged as one of the most prolific Burmese writers of 20th century. Her stories are known for realistic portrayals of modern Burmese society under colonial rule. Along with Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Ma Lay was one of a few female publishers in Burma. Amongst her other famous works is the Burmese novel *Mon ywe mahu* (Not out of Hate) (1955) tells of a tragic romance between Way Way, a young woman from an ordinary Burmese Buddhist family and U Saw Han, an older and thoroughly Anglicized Burmese man working for a British firm. The book focuses on the confrontation between Burmese tradition and western modernity. There is nothing recognizably Burmese about U Saw Han, who has become a replica of British colonial official. By marrying him, Way Way too loses her connection to her own culture. Unlike her husband however, Way Way is incapable of acculturating, and her body rejects all things Western. Her health declines due to western diet and medicine and the overbearing nature of her husband. Finally, her failed pregnancy and demise epitomize the futility and peril of marriage of Burma and the modern west.

Burmese of women who were entering into domestic and sexual relations with foreign men increased manifold. The censure attached to these interethnic unions by Burmese nationalists became an occasion for the proliferation of negative stereotypes of the migrant laborer during official and public debates in Burma. In this case, the temporary stay of the male migrant worker in Burma and his temporary commitment to the Burmese woman became a rallying point for reformers and Burmese nationalists. But more importantly, upper and middle class Burmese, Indians and Europeans, used these negative stereotypes during immigration debates to blame the lower class migrant Indians for economic and social problems in Burma. The mixed marriage problem was in reality an immigration problem and particularly it was the lower-class Indian male who was exploiting Burma slyly (to return back to India when his interests were fulfilled) and the only way to prevent it was by imposing restrictions on the presence of Indian labor and capital in Burma. The focus on the mixed marriage debate in this chapter is part of my larger argument in this dissertation on how immigration debates during 1920s and 1930s Burma cannot be read as simply divided along lines of ethnicity. Instead, this debate involved more complicated questions on the gendered nature of Burmese nationalism and the elitist response of Indian nationalists. Further, by addressing this question, I hope to highlight the specificities of the mixed marriage debates in Burma and the manner in state and society feminize the nation in various ways, but also place this case amidst similar debates in a global context.

This chapter focuses on two kinds of stereotypes that were created and perpetuated in the Burmese public sphere in the course of the mixed-marriages debate during the 1920s and 1930s. The first set of these stereotypes was the materialistic, lazy and yet naïve and ignorant Burmese woman (symbolizing Burma) and the lower class but hardworking Indian migrant laborer (representing India). The mixed marriage phenomenon was used in writings (like Ma Ma Lay's)

as a metaphor for the state of the Burmese nation, which was portrayed as dependent on foreign capital and labor and imprisoned in foreign political control. In the nationalist rhetoric in the Burma Legislative Council and print, the Burmese woman embodied the imagined Burmese nation and the single male migrant worker represented a “bird of passage” (his stay in Burma was temporary) and who intended to earn money and return back home to his previous family in India.

The second set of stereotypes is both racial and religious in nature. Critics of miscegenation in early twentieth century Burma saw the problem principally in terms of the illegitimacy of the union.⁴ Marriages between Indian (particularly Muslim) men and Burmese Buddhist women were not legally valid and therefore, these woman and children had no property rights in case of divorce or death of the partner. Thus, while Indian men of various religious faiths were likely in the habit of taking wives in Burma, Muslim migrant men who took Buddhist wives were particularly visible. Islam as a religion came to be seen as incompatible with Burmese Buddhist beliefs. Nationalist rhetoric in the 1930s projected the mixed marriage issue as a racial question and feared Indians producing half-caste children (called *zerbadis* in the case of Muslim marriages) who would dilute out the “pure” Burmese race over a period of time. Also, critics argued that since Islam allows the practice of multiple spouses (four wives) it was detrimental to the welfare of Burmese women who could easily be deprived of their maintenance and alimony (in the case of death and divorce) should the migrant worker return home to India.

Further, I link how these stereotypes are manipulated during debates on immigration restrictions in the legislative council of Burma. Upper class Burmese and Indian legislative councilors blamed lower class migrants for defiling and abandoning Burmese women. In 1940,

⁴ Miscegenation - defined as the mixing of different racial groups through marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations, and procreation.

with the conclusion of the Indo-Burmese Immigration Agreement, “marriage or cohabitation with a woman belonging to the indigenous races of Burma established to the satisfaction of the government of Burma could be made a condition for the cancellation of a permit or visa granted to a male Indian immigrant.”⁵ The clause caused a massive uproar and protest amongst Indian educated elite and political representatives in Burma and India who saw the bill as a threat to the self-respect of all Indians. The problem as they saw it, was *essentially of the laboring poor and not all classes of the society*. Further, in the absence of adequate safeguards, it could become a dangerous weapon in the hands of unscrupulous persons who might try to blackmail even innocent Indians regardless of their status. I have tried to lay out the seemingly different points of view in this debate on mixed marriages, which eventually converged on a common meeting point as they identified the lower-class male Indian migrant and especially the Muslim migrant as the main offender.

The chapter is divided into three sections: in the first section, I discuss the representations of the Burmese woman in colonial official records, contemporary European writings and native print as temporary wives to foreign men. The Burmese woman was often portrayed as opportunistic, materialistic and greedy, voluntarily entering into such relationships only because of monetary gains without any expectations of permanent attachments. In the view of the colonial state, loose marriage laws in the Burmese society (that freely sanctioned relations between men and women of different race, ethnicity and religion) were the main culprit, and had contributed to a state of contagion for the European men present in Burma. From the point of view of the state, Burmese women were a danger to the physical and moral well being of the European population present in Burma, the growing native nationalist opinion re-stereotyped

⁵ Satyamurti, *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement: A Nation in Revolt* (New Delhi: Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941), 26.

these women as unpatriotic, transgressing essential Burmese cultural boundaries and compromising the Burmese nation at the hands of foreigners.⁶ On being discarded by their European men, with no resources to fall back on, many Burmese women then had no option but to become prostitutes in Rangoon (and other cities), catering to an increasing population of single Indian migrant men in Burma.

The second part of this chapter focuses on specific cases in the Rangoon High Court and Legislative Council Debates on restitution of legal rights for Burmese women in temporary marriages (particularly with Indian Muslim migrants). In 1927, the Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Bill was introduced into the Burma Legislative Council for discussion. The purpose of the bill, according to the opening remarks made by the speaker of the House, was to legalize marriages between Buddhist Burmese women and non-Buddhist non-Burmese men. According to the existing law, marriage between a Burman Buddhist and a Hindu Indian or a Muslim Indian or other foreigners like Chinese was not recognized as a legal marriage in Burma. It was urged that the bill should be passed as soon as possible as in the past few years many cases had come to light where Burmese women cohabited with Indians or other foreigners believing that living together was sufficient to give them the recognition as legal wives. With the death of their husbands or in the case of abandonment, they found that not only their marriages, but also their children were considered illegitimate and they were not entitled to inherit any of the property that the man had acquired in Burma. In order to safeguard the rights of the women, such mixed marriages needed to be properly registered and were to be governed by the Burmese Buddhist Law as if the parties themselves were Burman Buddhists. The Burmese wife would be

⁶ See Chapter “Mixing Religion and Race: Intermarriage, Miscegenation, and the Wives and Mistresses of Foreign men” in Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

entitled to half the property of her deceased husband and the children were entitled to the other half.

The passage of the Bill assumed political importance as the women's wing of the G.C.B.A. (General Council of Burmese Associations) *Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin* and various Burmese Buddhist organizations took to the streets for the protection of the Buddhist religion. In 1938, matters took a turn for the worse, as the inter-marriage question became the center of a print war between the Buddhist and Indian Muslim community in Burma. Following the publication of a particularly inflammatory book on Buddhist religion, there were attacks and counter-attacks between various representatives of the communities leading to riots in Rangoon and in other provinces. Not to be left behind in this political battlefield, the insinuations and violence inflicted on the Indian community in Burma was condemned by Indian Muslim representatives in Burma and the Madras presidency, as they demanded immediate intervention by the government.

In the concluding part of this chapter, I concentrate on how the rhetoric of ruin caused by mixed marriage was used in the Legislative Council of Burma to explain how the Indian immigrants were inundating the Burmese nation by their sheer numbers: "if this state of things goes on for a long time, there will be no Burmese women left and in fact, in ten years time we would have to hand them over our women, our people and our money."⁷ The sentiment echoed Burmese public opinion. In the following cartoon published in *Myanma Alin* in 1932, mother Burma is represented being exploited for her riches by immigrant Indian men and she calls out for rescue from the clutches of foreigners.

⁷ U Ba Than, "Motion Regarding Separation" *Burma Legislative Council Report* (29th April 1933).

While protesting legislation against mixed marriages and proposed immigration restrictions, prominent Indian representatives in the Legislative Council of Burma objected to the all-embracing nature of the new regulations (which would include them). Also, apart from the legislative council members, Indian elites (specifically Muslim Indian elites) who had been in Burma for many generations (and had made Burma their home) objected to being conjoined with the recent stream of migrants coming to Burma from India and were in fact, critical of the habits and customs of Muslim immigrants. Thus, I would like to end this chapter with thoughts on how upper-class Indian nationalists in fact, distanced themselves from their lower class countrymen.

I. The “Temporary” Burmese Wife and the Migrant Foreigner

In the play *The Burmese Wife* written by James Ormerod (published in 1948), the author describes a particularly unfortunate union between a European man named Noel Langdon (a young mining engineer employed in the geological department in British Burma) and a native Burmese woman, Ma Shwe. The play begins with Langdon being described as being unhealthy and brooding at his home outside Rangoon. The native servant, Yaing, encourages him to take a local Burmese mistress from the village (an arrangement he could easily make) but Langdon prohibits any such action. His friend, the local middle-aged European doctor Robert Villiers reiterates the advice, as it was not possible for an Englishman to live in such an unhealthy climate with only coolies and animals for company.

Langdon protests that he has a fiancé waiting back for him back in England and being a faithful Christian he cannot risk cohabiting with a native woman. Further, what was the guarantee that the native woman would not develop feelings of attachment with the father of her

children and refuse to give him up? Villiers explains that in his experience amongst the Burmese people, it was not considered a sin for a man to leave a woman (or the other way round) and therefore, they did not consider it ill if the white man chose to leave a woman when she was of no use to him, that is, if she was well compensated. “It is the custom of the country again. Religion does not enter into the matter at all in Burma, as it does with us. Marriage is a social contract – that and nothing more, and like any other contract, may be varied or broken by arrangement.”⁹ Langdon is shocked at the heartlessness of the situation but Villiers elaborates: “if you eliminate all European notions of sentiment and morality which the Easterners don’t share, it is no more heartless than paying off a workman in a factory when his services are no longer required. Keeping a Burmese woman as a mistress is no more than a business transaction.”¹⁰

A liaison with a pretty local village girl (named Ma Shwe) is duly arranged and for the next few years, Langdon lives comfortably with his temporary native wife (akin to a mistress or a concubine) and two sons borne by her. He manages to educate her and she manages the housekeeping of an English home with aplomb. But at last the time comes when Langdon has to return to England and fulfill his commitment to his fiancé. Ma Shwe discovers the deception through a photograph and a letter where she was described as no more than a “dusky native woman whose body had been hired.” Consumed with jealousy (as is typical of a Burmese woman according to the author) and the futility of trying to persuade him otherwise, she decides to enlist the help of a local witch doctor to kill her own husband and then herself. The play ends

⁹ James Ormerod, *The Burmese Wife: a Tragedy in Three Acts* (London: Mitre Press, 1948).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

with the inevitable tragedy of Langdon's death and finally his realization of the mistake that he had committed.

The play provides the clear message that sexual contact with women of color could only be the harbinger of various kinds of dangers: moral corruption, the embarrassment of half-race children and ultimately even death for the European man.¹¹ But the most interesting part of the literary work seems to be the conviction with which the author describes the marital arrangement and attendant expectations of the Burmese woman and her family. The Burmese woman is no more than a "workman in a factory who could be paid off at the end of his services."¹²

Loose marriage laws within the Burmese society were commented upon by middle-class Indians present in Burma as well. Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya in his novel *Srikanta* describes the protagonist making an acquaintance in Rangoon with a gentle and exceedingly humble Burmese lady wholly devoted to the Bengali youth that she loved and lived with. On learning that the Indian man would return to India (Chittagong) without her, Srikanta asks when did he

¹¹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia" in Michaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 209-266. Through sexual contact with women of color, European men not only contracted diseases but also debased sentiments, immoral proclivities, and extreme susceptibilities to decivilized states. But beyond the immediate physical and moral danger to the European male population, the growing number of half-caste children – the "dangerous pauper element" often employed as low-level clerks, officials and even vagrants on the streets of colonial Asian cities were an embarrassment to the colonial state.

The metaphor of degeneration is replicated in different colonial contexts. See chapter "Womanizing Indochina: Fiction, Nation, and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia, 1890-1930" in Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 108-130. Born in Moscow and educated in Paris, Roland Meyer entered the Indochinese colonial service in 1908. Based on his personal experiences of life in the orient, Meyer wrote the novel *Saranami* where the protagonist (Komlah) settles in Cambodia and is so charmed by the Cambodian culture that he devotes his life to the study of Khmer language and history in order to rescue them for posterity. He gradually forgets his origins, race, and even his language, and becomes the Khmer's adoptive son. Komlah marries Saranami, a Cambodian dancer who represents everything exotic that he had ever loved about the country. Yet his hopes are dashed. Komlah's attempts to adopt Cambodian culture ends in failure. Overpowered by the native milieu, he falls sick and returns to France to stop the erosion of his western personality by "the morbid elements of the Khmer and Buddhist soul." Saranami dies alone, shunned by family and friends for having betrayed her race and culture. Meyer's message is deeply conservative: any attempt to subvert the status quo is an open invitation to disaster.

¹² Ormerod, *The Burmese Wife*, 15.

plan to come back to Burma to her? The man replies that he had no plans of doing so “as the entire clan would descend upon them like locusts.” Srikanta is depressed and feels that it would probably make the girl extremely unhappy. To this, the man laughed till tears came to his eyes. Then controlling himself with an effort, he said, “Unhappy! Burmese women are filthy, casteless whores. She will catch another man before the boat leaves the harbor. The slut eats *neppi* (a pickle of decomposed fish called *guanpi*) and stinks to high heaven. They are not like our women, *moshai* (mister). Unhappy indeed!”¹³

During the 1920s and 1930s such a contemptuous view of Burmese women was matched by the increasing nationalist critique of women who sold themselves and concurrently the nation to foreigners. The modern Burmese woman (predominantly in the cities) was seen to be preoccupied with the latest westernized fashion, mannerisms, and western consumer items increasingly available in Burma.¹⁴ Marriages of convenience (at times even cohabiting with multiple men simultaneously) were the only way to sustain an affluent lifestyle. However, criticisms of inter-racial unions (particularly with foreign migrant men) were not exclusive to Burma but were prevalent in other cultures too.

Describing inter-racial marriages in early twentieth century Mexico between single Chinese male migrants and local Mexican women, Robert Romaro shows how mainstream Mexican society strongly condemned such unions. Spoken-word comedy recordings, cartoons, and poetry created during these years comment on courtship, marriage, cross-cultural children, abandonment, and even family relocations to China. According to popular perception, wealthy Chinese immigrant merchants lured naive Mexican women into marriage by promising them

¹³ Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya, *Srikanta*, trans. Aruna Chakravarti (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), 168-169.

¹⁴ Chie Ikeya, “The Modern Burmese Woman and the Politics of Fashion in Colonial Burma,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67:4 (November 2008): 1277–1308.

lives of material comfort and prosperity. Popular Mexican culture sometimes found humor in the courtship antics of Chinese male immigrants but Mexican women who married Chinese suitors were shunned and scolded as ‘dirty,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘unpatriotic’ and shameless.’ Chinese-Mexican marital unions were described as marriages of convenience (very similarly represented as in the case of Burma) in which the lazy Mexican women avoided work thanks to the support of their Chinese husbands. According to critics, such cross-cultural relationships however were doomed to failure, as the Chinese husband would inevitably reduce the Mexican woman to a slave-like condition and she would be forced to become a mother to an alien-like offspring that she would seek desperately to abandon.¹⁵

In a similar fashion, Burmese nationalists continued to evoke through images in popular newspapers and magazines the ideal Burmese woman and the digression from these standards in the “modern” Burmese woman. In the following two images – a cartoon and an advertisement, the cartoonist implies the “modern” Burmese woman was an extremely ambitious and avaricious person who would only enter into relationships if provided with enough material interests.¹⁶

¹⁵ See chapter “Gender, Interracial Marriage and Transnational Families” in Robert Chao Remero, *The Chinese in Mexico 1882-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Also see chapter “Good Mothers, Medeas, or Jezebels: Feminine Imagery in Colonial and Anti-Colonial Rhetoric in the Dutch East Indies, 1900-1942” in Clancy-Smith and Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, 236-254.

Figure 15¹⁷

The Money Minded Burmese Woman by Cartoonist U Ba Gale



¹⁷ *Thuriya* (February 1917).

Figure 16¹⁸

Advertisement for Bombay-Burmah Furniture



In an advertisement for the Bombay-Burmah Furniture store in Rangoon - Burmese men are shown desperate to woo, coax, beg and even threaten the lady in question to accept their proposal. But when she comes to the Bombay-Burmah Furniture store and given the offer to buy anything she wants for her wedding, she promptly agrees!

¹⁸ *Toetetyei* (November, 1933)

In an article (accompanied by a cartoon) published in the *Bandoola* newspaper (1926) titled “Studies on Eastern Women with Western Morals” the author asks: “Have you ever seen a Burmese man with a foreign woman? But you could find numerous Burmese women nowadays in Rangoon shamelessly on the arms of sometimes not one, but two foreign men.”¹⁹ In such misogynistic articles and cartoons, the Burmese woman came to serve as a metaphor for the corruption and decadence that had crept into Burmese society under colonial rule. The task of critics was to educate the Burmese public of the dangers of such temporary liaisons, as they would inevitably end in degradation and shame for the woman.

This view of degradation of Burmese women was reinforced by a number of international abolitionist organizations working in Rangoon against trafficking in women. Some of these groups: Rangoon Vigilance Society, Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Young Men’s Christian Association and the American Baptist Mission collected first hand information to lobby the government against the policy of officially approved “segregated” areas in the town where brothels were allowed.²⁰ Collected papers (testimonies and eyewitness reports), indicated the transformation that had taken place in Burmese society with the British occupation of the province. Several Europeans took Burmese women as concubines during their stay in Burma, only to discard them when they returned home without making adequate provisions for them. Many of these unfortunate women ended up in

¹⁹ “Studies on Eastern Women with Western Morals” *Bandoola* (November, 1926).

²⁰ “Rangoon Vigilance Society Report Papers” (1909-1932) [Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, 1916-1932: various reports, pamphlets and leaflets] (3AMS/D/37/03 Women’s Library, London University). The main aim of these organizations was to collect first hand evidence and lobby the government for complete prohibition of prostitution as opposed to “segregated areas” in the city with official approval. Segregated areas had been introduced in colonial cities (particularly cantonment areas) in the late nineteenth century for the “grouping together of public brothels in a particular area” where medically approved sex-workers would cater to the needs of British troops, so that the latter could be protected from the scourge of venereal diseases.

brothels in Rangoon.²¹ But the biggest reason these brothels flourished, according to one such testimony, was because the “Burmese population had been swamped by the vast influx of foreigners from India and other neighboring countries.”²² According to the report, the clients of these brothels were British troops and sepoy and transient workers from the Indian subcontinent and not the local male population.²³ These foreigners included not only single male migrants who visited such establishments as customers, but also a large number of women (including Indian) who came to Burma to earn money as sex-workers.²⁴

Describing one particular nocturnal investigative tour of Rangoon by members of the Rangoon Vigilance society, the author writes about the various foreign (particularly Japanese), Burmese, Eurasian and Indian prostitutes openly soliciting in the center of the city. “In the heart of the town - on Dalhousie Street, Fraser Street and Thompson Street - alongside roads occupied by government offices, banks, shipping offices, business premises, large stores, and principal churches, colleges and schools etc. were brothels run legally by government sanction. In the 29th Street there are about 20 and 30 houses kept open for the purpose of prostitution. The total number of female inmates may be about 120, in this street alone. As we approached the 34th

²¹ “Testimony by Maung Ba Pe: Deputation from Burma to Association for Moral and Social Hygiene” in *Various Reports, Pamphlets and leaflets of AMSH* (1919).

²² “Request for Re-imposition of the C.D. Act in Rangoon: Memorandum by Mr. Madge” in *Various Reports, Pamphlets and Leaflets of AMSH* (June 1909).

²³ John Cowen, "Public Prostitution in Rangoon: Report to the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene on Brothel-Keeping, Prostitution, Segregation and Immoral Conditions in Rangoon and Other Towns and Stations in Burma," 9 June 1916, IOR L/PJ/6/1448, 3.

²⁴ “Annual Report on Trafficking of Women and Children from Madras to Burma for the year 1924” Public Department (G.O. 294-295) (25th March 1925) and “Annual Report on Trafficking of Women and Children from Madras to Burma for the year 1925” Public Department (G.O. 276-277) 24th March 1926) *Tamil Nadu State Archives* (TSA). According to the official reports and correspondence, the majority of the women who went to Burma and Straits Settlements came from lower castes (often from the Devadasi group) and went there to make money in the brothels for a few years to return home richer. In a particular case, a woman of this class who had saved money and returned from Burma built a temple at Coringa in the Godavari district at a cost of Rs 10,000.

Street, we saw open soliciting and large numbers of rickshaws and many Indian and Burmese men going into the houses freely.”²⁵ The children borne by these women (most of them half-caste) crowded the streets of Rangoon as beggars, pickpockets and pilferers, sometimes working at roadside stalls washing dishes for a few scraps of food. Many of them were opium addicts and often in the clutches of various gangs of thieves.²⁶

In order to further support their claims of immoral trafficking in the city, the Vigilance Society and other organizations collected statistics of the increase in cases of venereal diseases and abortions amongst Burmese women from gynecological practitioners within the city. Most of these women, according to the questionnaires answered by the practitioners, came from well-to-do families and had either fallen on hard times or their husbands’ had visited these brothels and contracted the dreadful diseases. The instance of abortions and stillbirths, particularly amongst Burmese women had increased from 30 to 50 percent in the past few years. There had also been several cases where patients had been crippled (because of venereal diseases) and in the past few years there had been a significant increase in the sale of patent drugs and medicines in dispensaries promising fast and effective cures for sexually transmitted diseases. Not only were adults infected, but the taint of venereal disease was found in 25 percent of newly born infants.²⁷

Despite the money brought in under the colonial economy, the city of Rangoon during these years came to represent all that was new, unfamiliar, tainted and vile to the native

²⁵ “Report of the Vigilance Society by Conyers Baker (Provincial Secretary for Y.M.C.A. Burma) in *Various Reports, Pamphlets and leaflets of AMSH* (1918).

²⁶ Ethel M. Lucy Clausen, “In as much” in *Barton Papers (1931-46)* [Cambridge South Asia Center]. The pamphlet describes the effort of a particular Burmese woman Daw Tee Tee, who worked as part of a missionary organization in Rangoon to rescue such mixed-raced children. Also, see Penny Edwards, “Half-cast: Staging race in British Burma” *Postcolonial Studies*, 5:3 (2002) 279- 295.

²⁷ “Tracts for Rangoon: welcome to the Territorials” in *Various Reports, Pamphlets and leaflets of AMSH* (YMCA Publication).

Burmese. For example, in a cartoon published in 1925 in the *Deedok Journal* a father is portrayed sending his son for further study at Rangoon University with high hopes for his future. Once he arrives to the city however, the young man falls in with bad company and is lured into visiting restaurants, listening to corrupting music, gambling at horse races and finally calling on women in brothels. In the end, he succumbs to venereal disease.²⁸ If the Burmese woman, in temporary marriages and in the brothels of Rangoon represented the tainted state of the nation, the middleman migrant, particularly the Indian migrant, came to symbolize the contaminant that was responsible for the degradation.

With regard to Burmese women: while their avaricious nature was criticized, Burmese nationalists and reformers also emphasized that many of these women were naïve and did not know the real consequences of their actions and therefore instructing them on the perils of cohabiting with foreign men would help mitigate the problem. Hence, during the 1920s and 1930s there was a spate of articles and advisory pamphlets, which aimed to “morally” educate such women. Particularly, there seemed to be a paranoia of ignorant and uninformed Burmese women being kidnapped from the countryside on false pretexts and being brought to the city for the purposes of prostitution. The following are two such advisory cartoons published in 1925 and 1935 in *Deedok Weekly Journal* and *Myanma Alin* respectively.

²⁸ *Deedok Journal* (12th August 1925).

Figure 17²⁹

Burmese Women being sold in Rangoon by Cartoonist *U Ba Gale*



Brokers, clerks and young men lure poor Burmese girls from villages to the city on the pretext of a good life, job and marriage. The unsuspecting girl is then “adopted” by a local woman and finally sold off to an Indian customer.

²⁹ *Myanma Alin* (June 1932).

Figure 18³⁰

A Woman's Honor by *Tun Min*



An older woman gives advice to a young Burmese woman: a woman's honor cannot be equated with gold, cannot be re-purchased with money (by her), the stains on it cannot be washed away like dust on clothes and once it is lost, the woman has no place in the home!

³⁰ *Deedok Weekly Journal* (October 1925).

Already during the late 1920s and 1930s there was an ongoing drive to investigate the living and housing conditions for lower middle classes and laboring poor in Rangoon (discussed in chapter three). As part of these enquiries, information was also collected about the sexual habits of the migrants. Both European and Indian medical officers commented on the lack of family life amongst the male migrant. “Their one purpose in emigration is to earn a livelihood and to save as much as possible to take back to their home. But the uncertainty of securing early employment and of their stay in Burma coupled with their inability to defray the expenses of transport, and in some instances caste prejudice, are factors which operate in preventing men from bringing their wives and families along with them.”³¹ Given the disparity in the sex ratio of immigrants from India, as high as 250 men to one woman, these investigations came to the conclusion that migrant Indian women openly accepted promiscuous relations with multiple men in these low-income tenements. “The tie is however not a legal one and is not so recognized; and either party is free to form a new alliance.”³² Such arrangements could be between single Indian men and women, but even married Indian men could also set up temporary households with native Burmese women during their stay in Burma, only to return back home to their original families when they had earned enough. According to the reports, the majority of the brothels in the city also considered these migrant men from India as their most profitable clients. “Prostitution being customary” amongst the laboring poor from India, in many cases proprietors of houses of ill fame either themselves made trips to India to obtain Indian women and girls for

³¹ Chapter XXI, “Sex Relation and Drink” in E.L.J. Andrew, *Indian Labor in Rangoon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

³² *Ibid.*, Also see chapter five “In Temporary Marriages: Wives, Widows and Prostitutes” in Samita Sen, *Women and Labor in Late Colonial India: the Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

their brothels or employed regular paid agents whose duty it was to periodically procure “fresh” females for the purpose.³³

During the 1920s and 1930s in the Burma Legislative Council and the Burmese public sphere - legislators, nationalist leaders, Buddhist monks and women’s organizations campaigned to save Burmese women and simultaneously the nation from sexual exploitation. They canvassed against the running of brothels in Rangoon, but the more important agenda was legalizing temporary marriages between Indian men (particularly Indian Muslim men) and Burmese women so that these women (and their children) were not identified as illegitimate and left without any recourse to rightful inheritance.

II. “Rescuing the Burmese Woman”: The Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Bill, 1937

In 1929, in an inheritance case, a certain Ma Chit May made an appeal in the High Court against her in-laws for restitution of her property rights on the death of her husband Dawood. According to Ma Chit May, a certain Dawood (an Indian Muslim migrant) had eloped with her and taken her to his home, where in the presence of a *Moulvi* (an Islamic cleric) she first converted to Islam (from being a Burmese Buddhist) and then married Dawood. All this had taken place nine years earlier, and the family admitted most of the facts alleged by Ma Chit May. Her mother-in-law and other family members had accepted her as his wife, and relatives who now challenged the legitimacy of her marriage, in their oral evidence said that they had no complaints whatsoever as to her conduct as a cohabiter. Her children, one aged about eight and the other about five were treated as Dawood’s children. However, the main issue on which the

³³ “Sex Relation and Drink” in E.L.J. Andrew, *Indian Labour in Rangoon*.

case was brought to the court rested on whether (apart from the token ceremonies) a legal marriage had indeed taken place between the two parties. Production of oral testimonies of an event that had taken place nine-ten years ago was a complicated matter. The *Moulvi* himself was called to give evidence in the case and while he admitted to the conversion of Ma Chit May, he denied a case of “legal” Islamic marriage between Dawood and Ma Chit May, which would require the presence of additional adult Muslim witnesses at the ceremony. Therefore, it was a contest between evidence of cohabitation and repute (in front of family and neighbors) of nine years as compared to legal requirements as per Islamic law. In absence of such witnesses or any written document or a definite will left by the husband, other family members demanded that she be deprived of any rights to dispose of property or take any jewelry, household furniture or even clothing.³⁴

Increasing numbers of such cases were filed in the Rangoon High Court during these years where Burmese women were in relationships with migrant men from India in the belief that mere cohabitation or a small informal ceremony proclaiming their conversion (in case of Muslim husbands) would be sufficient to establish them as legal wives. According to the Burma Legislative Council and the Rangoon High Courts the problem was differences in definition of marriage. “Under the customary law of Burma, marriage is a contract whereby two persons agree

³⁴ Mohameden Law of Marriage and proof of marriage “Maung Kyi and Others versus Ma Shwe Baw” *The Indian Law Reports: Rangoon Series* (August 7th 1929).

In another case, a certain Chedambaram Chettyar left his legal Hindu wife in Madras and converted to Islam in Burma and married a number of Burmese women, who had been cheated of their rightful inheritance since they had no proof of their legal status and were left destitute. Heirs of Converts to Mohamedanism must be Mohamedans “C.V.N.C.T. Chedambaram Chettyar vs Ma Nyein Me and Others” *Indian Law Reports: Rangoon Series* (7th February, 1928).

In yet another case in 1924 in the Rangoon High Court between Baran Shanta and Ma Chan Tha May following their divorce, the husband refused to provide for the maintenance of the child who was eleven years old. The Indian husband claimed that the child was old enough to work as a coolie laborer (and earn at least Rs. 2 a month) and provide for his own maintenance and therefore there was no reason for him to contribute to his upbringing. The Court however held that it was contrary to public image to encourage a child labor by holding a boy of eleven years should contribute towards his own support while he was in school. The ability of a child to earn something whether to be considered in fixing maintenance. B”aran Shanta versus Ma Chan Tha May” *The Indian Law Reports: Rangoon Series* (7th October, 1924).

to live together. The husband and wife work together for their mutual benefit and share the proceeds between them of their joint labors. There is no ceremony or formality absolutely required to complete a marriage amongst Burman Buddhists. All that is required is an intention to contract a permanent union with a view to becoming husband and wife. Nor is there anything specific in Burmese Buddhist law, which requires the other spouse to be a Buddhist.”³⁵ But in mixed marriages, when the question of her status arose, the Buddhist woman discovered that by the operation of the personal (religious) law of the man, she was not his wife. Both amongst orthodox Hindus and Christians, the Buddhist woman was not recognized as a legal wife and therefore could not benefit from the Indian Succession Act, Indian Christian Marriage Act or the Indian Divorce Act. Marriage under Muslim law on the other hand had the added dynamic of the Burmese Buddhist woman being forced to convert to Islam in order to make the union valid. Finally, even if she was recognized as the wife of the man, she could no longer obtain the benefit of the status of a married woman under Burmese Buddhist Law. Burmese Buddhist Law allotted to a wife an equal share to her children and her –in-laws in the properties acquired by her and her husband and gave her the whole estate as a survivor on the death of her husband.³⁶

Thus, the Burmese woman not only lost her high legal status (according to Buddhist religious and customary law) but in many cases she was seen as nothing more than a mistress. The Burmese-Muslim marriage question was highlighted as a national issue in the early 1920s when the leading women’s organization, *Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin*, a subsidiary branch of the General Council of Burmese Associations (G.C.B.A.) declared in a demonstration in Rangoon

³⁵ Definition of Burmese Buddhist Law regarding husband and wife to deal with joint property “Ma Paing versus Maung Shwe Hpaw and Eight Others” *The Indian Law Reports: Rangoon Series* (11th March 1927). Also see Aye Kyaw, “Status of Women in Family Law in Burma and Indonesia” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4. No. 1 (Special Burma Studies Issue) (Fall 1988), 100-120.

³⁶ See Chapter Five “Marriage Question” in *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Supdt. Govt. Printing and Stationery, Burma, 1939).

(1921) that Burmese women should not marry men of a religious faith other than Buddhism. The woman not only lost her culturally inherited conjugal rights, especially those pertaining to divorce and inheritance, she lost her religion by converting to Islam after her marriage to a Muslim man.³⁷ The *Konmaryi* members continued to speak publicly against Buddhist-Muslim marriages, as a result of which the Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill was introduced in the Legislative Council of Burma in 1927. The bill however failed to pass in 1927 and was re-introduced in 1937 with amendments (following the political separation of Burma from India) and finally drafted into a legal bill in 1939.

The Act decreed that Buddhist customary law be applied to marriages involving Buddhist women who belonged to any of the indigenous races of Burma and non-Buddhist men who did not profess the Buddhist faith and included Christians, Hindus, Mohammedans and Chinese. The following conditions were to be observed: first, the man was at least eighteen years of age and the woman at least sixteen. Second, the woman had no previous marriage ties. And third, notice was to be given to the headman of the village tract in which the woman resided before the marriage, and after the necessary publication of the notice, the marriage was to be formalized by the headman, who was herein termed as the registrar of marriages, in the presence of two witnesses. Both parties were to sign the marriage register and this effectively made the woman the legal wife with the same rights and privileges of a woman who had married a Buddhist man. The registrar was required to send a copy of the notice to be published and the marriage certificate to the Deputy Commissioner in whose office the documents were to be kept for evidence in case they were wanted in future either to prove marriage or anything else connected with the marriage such as the legitimacy of children and so on. If the couple co-habited without

³⁷ “The Aims of *Wunthanu Konmaryi Athin* in “Biography of Daw Saw Tin” in So Mon Nyin, *Myanma Amyothami* (Women of Burma) (Yangon, 1976).

marriage and being registered, the woman's parents, guardians, siblings could inform the village registrar of the matter, at which time both parties were to be summoned and urged to legalize the union. If the man refused such a course of action, a suit of breach of promise to marry or for seduction could be brought against him. In case of disagreements or incompatibility, the grounds of divorce were to be the same as those, which applied to Burmese Buddhists. All the property was to be divided according to the Burmese Buddhist Law. In the case of death of the husband, the woman was to inherit the entire estate, instead of the relatives (in the case of the personal law of the Indian man) who usually dispossessed her of everything. The bill also made financial provisions for the children born as a result of such a union. They were to inherit as though they were born of a Burman Buddhist husband and wife.³⁸

Indian representatives in the council, (S.A.S. Tyabji and K.C. Bose amongst others) while sympathetic to the plight of Burmese women in mixed marriages, raised objections as to the undue partiality of the proposed bill (in the discussion preceding the passage of the bill in the legislative council). According to them, in the case of such marriages, the law could be misused against the migrants' prior families and it was illogical to prioritize Burmese Buddhist Laws over the personal (religious) laws of men who neither belonged to Burma nor professed the Buddhist religion. In the case of prior marriages in the home country of the non-Burmese man (for example in India) the property and succession rights of the families left behind (including parents, brothers and sisters) would be seriously infringed upon. Apart from the undue and uncalled for preference for the Burmese Buddhist wife and heirs by her, councilors argued that it would also mean, in the case of Muslim householders, disregarding one's religious duties to make necessary donations and contributions to religious institutions (*waqf*). Therefore, the mixed

³⁸ "Application of *Dhammathats* to Marriages between Burmese Women and Foreigners" *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (31st January 1927) and "The Buddhist Women Special Marriage and Succession Bill", 1937 *Burma Legislature Proceedings of the First House of Representatives Volume V – Fifth Session* (February 1939).

marriage law interfered with the religious and personal freedom guaranteed under the British Crown.

Further, they reasoned that there seemed to be an undue focus on divorce cases in mixed marriages when there had been an increase in similar conflicts in Buddhist Burmese polygamous marriages in the past few years. In reality, rather than a single definition of marriage as the language of the bill suggested, Buddhist customary family law (even in marriages between Buddhists) was being continuously re-interpreted in cases and judgments in the colonial courts of law during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁹

The objections raised by Indian representatives did not go down well with the Burmese councilors who saw it as an assault on the rights Burmese women and the honorable duty of Burmese men to protect “the Burmese mother, sister, daughter and wife.” In the words of U Saw Hla Nyo: “our Indian friends want to ignore our Buddhist law; they would rather prefer that the personal law of the Indians to be followed in Burma...in reality, *Indians are now foreigners in Burma*. This bill is a Burma bill for the protection of Burmese women and I do not think it is fair that these foreigners come into Burma, marry Burmese women and desert them without making any provision for their after life or for their children; It is most shameful of them.”⁴⁰

In 1937, with the political separation of Burma from India, the mixed marriage question as it came to be discussed in the Legislative Council and the Burmese public sphere, became part of more sinister political rhetoric. It came to be seen as a consequence of unchecked Indian immigration into Burma and the leading cause for the destruction of the Burmese race. In 1938,

³⁹ “The Effect of Anglo-Indian Legislation on Burmese Customary Law” in David C. Buxbaum (Eds.) *Family Law and Customary Law in Asia: A Contemporary Legal Perspective* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 67-88.

⁴⁰ U Saw Hla Nyo, *Burma Legislature Proceedings of the First House of Representatives* (15th March 1939).

when the Indo-Burmese riots broke out, a large number of migrant Indian Muslim families were forced to return to India.

Public Criticisms of Burmese-Muslim Marriages

The critics of Burmese-Muslim marriages portrayed these unions as dangerous liaisons, which ended in misery for Burmese women and the ruination of the entire Burmese nation. In an article published in the *Seq-Than Journal* in November 1938, under the title “Burmese women who took Indians,” blamed Burmese wives of Indian Muslims for “ruining Burma’s race and religion.”

You Burmese women who fail to safeguard your own race, after you have married an Indian; your daughter whom you have begotten by such a tie takes an Indian as her husband. As for your son, he becomes a half-caste and tries to get pure Burmese woman. Not only you but also your future generations are responsible for the ruination of the race.⁴¹

But the problem with Burmese-Muslim marriages was not only the increasing population of half-caste children but according to the author of *Kabya Pyatthana* (the Half-Caste Problem), it was symbolic of a larger cultural degeneration that had set in, particularly the customary oppressive treatment of women which was bound to happen as a result of contact with Hindu and Muslim societies.⁴² An article entitled “Muslim Women” (“Muslim Amyothami”) published in the April 1936 New Year’s Edition of *Myanmar Alin*, the author U Ka outlined what he

⁴¹ *Seq-Than Journal* (27 November 1938) in “Burma Press Abstract” 5th December 1940 IOR L/R/5/207 cited in Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 135.

⁴² Pu Gale, *Kabya Pyatthana (The Half Caste Problem)* (Yangon: Kyi pwa Yei, 1939), 8 cited in Chie Ikeya, *Gender, History and Modernity: Representing Women in Twentieth Century Colonial Burma* (Dissertation, 2006),

identified as “a Muslim custom of hiding women at home,” or “purdah.” U Ka described *purdah* as a customary practice whereby a Muslim woman secluded herself from public sight by wearing a veil and a cloth that cover her from head to toe, and confined herself to her home. He explained that the custom, intended to protect a Muslim woman from moral and social adulteration, also prevented her from tempting a Muslim man to be lustful and immoral. U Ka then pointed out that a Muslim woman appeared to be deprived of numerous privileges including the ability to read religious texts, newspapers or anything written in English. “What is this belief,” deplores U Ka, “that a Muslim woman should undertake a *Haj* when she is prohibited from entering a mosque?” The author contrasted this situation with that of the urban Burmese woman who was educated, westernized and liberated. The Muslim woman in comparison had failed to move forward. And this was particularly true in the case of immigrant Muslim families⁴³

⁴³ U Ka, “Muslim Amyothamimya” *Myanmar Alin* (April 1938).

Figure 19⁴⁴

The “Backward” Muslim Woman as Compared to the “Liberal” Burmese Woman



Thus, the portrayal of the modern urban Burmese woman as highly westernized and liberated could be used as a criticism of these women for transgressing traditional Burmese cultural boundaries (as discussed in the first section) but at the same time it could be employed as a political strategy by nationalists for arguing against Buddhist-Muslim marriages. Just as the European community in Burma came to see interracial unions as blight on colonial rule, a Burmese wife married to a Muslim man was projected as demeaning to the nation, her race and her cultural heritage. Such a Burmese woman was destined to damage Burmese culture because she had to adopt her husband’s kin, religion and culture. Resolutions dealing with Buddhist-

⁴⁴ *Thuriya* (February 1932).

Muslim marriages appeared as an important agenda at nationalist meetings throughout the country and the colonial state cited the Buddhist-Muslim marriage as one of the chief cause of a series of anti-Indian riots – referred to as the “1938 riots” that broke out in Rangoon on 26th July 1938.

The riots began when a mass meeting of Burmese Buddhist monks and laymen at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda turned into a violent assault on Indians. The meeting, chaired by a respected Buddhist monk, had been organized to protest against an anti-Buddhist book by a Burmese Muslim Maung Shwe Hpi that had been published seven years before and then republished a few months prior to the riots. This republication resulted in a print war between both communities. Amongst other such writings, on the 16th of July 1938 the *Thuriya* newspaper featured an article that accused Indian immigrants in Burma who professed religions other than Buddhism of “seducing Burmese Buddhist women to become their wives and causing dissension.” In their statement:

It has been known to the world that Burma is a Buddhist country, people professing other religions come to Burma the country of the Buddhist without hindrance, and as they have been eating the flesh and sucking the life-blood of the Burmese, the whole of the Burmese nation not being able to bear, has raised a cry and clamored many years since, and they are aware of it...But without paying any heed they have insulted the Burmese Buddhist by seducing Burmese Buddhist women, causing dissension in order to create such communities as *Dobama Muslim – We Burmese Muslims*.⁴⁵

On the 19th of July, the editorial published in *Mujahed-i-Burma* responded that Burmese newspapers were spreading false propaganda regarding Buddhist-Muslim marriages and deliberately exciting the feelings of Burmans in order to drive Muslims out of the country. On

⁴⁵ *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing and Stationary, Burma, 1939), 11.

the day of the meeting, the gathered audience marched to the Soortee Bara Bazaar and upon arrival at the market, began throwing stones and attacking Indians. The police were called in and during the unrest Indian policemen were employed to maintain order while injuring Buddhist monks. Burmese protestors complained that Indian policemen abused their power and under the guise of bringing order to the riots targeted monks. On the 25th of July, 1938, the General Council of the Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas' Association (Buddhist Monks *Pongyi* Association) held a mass meeting and published its resolution under the heading "Bama Thway" (Burmese Blood) inciting Buddhists to rise up against all foreigners trying to submerge the Burmese nation by their sheer numbers. Following the violence in Rangoon, riots spread throughout the districts and provinces of Burma, through September 1938, resulting in 220 dead and 926 injured.⁴⁶

The final report on the 1938 Riots attributed the violence to several other factors, beside Maung Shwe Hpi's book, including the aftereffects of the Great Depression in Burma, the inter-marriage question, and the sensationalist and provocative coverage of the riots by the popular press. The details of the riots were recounted in confidential reports to the government of India and highlighted in the press in the Madras presidency. In the 14th of August 1938 special issue of *Ananda Vikatan*, a particularly alarming article, "Terrorism in Burma" caught the attention of government officials and a request was made by the government of Burma Home Department to the Chief Secretary to the government of Madras to seize all copies of the magazine, and given the delicate political nature of the situation, prohibit publication of all such inflammatory material in near future.⁴⁷ The author to the article wrote plaintively, "our Indian Muslim brethren

⁴⁶ *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Supdt. Government Printing and Stationary, Burma, 1939), 8.

⁴⁷ Letter from the Government of Burma Home Department to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras No.667 G.O. 1517 (Confidential) (24th August 1938) *Tamil Nadu State Archives* [TNA].

are disembarking in large numbers from steamers coming back from Burma. Our hearts bleed at the sight of them. They appear to be terror-stricken and begin to quiver when they describe the atrocities inflicted on them. The hardships endured by them and the frightful scenes witnessed by them are not really dreams. Are they not the persons who have witnessed their relatives and friends being butchered in front of their own eyes, who have lost all the money they earned toiling all through their life and who have been subjected every possible cruelty?”⁴⁸

The thoughtless act of an Indian Muslim brother (who republished the original book written by Maung Shwe Hpi) has been responsible for this series of events. Every educated Muslim will condemn such an act. To carry out an organized propaganda vilifying the religion of the majority of the people to which a person has gone to earn his livelihood is not only criminal but also foolish. But what is it that has happened in Burma? What terrible things have resulted from a petty offence? How strange is that all these stabbings, murders and cruelties were committed in the name of Lord Buddha, who was the embodiment of compassion?”⁴⁹

The article continued with a detailed pictorial representation of Burmese Buddhist monks killing Indian migrants in Burma and the government unable to take any steps. “How could the poor Indian migrant survive in Burma, being attacked by monks who had turned into bloodthirsty executioners?”⁵⁰

We are unable to believe that the aforesaid publication vilifying the religion in question was responsible for this terrible riot. It seems to us that this served as a pretext for them to vent their hatred, which they had already been cherishing against the Indians. This is not the first time that such events have taken place in Burma. It is the responsibility of the

⁴⁸ "Terrorism in Burma" in government censored magazine *Ananda Vikatan* Public GO (confidential.) 1517 *Tamil Nadu State Archives*

⁴⁹ "Terrorism in Burma" *Ananda Vikatan* (14th August 1938).

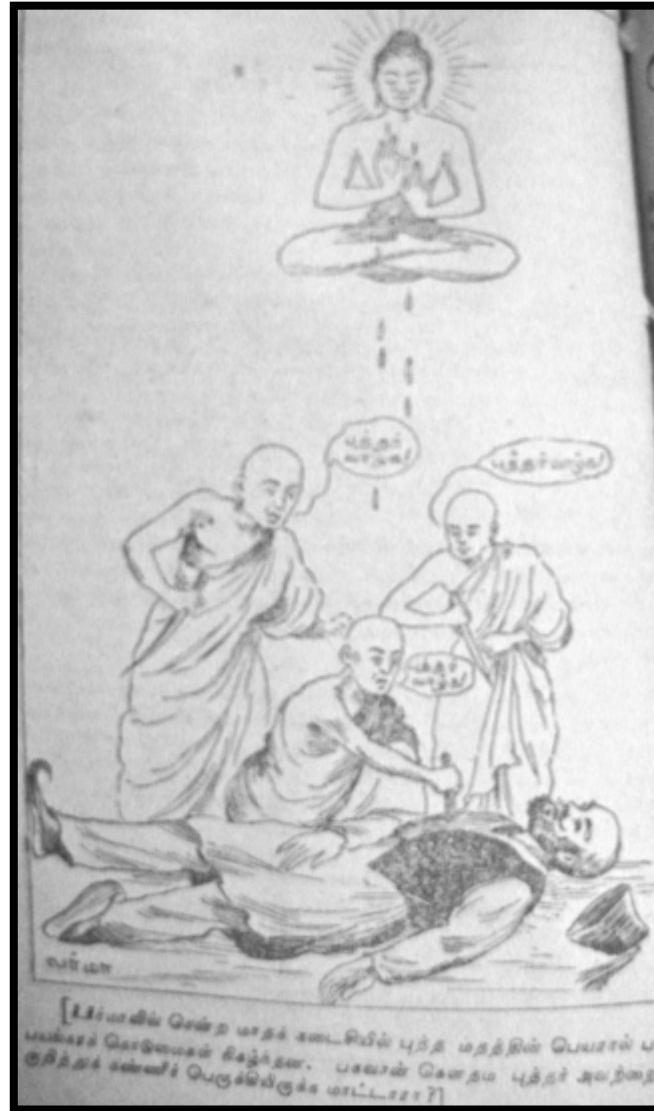
⁵⁰ "Terrorism in Burma" in government censored magazine *Ananda Vikatan*. Also, Response of Madras LC towards Burmese Riot Commission Report Public GO (confidential) 1616 (1939) *Tamil Nadu State Archives*.

Government of Burma to appoint a commission in order to investigate the events and prevent such outward incidences in future. Further, the imperial government in Britain has a duty to protect Indians in Burma. Both India and Burma were under the control of the British government and the Indian went to Burma depending only on the protection of the British government. They have invested a large amount of capital that has been critical for the present prosperity of Burma. India and Burma may be separate politically but they have not been separated geographically. It is certain that India will become an independent country very soon; it is only India's friendship that will prove beneficial to Burma in several ways. The Burmese should realize this and act accordingly.⁵¹

⁵¹ Ibid.

Figure 20⁵²

Buddha's Tears



The objectionable (censored) picture was titled “Buddha’s Tears” on page 6 of the article depicting a Burmese Buddhist monk stabbing a Muslim man lying helpless and supine on the ground and two other monks hastening him to kill him while shouting slogans “long live Buddha.” Lord Buddha at the top of the picture is represented as shedding compassionate tears at this ghastly deed.

⁵² “Terrorism in Burma” (14th August 1938).

Members of the Legislative Council of Madras discussed the plight of returning refugees from Burma. Emigrants from the Malabar and the Godavari district (in the Madras presidency) had been badly affected and many did not even have sufficient money to pay for the return steamship passage for home.⁵³ The representatives however presented a fairly myopic view of the cause for the political situation in Burma in their public statements. According to one of the Councilors, T.S.S. Rajan, the riots were the result of a gradual conspiracy on the part of the colonial government and the political ignorance and inexperience of the Burmans.

There has been a subtle force at work in Burma whereby Indians are gradually made to understand that Burma is not the place for them and Burmans unfortunately were led to believe that Indians were primarily responsible for all the evils of Burma. This insidious poisoning of the Burman mind has been going on for the last twenty years. In fact the government thought that the separation of Burma from India was in a way, the solution of the problem. But today our countrymen have been ruthlessly murdered and their properties looted.... the Burman is essentially a good neighbor, sociable and a genial fellow, loves sports, fine dress and other good things.... but he is also susceptible to fanaticism and prone to committing offences even without his knowledge, which make him subject to the penalty of the law. There are forces and interested parties behind this movement, whose interests are that the Indian element should be excluded from Burma at any cost.⁵⁴

Following the riots however, mixed marriage became a crucial point of immigration negotiations between India and Burma. The women's question was transformed into a larger political issue about the Burmese nation being exploited by the migrant laborers and capitalists in the changed political climate in the 1930s and Burma being in need of urgent immigration restrictions.

⁵³ Indian migrants from the east and west Godavari districts were called *Coringees* in Burma after the name of the port that they sailed from.

⁵⁴ T.S.S. Rajan, "Resolution regarding Burma Riots" in *Madras Legislative Council Debates* (19th August 1938).

III. “And they swarmed our Nation!” Debates on Immigration in Burma Legislative Council

Three or four years ago there were about twenty-five bamboo shanties inhabited by Burmese women with Chittagonian husbands. Now there are about seventy-five of them. Because my eyes search for these things I find them. If this continues, Indians would overrun this place. Local Burmese girls, being youthful maidens, want to decorate themselves. Chittagonians are good workers and good earners simply because they are thrifty but are capable of providing for them. In a particular case, after arriving in Burma, the Chittagonian approached a neighboring woman (herself married to an Indian) to arrange a match with one of the girls and for that purpose he would give the woman fifty rupees. The woman coaxed one of the girls by pointing out the futility of marrying a Burmese man. She pointed out that the girl's own brother-in-law earned nothing and beat his wife, who was forced to provide for both of them. On the other hand, the married woman showed how her Indian husband gifted her gold bangles and new longyis. Seeing the poverty and abuse and being persuaded several times, the girl consented. Thus, the woman got her fifty rupees but now the country is in such a difficulty. With my own eyes I have seen it increased to seventy-five houses.

- U Kya Gaing (1933)⁵⁵

The problem of inter-marriage, as we have discussed till now, was projected as a racial question. But beyond the humiliation of half-caste children, I argue that the Burmese nationalist saw the indigenous Burmese woman as symbol of the nation, and mixed marriage, though it might seem temporarily profitable, was symbolic of the power imbalance between Britain and Burma. The British government in India controlled Burma both politically and economically. Burmese nationalists remarked that if a comparison was made between the conditions of Burmans and Indians, it would be found that Indians were predominant in every sphere of life, i.e., from the lowest rung of the sweeper up to such powerful positions as high court jurists, doctors, and lawyers. The Indians had entrenched their position in Burma. Even the official language of the Legislative Council was not Burmese. Burmans in Rangoon had become used to

⁵⁵ U Kya Gaing, “Motion Regarding Separation” *Burma Legislative Council Debates* (2nd May 1933).

hearing Hindustani or English. As one of the Burmese councilors put it, “the Indians have swallowed up Burmans.”⁵⁶ In his memoirs, Alister McCrae, as a senior employee of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company in 1933 in Burma recalls: “I had a strange feeling in first impressions of Rangoon, a feeling that I had only one foot in Burma, the other India. Lower Burma had been flooded with Indian clerks, servants, and laborers in the nineteenth century. The legacy in 1933 was that half of Rangoon’s population was Indian. For the next three months I was given lessons in colloquial Hindustani. This was the *lingua franca* of Rangoon, imported with the influx of Indians and attention had to be given to it so that I could communicate with the *durwans* with whom I was to work in the cash department and with the Chittagonian crews in the fleet. There was no mistaking in Rangoon that Burma was part of the Indian Empire and that much of our way of life was influenced by the customs of India.”⁵⁷

Burmese councilors argued that Burma was being treated as a child who was denied being given preference in any sphere, whether politically, economically or socially. As Burmese nationalist U Ba Than said during the legislative council debate on the separation of Burma from India:

What we want is equal treatment with others. Our demand for necessary safeguards in the interests of our people should be ten times the demand made of the Federation by the Indian states.... Yes, we shall separate not only from India, but also from England herself. The constitution of India is framed in such a way that there is almost no right to leave the British Empire. One of the provisions made in the federal constitution is that no federal unit should make any law adversely affecting others. That is to say, Burma must not make any law affecting Bombay or Bengal. While it has been clearly stated that no such law must be made, how are we going to restrict immigration? Separationists as well as Federationists have a strong desire to protect the interests of the Burmese women, and we shall have to enact laws for the purpose, when necessity arises. But we shall be unable to do so if we enter the Indian federation.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ U Pe Maung, “Motion regarding Separation” *Burma Legislative Council Debates* (20th December 1932).

⁵⁷ Alister McCrae, *Scots in Burma: Golden Times in a Golden Land* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1990), 70.

⁵⁸ U Ba Than, “Motion regarding Separation” *Burma Legislative Council Debates* (29th April 1933).

Thus, the mixed marriage question was bigger than the plight of the abandoned woman. It had become a question of how Burma was being exploited by both India and Britain and denied equal political rights at the time of Separation from India.

Figure 21⁵⁹

The Burmese Nation between England and India



The Burmese woman (or the nation) in a precarious situation between England and India

⁵⁹ *Bandoola* (August 1928)

In 1940, with the conclusion of the Indo-Burmese Immigration Agreement, categories of permits for entry were created on the basis of economic standing and permanent interests (and capacity) of domicile in Burma. Men from India who came to Burma for short-term employment were to be discouraged from coming to Burma. Marriage or cohabitation with a woman belonging to the indigenous races of Burma established to the satisfaction of the government of Burma could be grounds for the cancellation of a permit or visa granted to *all* male Indian immigrants.⁶⁰ The clause caused a massive uproar and protest amongst Indian educated elite and political representatives in Burma and India who saw the bill as humiliating and insulting to India. The problem as they saw it, was essentially of the laboring poor and not all classes of the society. Further, in the absence of adequate safeguards, it could become a dangerous weapon in the hands of unscrupulous persons who might try to blackmail innocent Indians regardless of their status. It was inferred in the arguments that poorer laboring classes would frequently visit Burmese prostitutes while in Rangoon and other towns and they alone should be held responsible for their actions. “Regulation of the irregular sexual relations of the lower class by introducing Brothel Acts and similar legislation was understandable, but not unheard of penalties proposed in the agreement. The rule is discriminatory and calculated to give offence. So far as marriage is concerned, the ordinary law of the land ought to apply and, if any departure is made, it ought to apply to all non-Burmans alike.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Satyamurti, *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement: A Nation in Revolt* (New Delhi: Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941), 67.

⁶¹ G. Sevapathy Chettiar (Corporation of Madras) and Memorial submitted appointed at the public meeting held at the Gokhale Hall, Madras on Monday, the 28th July 1941 in *The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement: A Nation in Revolt* (New Delhi: Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941).

Conclusion

This chapter engaged with the question of women, colonial modernity and nationalism in early twentieth century Burma. During that time, the stereotype of the “modern,” avaricious and materialistic Burmese woman who enters into a marriage of convenience with the foreign immigrant man (circulated in popular colonial and nationalist discourses) became a symbol of the ruined Burmese race. During legislative council debates male legislators argued for specific laws and immigration restrictions designed to discourage mixed marriages and rescue Burmese women being abandoned when the man returned to his native country. Beyond these official debates, I explored the spread of print culture in early twentieth century Burma where I focused on women writers who expressed their opinion on this issue. Further, I showed how the woman’s question was transformed from the perils of temporary marriages to the impact of foreign immigrants on the Burmese nation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Retreating Mercantile Diaspora and Claims of Citizenship*

Introduction

But the real difficulty is the question of citizenship. Now, these Indians abroad – what are they? Are they Indian citizens? Are they going to be citizens of India or not? If they are not, then our interest in them becomes cultural and humanitarian, not political (...) This House wants to treat them as Indians and, in the same breath, wants complete franchise for them in the countries where they are living. Of course, the two things do not go together.

- Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru addressing India's
Constituent Assembly (legislative) in 8th March 1948¹

In August 1948, Sir Kumara Raja Chettiar, the president of the Nattukottai Chettiar Association in India send an urgent telegram to the Indian Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel requesting help from the government for his fellow countrymen in Burma. The Burmese parliament was in the process of passing the Nationalization of Land Act into a law, whereby ownership of all the agricultural lands (currently in the hands of the Chettiars) in the lower Burma delta would be revert back to the state. The affected people were members of the Chettiar community who had been living in Burma for decades and owned the majority of this land. Not only would the Act lead to loss of property but also, as Sir Kumara Raja said, lack of adequate compensation from the Burmese government would “affect lakhs and lakhs of villages in

* This chapter is based on a number of Tamil language sources procured from Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai [RMRL]. I would like to thank Aparna Narayanan for the detailed translations.

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy: Selected Speeches, September 1946-April 1961* (New Delhi, 1961), 128-129 cited in Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 274.

southern India.”² The history of the formation of new nation-states in Asia with the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the British Empire coincided with the withdrawal of Indians from these various places, often precipitated by violence targeted against them. After independence in 1948, the Burmese government considered Indians (specifically Chettiars) as foreigners who had come to trade in Burma under the British government and now had no legal rights in the land. In a reply to Sir Kumara Raja, the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru (on behalf of the government of India) issued a statement: “I understand the problems being faced by Indians in Burma. However, we are helpless...but we will try our best to take some measures to help them...”³

This chapter focuses on this process of retreat of Indian merchant capital, particularly the Chettiars, from Burma. It also places the returning Indian merchant migrant from Burma in the larger historiographical literature on mercantile networks, circulation of people and capital and restrictions on movements placed by newly formed independent states in mid-twentieth century Asia and Africa. The predatory nature of the Chettiar moneylender was often asserted in colonial reports and nationalist rhetoric during the 1920s and 1930s in Burma and many other parts of Southeast Asia. J.S. Furnivall described the Chetty “as the typical middleman, a foreign Asiatic who was nothing better than a plague, an epidemic that was destroying the indigenous peasant life in Burma (and Java).”⁴

My aim is to explore how the Chettiars responded (if they did) to these accusations. Did

² Telegram from Sir Kumara Raja Chettiar to Acting Indian Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhai Patel, 15th October 1948. *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars’ Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, First Report)* (Chennai, 1949), Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai [RMRL].

³ Reply from Prime Minister Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru to Sir Kumara Raja Chettiar, 8th November 1948. *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti Currarikkai (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars’ Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, First Report)* (Chennai, 1949),

⁴ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, 336-37.

the community describe its members as “immigrants” or “sojourners” with no reciprocal obligations to these distant places of work? How did they try to change or evolve with the changing economic and political circumstances? What was their mode of appeal to the new government in Burma as well as the Indian government and what response were they able to elicit? This dissertation explores the processes through which the figure of the Indian immigrant was created in the official and the Burmese public sphere in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this chapter, I focus on the time period - 1930s and 1940s, when during an atmosphere of economic crisis and the impending political separation of Burma from India, the Chettiar mercantile community became a target of anti-Indian sentiments in Burma and many other parts of Southeast Asia. I see how new citizenship rules shaped distinctions between domiciled citizens who were allowed to own property and work and non-citizens (immigrants and even refugees) who were outsiders and therefore were entitled to limited rights. Further, how the upper class Chettiar merchant through his political articulations and representations, with both Burmese and Indian governments, claimed citizenship rights, because of what he had contributed to the economy of the place he worked in.

This chapter tries to bring together developments in the political and public sphere during this period both in the Madras presidency (where these Chettiar merchants originally came from) and in Burma, Ceylon and the Malay Peninsula (where they had representatives in business firms and invested money). The aim is to see multiple connections – whether economic, social or political - between different places across the Bay of Bengal during the early to mid twentieth century. Amongst the primary sources used in this chapter are journals published by the Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam (literally meaning community/social organization) both from Madras and Rangoon. These along with legislative council reports, legal cases involving Chettiar

firms, official government memos and newspaper articles are explored in this chapter for a fuller understanding of how this particular merchant group tried to cope with a changing international order.

The chapter is divided into the following sections: in the first section, I concentrate on Chettiar expansion in Southeast Asia during the colonial period and the mode of operation of these firms. The second section focuses on the worldwide trade depression and the growth of nationalist movements in several of these British colonies. The sudden economic downfall in many cases pushed several Chettiar firms to bankruptcy (as in Malaya) while on the other hand many of them gained large tracts of lands mortgaged to them by small landholders (as in the case of Burma). This change in position coincided with the growing national movements in these colonies. Thus, the anger at British apathy towards collapsing economy spilled over to the Chettiar middlemen who seemed to be exploiting the country and its people. The third section is devoted to Chettiar Sangam's meeting and publications and the manner in which the community seemed to be fashioning itself as a political organization. I explore the political and philanthropic activities of some of the leading members within this community both in Burma and in Madras presidency. Equally interesting is the manner in which many of these members associated themselves with political parties (prominently the Justice Party) in Madras and the Indian National Congress. I discuss the stance taken by the Congress Party and National Business Organization in Bombay and Madras towards the problems faced by Indian businesses abroad. In the last segment of this chapter I raise larger questions about India, British Empire, statelessness and citizenship for Indians abroad in the mid-twentieth century. With the end of colonialism and the rise of independent nation states, a large number of Indians living and working in erstwhile colonies of the British Empire were reduced to the status of refugees and forced to return to India

or live as minorities in these places.

I. Colonial Expansion and Chettiar Businesses in Burma, Ceylon and Southeast Asia

As discussed in chapter one, Chettiars were an important mercantile group in circulation in the Indian Ocean arena in the early modern period with outposts as far away as in the Malaya peninsula, Burma and Indo-China.⁵ The Chettiar merchant-banker group in the more militarized and changed political climate of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century had transitioned to minor trading partners to the British East India Company and were chiefly engaged in salt trading.⁶ In the latter half of the eighteenth century however this became increasingly less

⁵ While the terms “Chetty” or “Chetti” are used as caste names at the end of given (proper) names as a mark of membership of a particular caste group, a further suffix ‘ar’ as an honorific or form of respectability has been added among the Tamil speakers during the last half of the twentieth century. Thus, a Chetty becomes ‘Chettiar’. The community is subdivided into numerous sub-castes in the present state of Tamil Nadu. A fairly close-knit group, the Chettiar claim an ancestry that goes back to the time of Cholas in early Medieval South India. The most enterprising, prominent and successful of these business sub-caste Chettiar groups are the Nattukottai Chettiars or the Nagarathars. How this particular sub-caste acquired these two names is an interesting indication of and a commentary on their economic milieu. The former (Nattukottai Chettiar) is of relatively recent origin for it refers to their affluence, which dates, in its external manifestation, from the beginning of the twentieth century, when their financial operations overseas, particularly in Burma, proved a great success. Those Chettiars who amassed a fortune as a result of their business enterprises in Burma built huge homes, more or less mansions indigenous in style, in their ancestral villages in the Ramnad district of Tamil Nadu. Hence, the name Nattu-kottai, for these mansions, which literally means ‘country forts.’ Thus, Nattu-kottai Chettiars would be Chettiars who live in country forts or elegant country homes. It is interesting to note that the affluent Nagarathars, when they made their great fortunes at the turn of the century did not give up their ancestral villages, as might have been expected, and migrate to nearby urban areas in Madras, Madurai or Tiruchirapalli to build their mansions, but chose to remain in their traditional moorings.

Chettiars are also known as Nagarathars since they were grouped for socio-religious purposes into nine Nagarams or temple townships. They are a section of the traditional business community of South India. Nagaram in ancient Tamil usage means a trading post or village (A.D. 846-A.D. 1279) the term referred to a caste guild devoted to mercantile interests; and therefore Nagarathars simply means those who belong to a trading community. Secondly, the word can be derived from the Sanskrit root Nagaraka or literally a city dweller, or metaphorically one who is polished and urbane. Yet another source for deriving the meaning of ‘Nagarathar’ is old Tamil literature. Therein *nagar* means palatial or spacious home. Hence Nagarathars means those who are in habit of building and living in larger and commodious homes. For more on the sub-castes and division within the community refer to S. Chandrashekhar, *The Nagarathars of South India: An Essay and a Bibliography on the Nagarathars in India and Southeast Asia* (Madras: Macmillan Co., 1980).

⁶ David West Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: the Nattukottai Chettiars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 56. In the eighteenth century, the records suggest that salt in various forms was produced in coastal regions of southern India and traded for inland consumption in exchange for items such as wheat cotton, rice,

profitable as in 1792, a widespread drought and famine reduced or halted trade between inland salt consuming and coastal salt-producing regions of the Madras presidency. The disruption in the salt trade business helped the East India Company to a large extent to eliminate middlemen in the salt trade business or at least assume monopolistic control. The Nakarattar caste however responded to this hostile “push” of salt trade disruption and East India Company pricing policies by further developing their sophisticated financial apparatus which included provision for making forward loans to political and military leaders (for instance the poligars in Southern India), and for transmitting *hundis* (bills of exchange) among themselves and their clients. Since Rudner’s primary understanding of the Chettiar group is through its caste organization, he sees the colonial period as a time when the Chettiars (not only successful individual merchants) actually evolved from a geographically restricted community of salt traders to a powerful, long-distance merchant-banking caste.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, members of the Chettiar community had stakes in rice markets in Ceylon, Bengal and Madras and were financing East India Company wars in the subcontinent and in Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia. The money brought in was re-invested back into land in their home districts. Rudner estimates that by converting bad debts into land ownership, between 1850 and 1900, perhaps 200 Nattukottai Chettiars were able to obtain minor landlord titles. In spite of such elite Nakarattar land acquisition, the number of Nakarattar families attaining land titles remained a very small proportion of their total numbers.⁷

dry grain, tamarind cumin seeds, and long peppers. They identify castes other than Nakarattars (especially Telegu Komati and Baliga Chettis) as being involved in the coastal and international trade. Typically, kings and European companies rented coastal salt “firms” under their control to important merchants as *dubashes*, who then had salt transported by Muslim traders on cattle back to inland customers.

⁷ Ibid, 67. Taking 1890s estimate of the population as approximately ten thousand people, two hundred relatively large-scale landholding Nakarattars could have represented one-fifth and more likely one-tenth or even one-twentieth of joint family units whose heads might have sought to receive title.

Moreover, many of these *zamins* (landholdings) were actually quite unproductive given the lack of irrigation facilities or lack of proximity to the railway line. For the majority of Nakarattars, then, and for elite Nakarattars who were not satisfied with the acquisition of land and titles in Madras, the constricting climate for financial investment in India must have been a considerable stimulus to search for new ways of putting their money to use.

The opportunity came with the growth of plantation economy in Ceylon, the emergence of the Burmese rice market, and the development of Malaya's rubber and tin industries. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, British banks largely monopolized the servicing of British credit needs in these countries, and with a few notable exceptions they remained aloof from servicing the credit needs of the non-British. Thus, in the case of Ceylon, for example, the Chettiars provided the main source of credit to the indigenous population and stood for them as guarantors for loans with British banks.⁸ Unlike in Madras however, the provincial governments of Southeast Asia adopted policies that initially encouraged rather than restricted investment by

⁸ See "Introduction" and Chapter "The Nattukottai Chettiars as the Middlemen of the Exchange Banks in Ceylon" in W. S. Weerasooria, *The Nattukottai Chettiar Merchant Bankers in Ceylon* (Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo: 1973). Prior to the establishment of the first commercial bank on the island, the Bank of Ceylon in 1841, the Chettiars were referred to as the only "bankers" in Ceylon. The country's exchange problem in the early British period was that of meeting her trade deficit with India on account of imports from the mainland out of her receipt of excess sterling earned from her exports to England and other European countries. This exchange problem was solved mainly by the intervention of the Nattukottai Chettiars who, with their connections and vast resources in India, discounted the excess sterling bills for rupee bills to pay for the imports to Ceylon from India. After the establishment of the British Banks (Oriental Banking corporation, the Mercantile Bank and the Bank of Madras) the Nattukottai Chettiars realized that instead of trying to compete with the British bankers and giving up their business on the island, the next best thing would be to join hands with them and become their middlemen. Thus, the Chettiar moneylender would deal with the shroff, the British Banks and provide good credit references for the Ceylonese concerned (since apart from the very wealthy and the very influential locals did not have direct personal access to the European staff of the banks). It is said that between the period 1900 to 1925, the British Exchange banks in the Island had lent over Rs. 25 million to their Chettiar middlemen, who re-loaned the money so borrowed to the Ceylonese at higher rates of interest. The special rates of interest at which the banks lent to the Chettiars came to be commonly referred to in business circles in Colombo as the "Chetty rate." This was about 2 to 3 percent more than the normal bank rate, which varied in that period from 5 to 6 percent. This alliance between the British Exchange banks and the Nattukottai Chettiars went on till about 1925. In that year, a leading Chettiar firm in Ceylon collapsed as the firm was heavily in debt both in Madras and Ceylon and the liquidation and winding-up proceedings of the firm disclosed a number of malpractices. Subsequent investigations revealed similar practices in other firms and the British banks stopped giving credit to the Chettiars after that.

Nakarattar moneylenders. Displaced from the credit markets of Madras, and sidelined from British investment and exchange markets throughout greater British India, the Nakarattars found a new niche in servicing the credit needs of the indigenous Southeast Asians and migrant Indians who were producing agrarian commodities for the European export market.⁹ Nakarattars were however not the sole source of credit. In different countries of Southeast Asia, they faced competition from the Chinese, who also maintained a formidable network of moneylenders.¹⁰ But the Nakarattars were in a particularly advantageous position. In addition to their own financial and organizational resources, Nakarattars – especially elite Nakarattars – retained ties to British banks and firms and used these ties as a further and substantial source of investment capital. In many ways, this practice merely represented a continuation of practices established during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Madras and Ceylon. In expanding this general role of financial intermediary, however, they were able to exclude any competing group from the specific niche of intermediary between the British and indigenous Southeast Asians.¹¹

In the case of Burma, Chettiar capital arrived in Tennassarim around 1926, soon after the first Anglo-Burmese war, where their business was “informal moneylending among their

⁹ Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India : the Nattukottai Chettiars*, 69.

¹⁰ Interestingly, in the case of early twentieth century Indonesia, Chinese symbiosis of commerce and religion for the purposes of community business transactions were weakening. Chinese merchants were relying increasingly on Indian Chettiar moneylenders as suppliers of credit. See Kwee Hui Kian, “Money and Credit in Chinese Mercantile Operations in Colonial and Pre-colonial Southeast Asia” in David Henley and Peter Boomgaard (eds.) *Credit and Debt in Indonesia, 860-1930* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2009).

¹¹ Chettiars were also a major source of credit to the Asian traders in Malay Peninsula during the late nineteenth century. In fact, during this period most of the opium trade of Singapore passed through their (Chettiar) hands. Even the discounting of “hundis” or financial bills of the Chinese traders was an important activity of the Chettiar firms in Malaya. In the early twentieth century, because of the increasing British political influence over the Malay state, there was a growth in infrastructure (railroads and roads) to exploit the rubber growing and tin mining areas in the interior of the country. While the pioneers in both rubber and tin industry were the Chinese entrepreneurs, the Chettiars stepped in to take advantage of this new opportunity, while replacing the Chinese, and emerged as the direct source of credit to Malay peasants and landowners in return for the mortgage of their property. See Chapter “Chettiar Credit Networks” in Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, *Capital and Entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 173-188.

compatriots...in small Burmese towns.”¹² In response to growth in trade and the opportunities arising out of the colonization of lower Burma with the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852), there was a more organized wave of Chettiar migration. These Chettiars organized the first Chettiar agency or firm in either Rangoon or Moulmein between 1850 and 1852. More such firms came to be established in quick succession in these two towns and until the 1870s, the Chettiar firms were concentrated in these towns, where they financed the trade between Burma and India. It is important to note that at this time they did not finance agriculture directly. They merely provided loans to the indigenous moneylenders (and that too in Rangoon or its immediate environs) who in turn provided some credit to the Burmese agriculturalists. The size of their business was rather small, owing principally to two factors: the low demand for agricultural credit, and the tenurial system that existed before 1876, whereby the peasant was a squatter and not the proprietor of the land that he cultivated and hence could not provide the type of security which the Chettiar usually demanded as moneylenders.¹³ In the early decades of lower Burma’s economic development, it was the Europeans who dominated the key sectors of the economy like banking, large-scale processing, foreign trade, transportation etc. At the same time, internal

¹² Chester L. Cooper, “Moneylenders and the Economic Development of Lower Burma : an Exploratory Historical Study of the Role of the Indian Chettyars” (Ph. D. Dissertation, American University, 1959), 29.

¹³ Michael Adas, “Immigrant Asians and the Economic Impact of European Imperialism: The Role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33:3 (May 1974), 387. If capital was needed for the purchase of new implements or bullocks, or by migrant settlers seeking to open new lands, it was obtained in most cases from indigenous sources. Perhaps the most important sources of credit in the first decades of growth were the cultivator’s relatives or neighbors who had managed to save a portion of the profits they had made by marketing their surplus rice. Indigenous professional moneylenders, who were often originally successful cultivators or paddy brokers, extended loans to agriculturalists in many areas of the delta by the 1870s. Most professional moneylenders provided credit on a *ngwedo* basis which meant that the loan was given in cash and both the principal and interest was repaid in cash. Local shopkeepers, who often functioned as rice merchants and moneylenders as well, also provided a major source of credit. Shopkeepers lent on *sabape* terms, which meant that they advanced goods or cash to cultivators in the monsoon season, and received paddy in repayment after the harvest. The shopkeeper would then market the paddy and use the profits to make further advances in the next cropping season. Lending transactions between neighbors or relatives were normally verbal, without security, and at rates of interest, which ranged from 2.5 to 3.33 percent per month. These rates were well below the minimum 4 to 5 percent per month on land security charged by professional moneylenders, or the *sabape* rate charged by shopkeepers, which went as high as 10 to 12 percent per month.

marketing was controlled by several thousand jungle brokers (middlemen) who directly purchased the paddy from the producers or the rice merchants and non-Chettiar Indians or European agents who supervised purchasing operations at the rice mills.

The economy of the delta experienced an upsurge – the area under paddy cultivation increased from 600,000 in 1852-53 to 1,712,000 acres in 1870 and the rice exports increased from 74,000 tons in 1845 to 160,000 tons in 1861 and to 363,000 tons by 1869-70 – yet until the opening of the Suez canal, most agriculturalists produced for the market only on a part time basis. As late as 1870, rice was grown on smallholdings by peasant cultivators for their family and surplus, was sold only if there was good price and adequate demand in India, China and Upper Burma.¹⁴ After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, however, the need for credit rose sharply. The canal made it possible to supply large quantities of higher-priced husked and even white rice to European markets. In addition, market outlets in Asia expanded as the result of the growth of plantations and a concomitant growth of their laboring forces that were often dependent on imported foodstuffs.¹⁵

The international demand led to the sudden acceleration in the rate of growth of the Burma rice industry. Increasing numbers of cultivators shifted from spare-time to full-time production for the market in order to take the fullest advantage of the rising price paid for paddy.¹⁶ Meanwhile the colonial authorities with the view to fully opening up lower Burma for

¹⁴ Siok-Hwa Cheng, *The Rice Industry of Burma, 1852-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 12-15.

¹⁵ A. J. H Latham, "From Competition to Constraint: The International Rice Trade in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Business and Economic History* 17:2 (1988): 91-102. A. J. H. Latham and Larry Neal, "The International Market in Rice and Wheat, 1868-1914," *The Economic History Review* 36:2 New Series (May 1983): 260-280.

¹⁶ In the decade prior to the opening of the canal the price of paddy was more or less stationary around Rs. 45 to Rs. 50 per hundred baskets (100 baskets = 46 pounds). This shot up to Rs. 70 per hundred baskets in 1870 and thereafter increased steadily and was in 1880 quoted around Rs. 85-Rs. 90 per hundred baskets in Rangoon. Raman

colonial exploitation enacted the 1876 Lower Burma Land and Revenue Act. By providing that any person could acquire freehold of agricultural land after occupation and payment of land revenue for 12 years, the Act was, to some extent, responsible for attracting immigrants into lower Burma as it provided the necessary incentive for people to come in and occupy all the available land and bring it under rice cultivation.¹⁷ The emergence of all these opportunities, coupled with the change in government land policies helped create large influx of immigrants from upper Burma and India and, to a lesser extent, from China into the lower Burma Delta. According to estimates, between 1850 and 1900 the population of lower Burma increased approximately from one million to over four million. This increase in population intensified the competition for paddy lands and, along with the rise in the wholesale price of paddy, contributed to the increased value of land and in general the cost of goods and services in the region. The heightened demand for capital and agricultural credit could not be met by the existing indigenous sources. As a response to this demand, the Chettiar began to extend their operations from Rangoon and other urban centers into the rural delta.¹⁸

In the 1880s Chettiar firms established branches in the rural tracts and in towns along the railway lines and main rivers throughout most of lower Burma. Chettiar moneylenders began to supply credit directly to cultivators on a large scale, and expanded their role as a source of capital for indigenous moneylenders. According to a special survey taken in 1929-30 by the Burma Banking Enquiry, the number of Chettiar firms in Burma had increased from approximately 350

Mahadevan, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Colonial Burma-An Exploratory Study of the Role of Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu, 1880-1930," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 15:3 (1978), 338.

¹⁷ Speech by Thakin Nu, Prime Minister, in support of the Land Nationalization of land Bill, at the Sixth Session of the Parliament of the Union of Burma, 11th October 1948. Cited in *Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Association Annual Report* (1949).

¹⁸ Adas, "Immigrant Asians and the Economic Impact of European Imperialism: The Role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma," 390-391.

in 1910 to over 1650 in 1930. The committee found that Chettiar firms provided nearly 60 percent of the crop loans and 45 percent of the long-term loans taken by agriculturalists in the Lower Burma districts where rice production was concentrated. The importance of Chettiar credit was further indicated by the committee's estimate that Chettiar loans to agriculturalists in the main rice producing districts totaled from 450 to 500 million rupees, an amount that exceeded from 30 to 80 million rupees the value of the current rice crop.¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for the success of the Chettiar community in the financial world was their caste organization and group solidarity. Centuries of involvement in commercial enterprise had shaped the social and patterns and oriented the values of the Chettiar community. This included the training of the Chettiar male child since childhood in accounting, bookkeeping and other practical skills, which would prepare him for a position in a Chettiar firm when he came of age. The Chettiar firm usually employed members of the larger family/kin and even at the clerical level only persons from Madras were taken whom they knew or trusted. The entire business was maintained by the use of trusted circulating agents and intermediaries between Madras and Burma. Sub-agents were posted at the far-off villages in the lower Burma delta. Agents directed the day-to-day operations of the firms' main branches (usually located in the larger towns) and were assisted by cashiers, accountants and clerks. An

¹⁹ Government of Burma, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30* (Rangoon, 1930) Vol. I, 210-13. There were in 1929, 1650 Chettiar firms operating all over Burma – of these, 360 firms, i.e., one-fifth of the total number of firms, were located in Rangoon. The heaviest concentration of the firms was in lower Burma; it was estimated that there were 1443 firms in the whole of lower Burma; inclusive of the firms in Rangoon. The share of upper Burma was only 195, excluding the Federated Shan states, where 12 firms were reported to have been functioning.

Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30 190-201. Alongside this movement of Chettiar capital from centers of trade to the remote villages and towns in the interior of lower and upper Burma, there was also a fresh wave of Chettiar migration from Calcutta and Madras presidency. Around 1850 there were as many as 120 Chettiar firms in Calcutta engaged in the export-import trade and in moneylending. After 1869, with the emergence of profitable opportunities for the employment of capital in the booming deltaic region of lower Burma, quite a large number of these Calcutta based firms were reported to have wound up business in Calcutta and migrated to Burma.

agent overseer, who might be one of the proprietors, was stationed in Rangoon or Moulmein to supervise the operations of all the firm's branches.²⁰ Describing the intense schedule of work stationed in small towns in Burma, S. Muthiah recollects:

The day for the A.M.M.R.M. Firm would, thus, start well before 7 A.M. and go on till long after 8 P. M. Every evening the firm's assistants would go to the Moulmein bazaars and other nearby bazaars, meet their clients and collect the cash from the day's sales of traders who banked with them. The amount collected would be entered in the passbook the trader held and the assistant would note the amount in his little notebook. Back at the firm, the collected cash would be counted, the records in the assistants' notebooks checked and the accounts written. Nothing was left for the next day. On a light day, they would wind up around 7 P.M., but on a busy day the day's work would go for many more hours. There were days, remembered AMM, when the accounts would not tally, sometimes by as little as a quarter of an anna, and no one could go to dinner till the amount was reconciled. There were days when this reconciliation took till well after 10 P.M., but the day's accounts had to be completed perfectly on the same day. That was the Chettiar practice.²¹

The capital of these Chettiar firms came from many different sources: a large portion came from the proprietor or the partners, borrowings from relations and other members of the caste and deposits from Marwaris, Chinese and Burmese. At times, smaller firms also borrowed from bigger Chettiar firms (*Adathis*), which had direct dealings with the European banks from whom they got loans and overdrafts. Thus, these Chettiar combinations facilitated superior sources of capital to invest and lend which did not always come strictly out of the firm's own account. Informal or non-legal sanctions were a common matter through which members of the

²⁰ See section "Proprietors and Agents" in Chapter Six: Collective Spirit of Capitalism in David Rudner, *Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India*, 114-119. An agent usually remained at his post for three years. Six months before his period of service was to end, his successor joined him in order to familiarize himself with the station's records and clientele. After his term of service ended, the agent returned to Madras where he spent up to three years tending to domestic concerns and working on accounts in the firm's main office. At the end of the period, he returned to Burma to take up a post often, but not necessarily, with the same firm.

²¹ S. Muthiah, *Looking Back from "Moulmein": A Biography of AMM Arunachalam* (Chennai: EastWest Books Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 45-46.

community ensured that debts were paid, orders delivered on time and contracts kept on a continuing and long-term basis. Prosperous Chettiars were often partners in several firms, and a firm in financial difficulty was usually given aid by other firms.²² Given the informal nature of these linkages, the meetings and discipline of the Chettiar caste *panchayat* has often been highlighted. In the case of Burma for example, the main Chettiar temple on Mogul Street in Rangoon, which was called the “Chettiar exchange”, served as a focal point for the community’s activities. Apart from periodical meetings where current interest rates were determined, discussions on important political issues were held and news exchanged from home (in Chettinad, India), it also served as a location for settling financial disputes amongst members.²³

While caste solidarity may have been a vital factor in the success and dominance of the Chettiars as a mercantile group in the lower Burma delta, it tends to overshadow and minimize the financial and legal problems that grew between partners and between different firms and with debtors in the market in Burma and other places in early twentieth century.²⁴ A large number of

²² W. S. Weerasooria, *The Nattukottai Chettiar Merchant Bankers in Ceylon* (Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1973). In the case of Ceylon for example, the Chettiars borrowed from the British Exchange banks (chiefly the Imperial Bank in Ceylon) by means of overdrafts, promissory notes and time notes. These banks were faced with the problem of investing the considerable funds deposited with them by their British clients. Although the British would not extend credit to Ceylonese, they would make short-term loans to reputable Nakarattar bankers (*adathis*) secured only by the signature of a second Nakarattar. The banks did try to place certain safeguards: for example, the loans would be made only if the recipient or cosignatory was on an approved *adathi* list prepared by the head office of the Imperial Bank of India, which was supposed to keep track of credit worthiness and indicate the maximum amount of loans for which each firm was eligible. But in reality, none of these mechanisms really worked.

The system of inter-Chetty lending was the chief support of the successful working of Chettiar banking. When in need of liquid funds they lent freely among themselves, at the inter-Chetty rate (6 percent) or at the rate charged by the banks, in order to accommodate a brother in trade. Thus, so long as some among the Chettiars had untapped credit at the banks, none of them, whose position was otherwise sound and could prove it to be as such to his prospective Chetty creditor, had to fear, in all normal times, any inability to meet his short term obligation to his bank. Sometimes, Chettiars were able to use loans from banks, sometimes from the same bank, to meet the maturing banks loans.

²³ M. Adas, “Immigrant Asians and the Economic Impact of European Imperialism: the Role of the South Indian Chettiars in British Burma,” 396.

²⁴ Weerasooria has reviewed a large body of legal cases in Ceylon that focus on precisely these issues. In court cases, creditors could argue that a Nakarattar firm was liable for any obligation that the firm’s agent incurred while using the firm’s *vilacam/vilasam* (*Vilacam* do not so much as designate individuals, though they would have the

disputes between different Chettiars firms (as well as with Burmese claimants) between 1923 and 1937-38 were brought to the Rangoon High Court.²⁵ Also, over-drafting by the bigger Chettiar firms from European banks had its own limits. As happened in the case of Ceylon, with the collapse of a certain prominent Chettiar firm in 1925, investigations into the accounts of the firm revealed massive financial malpractices. But the most serious accusation that the Chettiars had to face during the 1930s (with the onset of the world wide trade depression of 1929-30) was that they were responsible for the growing indebtedness and spread of land alienation amongst the native peasantry in Burma, Ceylon and Malaya. The plight of the indigenous peasant at the hands of the Chettiar became a rallying point for emerging nationalist movements in these countries.

initials of the proprietors and partners added to the long list of abbreviations. Rather they designated the business firm as a whole). The firm on their part denied blanket liability and argued that their employee's customary use of their *vilacam* as part of his name did not imply unless given full power of attorney. Otherwise they were liable only for those obligations incurred within the restricted range of their contractually specified exercise of power. They argued further that if the plaintiff had a quarrel, it was with their agent as an individual, not with them.

²⁵ Ananta Narayana Aiyar, *Indian Ruling, Rangoon Section, Containing Full Reports of All Reportable Decisions of the Rangoon High Court* (Rangoon, 1941/42 1929). The Rangoon High Court legal compilations give a glimpse to the different kinds of cases that the Chettiar firms engaged with. To give some examples (1) a dispute was presented to the court in 1928 between P.K.P.V.E. Chidambaram and N.A. Chettiar firm on the question of a hundi being improperly stamped during their financial transactions. The case was ultimately dismissed but both sides being made to pay for the cost of two days worth of hearing (Civil Reference number 6 of 1928 in Indian Law Report, Rangoon Series, p. 703-740). (2) In a case from 1925, S.M.A.R.R.M. Chetty firm v V.S.T. Thamsundaseen, the former appealed to the courts to grant them the interest on the amount of money that was under dispute between the time the case was brought to the court till the decree was given (Civil Application Miscellaneous Number 35 of 1924, p. 405-409). (3) In a suit brought about by the N.K.M. firm against Ma On Khin and her husband in 1927, the firm sought to recover the balance on the principal and interest due on a promissory note signed by her and her husband. Ma On Khin contested the suit, and pleaded payment of a certain sum of money. In support of her defense, she provided documents, which showed entries made of payments on different occasions. But the Chettiar firm contended that the entries had been altered and fabricated. However, the sub divisional magistrate refused to hear the arguments on behalf of the firm (despite evidence of alterations) as the Chettiar firm according to the judge was dishonest in its dealings. Several adjournments intervened between the time the case was brought to the court and the trial. Ma On Khin was examined and on being questioned regarding the erasure she could not give a definite reply. Without confirmation on whether the document had been changed before it was produced or afterwards, the case was referred to the criminal court and was dismissed from the civil court. (Civil Miscellaneous Appeal no. 51 of 1927, 523-526).

II. World Wide Trade Depression and Growth of Nationalist Movements in Burma and Southeast Asia

You represent a very important factor indeed in the life of this province...Without the assistance of the Chettiar banking system Burma would never have achieved the wonderful advance of the last 25 to 30 years.... The Burman today is a much wealthier man than he was 25 years ago; and for this state of affairs the Chettiar deserves his thanks.

- Sir Harcourt Butler, Governor of Burma
to the Chettiar representatives, 1927.²⁶

Chettiar banks are fiery dragons that parch every land that has the misfortune of coming under their wicked creeping...They are hard-hearted lot that will wring out every drop of blood from the victims without compunction for the sake of their own interest...the swindling, cheating, deception and oppression of the Chettiars in the country, particularly among the ignorant folks, are well-known and these are, to a large extent, responsible for the present impoverishment in the land.

- Testimony of a Karen witness
to the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry, 1930.²⁷

The market slump of the late 1920s was a harbinger of the Great Depression; but cultivators, mill owners, and merchants in lower Burma viewed it as merely another temporary setback. Consequently, prior to the arrival of the monsoon in 1930, large landlords, small landholders, and tenants alike took crop loans and calculated production costs and profits on a scale that was based on the assumption that the price of paddy would exceed Rs. 150 per one hundred baskets as it had for the past decade. Sharp price drops in the last months of 1930

²⁶ Sir Harcourt Butler, Governor of Burma to the Chettiar Representatives cited in Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons : Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press,, 2009), 13.

²⁷ Burma Provincial Enquiry Committee, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, Volume I: Banking and Credit in Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing, 1930a), 189.

lowered the average for that year to Rs. 130 per one hundred baskets. The following year, the price of paddy had plummeted to an annual average of Rs. 75. Although cultivators had produced as much as or more paddy than they had in the previous season, its market value was nearly halved. As a result landholders were hard-pressed to pay their laborers wages set at pre-depression levels, and landlords and small landholders found it extremely difficult to pay even the interest on loans taken prior to market collapse. Tenants were unable to meet their rent payments, much less pay back crop loans extended by the owners of the lands they worked.²⁸

The market slump also led to the great contraction in the volume of credit extended to agriculturalists by both private and government agencies. In most areas Chettiar moneylenders pressed for repayment of loans for which they had merely collected interest on for years. This led to transfer of land from local Burmese landowners to both indigenous and Chettiar moneylenders. The amount of the total occupied area in lower Burma held by non-agriculturalists rose from 31 percent in 1920-30 to nearly 50 percent by 1934-35. The fact that the percentage owned by resident, non-agriculturalists increased only slightly from 8 to 9 percent, while that held by nonresident landlords rose from 23 to nearly 41 percent demonstrates the importance of foreclosure as a result of accelerated alienation. The role of debt in the continued spread of land alienation is also evidenced by the great increase in the proportion of land held by Chettiar moneylenders. In 1930 for example, Chettiars were listed as the owners of only 6 percent of the total land occupied in the delta and 19 percent of the area held by non-agriculturalists. By 1937, they controlled 25 percent of the cultivated area in lower Burma and 50 percent of that held by non-agriculturalists.²⁹

²⁸ Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 186.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

Recent researches have shown that despite statistics indicating prosperity, the Chettiar firms were not always the obvious beneficiaries. These years saw tense relations between the Rangoon branch of Lloyd's bank and several Chettiar firms, which had acquired short-term loans from the bank. Because their debtors could not repay their loans, these companies were unable to pay back the money, and several of these firms were driven to bankruptcy. The crisis for the Chettiars was not simply that they had suffered a serious loss of income but they also found themselves needing to put up new money for investment if they were to salvage much from the collapse. This would include new advances to the landowner if the Chettiar were to hope for some recovery of the loan in the following agricultural season. On the other hand, if he took possession of the land, he became liable for payment of the land revenue. Despite several settlements as late as 1934, for reduced interests on the loans, there remained a core of unsettled accounts. Instead of ownership of some of the richest agricultural land in the world, as it is often claimed, the crises made a serious dent in the Chettiar interest in the rice delta and in Burma.³⁰

However, the worst hit by the onset of the economic crisis in the lower Burma region were the tenant farmers and the laboring poor working on these lands. Because they were forced to sell their surplus paddy for half its expected value, few tenants were able to pay their laborers' wages, their landlord's rent, and still have money left to repay the crop loans extended by their landlords during the monsoon season. These economic dislocations were all the more keenly felt

³⁰ See chapter three "Credit Contraction and Foreclosure" in Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Cultivators and the World Depression of the 1930s* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). Moving away from the focus on the depression years in Burma, a recent work by Ian Brown tries to expand on the impact of the international demand of the rice market. In the later 1920s, Burma's rice exports were facing difficulties in a number of important markets. For example, in 1927-28 the Japanese government imposed a duty on the import of foreign rice followed by a full prohibition in Japan and its colonies the next year. Also, a strong challenge to the regional Burma rice market in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay states developed from rice imported from Siam and French Indo-China. Simultaneously, there was a slump in world market prices of wheat bringing it within reach of populations who had earlier been able to afford only rice. Thus, it was a cumulative impact of many different developments that brought clear disadvantage to the rice trade. Certain substantial export firms and up-country mills in Burma collapsed during 1928. While the large landlord and the owner cultivator suffered losses, according to Brown it was the shifting population of tenant-cultivators and gangs of laborers, which suffered the most.

by the Burmese in the delta region because of the general weakening of the monastic system, paralleled by the neglect of village pagodas (monasteries) which were essential parts of the traditional Burman village and might have buffered their growing economic distress. In 1930-31, an unusually high number of tenants were turned off the holding, which they rented. With agrarian outlets closing and the quality of rural life declining, many land owners, tenant farmers who had been turned off their lands and many laborers who could not find work sought employment in Rangoon and other urban areas where there was already an oversupply of labor in the 1920s.

Growing anger against the Chettiars was reflected in the leading newspapers. For example, an editorial article published on March 31st 1931, in *Thuriya* (Mandalay supplementary edition) mentioned that a public petition had requested for postponement of the collection of taxes and repayment of loans to the government and the Chettiar moneylenders for at least a year. However, there were rumors that this idea would be rejected and if both the Chettiars and the government demand their dues, it would lead to bankruptcy for both the peasants and all others involved.³¹ Burmese nationalists accused the colonial government of collaborating with the Chettiars against the indigenous peasant. In 1927, the Burma Agrarian Bill was presented in the Legislative Council. It suggested a number of remedial measures to ameliorate the land alienation problem during 1920s: (1) to make payments for wages, cattle hire and current rent charges against the produce of the land; (2) to see that ejected tenants were compensated for improvements made on the land; (3) to give small-scale tenants cultivating 30 acres or less fair treatment from their landlords, the right to contract for leases covering up to seven years'

³¹ "Burma's Financial Position" in *Thuriya* Mandalay Supplement (31st March 1931).

duration.³² Rich landowners in the council (in many cases Chettiars) successfully opposed the Bill thereby giving the (British) government an opportunity to absolve itself of any responsibility. Later in 1930, when the question regarding the postponement of dues was raised in the Burmese Legislative Council, prominent Burmese members argued that the government was in league with the Chettiars and European millers to promote their interests, without a thought for the people affected.³³

Burmese writers singled out the Chettiars in their polemical assaults against Indians in the country. In February 1930, for example, the Maubin district-based edition of the newspaper *Thuriya* reported that the Chettiars had “aimed at obtaining possession of agricultural land” through the artifice of loan arrears - a strategy which, in the past three years alone had secured them 30,000 acres of the district’s best land. Like much of the vernacular press, it called for the outlawing of foreign ownership of land and called upon Burmese everywhere to “raise an outcry.”³⁴ Chettiar moneylenders and landlords became “butt of the Burmese cartoonist” and “the public enemy number one.”³⁵ Nationalist editorials demanded that the government stop Chettiars from oppressing Burmese landowners. One writer suggested that all cultivators whose land had been taken from them by Chettiars should form an association aimed at winning back their holdings. In another article, a Burmese journalist insisted that the government pass

³² John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1958), 252- 278.

³³ “Postponement of the Collection of Land Revenue,” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* 21st February 1931.

³⁴ The newspaper’s claim, made in its 19th February 1930 edition is cited and discussed in Burma Provincial Enquiry Committee, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, Volume I: Banking and Credit in Burma* (1930): 198-199.

³⁵ Harvey, *British Rule in Burma: 1824-1942*, 55. Also see, Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora & Co., Publishers Private Ltd., 1960), 19.

legislation prohibiting Chettiars from owning land in Burma.³⁶ The negative image of the Chettiars was also reinforced in the Banking Enquiry Committee Reports in both Burma and Ceylon. In depositions to committees, a number of witnesses made their dislike of Chettiars evident by describing them as “shylocks,” “bloodsuckers,” “swindler’s,” “deceivers” and “fiery dragons.”³⁷ In one such deposition in Ceylon:

Once a Chetty enters a produce store or an estate he will not leave it until it is dead. He gets his money in all cases, bleeding the proprietor white, and in most cases killing him morally, financially and at times physically. Banks’s methods are subtler and they do not always mean disaster to the produce owners....³⁸

In the mid-1920, groups of revolutionaries and villagers in the lower Burma delta formed *Sibwaye Athins* (development associations) whose purpose was to forcibly compel the Chettiars to reduce debts owed. They resorted to cattle maiming, arson, and even murder. According to administrative reports, increase in crime and robberies (often targeting Chettiar households) during these years was an indication of the anger of the people against these moneylenders. During 1930s, bands of Burmese insurgents raided villages in the Tharawaddy district. The rebels sought firearms and killed those headmen and landlords who dared to oppose them. These incidents began as a series of uprisings (against landlords and the colonial government machinery), which have come to be known collectively as the Saya San rebellion, after the *ex-pongyi* (monk), folk doctor, and nationalist named Saya San who led the series of insurrections.

³⁶ From excerpts printed in the newspaper *Saithan* in 1936 and 1938 and cited in Government of Burma, *Interim Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing and Stationary, 1939), 36.

³⁷ Burma Provincial Enquiry Committee, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30, Volume I: Banking and Credit in Burma*. Also, *Volume II: Surveys, Appendices and Questionnaire* (Rangoon: Superintendent Government Printing, 1930b).

³⁸ Government of Ceylon, Ceylon Banking Commission Report Volume II in W.S. Weerasooria, *The Nattukottai Chettiar Merchant Bankers in Ceylon*, 64.

These uprisings and a number of related disturbances affected most of the districts of the delta and spread to several districts in upper Burma. They were not completely brought under control until 1932 and resulted in the loss of nearly 1700 lives and millions of rupees in property damages.³⁹

Thus, during the 1930s the Chettiars had become social and political pariahs in these places distant from their homeland (in southern India) where they had once enjoyed positions of prominence and wealth. This was particularly so in Burma, where the Burmese nationalists were demanding separation from India and Indian community members had to justify their presence in the country. Speaking in the legislative council on the Joint Parliamentary Committee Report on Constitutional Reforms in the Burma Legislative Council in 1935 and presence of Chettiars, A. M. M. Vellayan Chettiar desperately emphasized the important work they had done for the economic development of the country. He protested against both the disparaging remarks that had been made in the report by the British administrators and the support shown by the Burmese members on the floor of the house towards the conclusions of the report:

The report has lightheartedly dealt with the legitimate interests of the Indian (Chettiar) community in this country and the safeguards required for them. The British government and the world at large know very well what the Indians have contributed to the progress of the country. ...Not only does the report does not provide proper protection for us.... my community which has all along identified itself with the welfare of the Burman agriculturalists has been referred to in the report in a language which is unbecoming of its distinguished authors. We have invested nearly 80 crores of rupees in the development of the land and we are therefore styled as *undesirable* and *not men of good standing* [my emphasis].

It is against the avowed policy of any banker to have frozen assets nor is it the intention of Chettiars to possess properties. A conspiracy of circumstances expedited by the worldwide depression has saddled us with all this land. The methods of the Chettiar bankers are not so much as to bring large tracts of land into their possession by their

³⁹ Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, 200.

operations, rather they are calculated as to postpone the day of the transfer as long as possible.⁴⁰

- A. M. M. Vellayan Chettiar, *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (1935).

The need for protection by the new Burmese government seemed essential to the Chettiar community, especially as there was talk of dispossessing the Chettiars (with the upcoming separation of Burma from India) of all the lands they had acquired from the small peasant holders during the depression years (1929-30 and onwards).⁴¹ The developments during these years therefore, are critical to our understanding of Chettiars as a mercantile group who were forced to defend their professional standing in front of different kinds of audiences – the growing nationalist leadership within Burma, the British administration, and finally in petitions and representations forwarded towards to the Indian government.

III. Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam and Quest for Political Representation

In a particularly romantic recollection of the Chettiar past in Burma, A.M.M. Arunchalam Chettiar described:

⁴⁰ A. M. M. Vellayan Chettiar (Nominated) *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* Vol. XXIX – No. 5 Seventh Session - Fifth Meeting (Tuesday, 19th February 1935), 78.

⁴¹ Raman Mahadevan, “Pattern of Enterprise of Immigrant Entrepreneurs: A Study of Chettiars in Malaya, 1880-1930,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 13: 4/5 (February 28, 1978), 150. The net effect of the depression on Chettiar firms in Malaya was equally catastrophic. In a short span of time, the immobilization of liquid capital led to the failure of a number of small, medium and large firms. The government, which earlier supported the Chettiars for their favorable influence on the economy now hastened to take action in the crisis situation and introduced in 1931, the “Small Holdings (Restrictions of Sale) Bill.” According to the provisions of this bill, no sale of land exceeding 25 acres could be “carried out without the consent of the state where the land was situated.” This measure quite naturally evoked loud protests from the Chettiars whose 125 million rupees loaned to small holders in the Malay federated states were now in danger.

If the Chettiars were aliens in strange lands that they thought of as second homes – and many did in fact have second homes in these strange lands through local liaisons – it was because they never lost sight of the fact that home was some little village in Chettinad. Curiously, it is a sentiment felt even today, from the richest to the poorest, even if the commitment of years past has diminished. After every trip abroad in that halcyon past, the Chettiar would return to his village, give a percentage of profits to temples and charities, build mansions that looked like fortresses in the wilderness, invest in jewelry, silver and gold, and household goods, and spend lavishly on offering unsurpassed hospitality at the celebration of family rituals.”⁴²

During the early part of the twentieth century, Chettiar community representatives felt that both the real and imaginary connection between the homeland and distant places where the Chettiar business firms operated needed to be institutionalized. There was a need felt for some kind of control over the multifarious activities of the growing number of Chettiar firms, all of which did not have the same level of wealth or networking capacity. Thus, the Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam (association/community organization) was founded in 1922-23. The association was registered as a member of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and had a membership of 1498 firms by 1929.⁴³ While the headquarters was in Kanadukathan near Karaikudi (Chettinad district in the Madras Presidency), the branches were in Rangoon, Malaya and in Ceylon. The first all-Burma Nattukottai Chettiars Conference was held in Rangoon in November-December 1924.⁴⁴

⁴² S. Muthiah, *Looking Back from ‘Moulmein’: A Biography of AMM Arunachalam*, 13.

⁴³ Government of Burma, *Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1939-30* (Rangoon, 1930), Vol. I, 195-196.

⁴⁴ *First Indian Commission Report for Burma Nattukottai Sangam*. Also, Mahadevan, “Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Colonial Burma – An Exploratory Study of the Role of Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu, 1880-1930”, 348. In his presidential address, T.S. Nagappa Chettiar, the proprietor of the TSN firm, urged his kinsmen to strengthen the position of the association. Apart from the usual rhetoric about the need for unity and less competition amongst members and resolving intra-Chettiar disputes out of court, the two other significant announcements were: to consider venturing into fields other than moneylending, such as trade and organized modern banking and to join the Burmese political process. Specifically, some of the resolutions of the conference were (a) the need for a modern joint stock Chettiar Bank, the directors and shareholders of which were to be Chettiars (b) the Chettiars firms should not charge excessive interest rates on loans to their own kinsmen, and that Chettiars should not borrow from non-

The formation of the Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam at this specific historical juncture was a response to several bigger changes taking place – on one hand, this was the beginning of the slowdown in the international rice market and economy therefore this urged Chettiars to venture into other economic avenues. Also, post-First World War administrative and political reforms introduced both in India and Burma had a number of consequences.⁴⁵ In Burma, the Chettiars could see how Burmese nationalists were increasingly demanding more economic and political autonomy. Also, there was anticipation of Burmese separation from India. In the case of such an event, Chettiar representatives felt that there was a need to form a strong lobby and voice in the provincial Burmese government to protect their own interests.

The second set of developments had taken place in India (particularly in Madras presidency), which defined the internal contours of the organization. In the Madras presidency, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a rapid growth in the number of caste organizations (mostly non-Brahmin castes) marked the social and political landscape. One reason for the emergence of such groups was the desire of the western educated and the urban, upwardly mobile members (usually traders but also lower caste groups) to establish the respectability of their caste in their own eyes and in those of other communities. Such caste associations in the twentieth century become much more institutionalized. It entailed subscriptions from enrolled

Chettiar sources (c) the government inform the Chettiars in cases where landholders had failed to pay land revenue of a particular piece of property before that land was put up for auction (d) it was urged that the commercial banks in Burma lower their interest rates on loans to the Chettiars since their rates were much higher than the rates prevailing at banks in Calcutta and Madras (e) it was resolved that the tenure of the agent of Chettiar firms in Burma be reduced from three to two years (f) finally, in order to effectively represent the community in Burma, it was requested that the Chettiars come forward and run for office for the legislative assemblies, municipalities and town corporations.

⁴⁵ Hugh Tinker, *The Foundations of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1954). According to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms “Dyarchy” was introduced in the government. Elections were held for the first time in Burma and Burmese elected representatives found positions in the Burmese Legislative Council with responsibilities for certain “transferred” subjects like agriculture, education, health and sanitation and so on.

members, annual conferences, publications, reform through increasing “Sanskritization” and proposals for education for low-income individuals in the group.⁴⁶ The caste association was no longer a natural association in the sense that birth became a necessary but not sufficient condition for membership. One had to join the Kongu Vellala Sangam or the Kshatriya Mahasabha or the Kisan Sabha through some conscious act involving various degrees of identification - ranging from attendance at caste association meetings or voting for a candidate supported by caste association leaders or paying membership dues. But perhaps the most significant aspect of such caste gatherings in twentieth century India was its ability to organize mass electorates and transform itself into a democratic pressure group or political interest group.⁴⁷ The Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam can be seen as part of this trend, only on a much larger geographical scale because of its overseas connections.

Important Chettiar community members had already joined the Madras Legislative Assembly and were leading members of the Justice Party, which was emerging as a platform for the massive anti-Brahmin social movement in the southern part of India and a significant source of opposition to the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhi. The power of this social movement had a substantial influence on Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam social reform initiatives within the community.⁴⁸ However, regional base did not alone determine the political

⁴⁶ By definition, Sanskritization denotes the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community. See M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) and *Caste in Modern India, and other Essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962).

⁴⁷ L. I. and S. H. Rudolph, “The Political Role of India’s Caste Associations” *Pacific Affairs*, XXXIII, I March 1960, 5-22. Also, David Washbrook, “The Development of Caste Organization in South India, 1880-1925” in C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook, eds., *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880-1940* (Delhi: Macmillan & Co., 1975).

⁴⁸ The purpose of social reform as described in these journals was for *Desha Sevai* (national service), *Samuga Sevai* (community service) and *Bhasa Sevai* (language service). Community members were repeatedly urged to come forward and participate in the movement towards removing the social ills that plagued Chettiar society. Emphasis

affiliations of business groups on a national platform. Particularly, with the decline of the influence of the Justice Party during the 1930s, many prominent Chettiars on board of associations like the Federation of Indian Commerce developed a close relation with the Congress leadership (as revealed in the Sangam's annual reports).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Chettiar leaders were navigating these interlinked local, regional, national and international forums in India, Burma, and other parts of Southeast Asia, Europe, and the U.S. to cement their economic and political position. The need for political recognition as a community was clearly evident in the conference held by the Chettiars in Malaya at Ipoh Town Hall under the leadership of Mr. T. S. Mutthiah Chettiar (of the Killan Nattukottai Sangam). The conference members passed a resolution whereby (a) the F.M.S. Straits Settlement, Johore and Kedah were to be approached with the view to discontinue the use of Chetty and instead use the correct designation of Chettiar on all official correspondences, records, transactions and notifications (b) that no member of the Chettiar community should be handcuffed prior to conviction by the Supreme Court (c) that Chettiar advocates and solicitors should be allowed to practice at the local courts (d) a Bank should be established in Malaya in order to finance Indian enterprises with subscriptions from the Chettiar members (e) the management of the British Steamship Navigation Company was to be approached about not providing Chettiar passengers proper cabin and adequate/proper provisions (f) representations to

was laid on education for all and especially women's education. Family was hailed as the building bloc of society and education for the girl child and women envisioned as the first step in the direction of its development. In time, education would also provide a panacea against superstitions, old rituals and practices and unnecessary expenditures in ceremonies (as in marriage). Frugality and economizing during marriage ceremonies would not only save money, which could be invested into starting one's own business, but poorer families would not be forced into keeping their daughters unwed for lack of sufficient dowry. A number of these ideas and social messages in the Sangam's journal were in fact inspired by the anti-Brahmin and anti-caste "Self-Respect Movement" in the Madras presidency under the leadership of Periyar.

the Controller of rubber exports regarding licenses, coupons, inspection fees etc.⁴⁹ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Chettiars were busy in such meetings and conferences through which they could jointly put forward their demands for political recognition from governments. In another such situation, in 1928-29 community leaders, Annamalai Chettiar and Murugappa Chettiar were part of the Federation of Commerce business meeting in Washington D.C. where they tried to gather support from business groups in Bombay against Burmese separation from British India in the Second Round Table Conference.⁵⁰

The political activities were accompanied by the more day-to-day local undertakings to increase their support and subscription base. The Sangam's center at Rangoon for example, counted the number of propertied Chettiar members and collected local subscriptions for their community center (at the rate of Rs. 12-0-0 a month) for educational purposes and celebrating festivals. Similarly, branches of the organization based as far away as in Cochin China, Malay and Ceylon sent contributions and reports of their annual activities to the Sangam's headquarters or the nerve center at Chennai. Various members of the Sangam were involved in publications (apart from the Sangam's mouthpiece journal) like *Dhana Vanikan*, *Oolian*, *Jyothy* published from Rangoon, which record the diverse activities of the Sangam during this period. There are two main themes that seem to emerge: first, the need for political voice for the Chettiar community and the safeguarding of rights as a result of an increasingly difficult relationship between India and Burma. Second, the need for reforming the community (mostly educational) to bring up the social standard of the group in the eyes of other caste associations within Indian society as well as outside in places like Burma.

⁴⁹ "The Malaya Chettiars: Decisions at the Conference at Ipoh" *The Straits Times*, 4th June 1924, 9 (National University of Singapore library). <http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19240604.2.63.aspx>.

⁵⁰ *Dhana Vanikan* (Nattukottai Sangam's Journal published roughly 1928-29).

Following the economic crisis in the 1930s and the change in the political climate, the Chettiar Sangam assumed a more critical role in articulating the grievances, petitions and demands of citizenship rights from the Burmese and the Indian governments. In 1937, with the separation of Burma from British India, the legislative council was invested with greater autonomy and Burma Tenancy Bill was passed to protect the tenants against foreclosures. With the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1941-42, the Chettiars had to leave the country and the new Japanese supported Burmese government froze all their earnings from land and property investments. After Burma's independence in 1948, the international political situation had completely changed and when the Chettiars tried to re-establish themselves in the economic sectors they had once dominated they were faced with a surge of legal battles. A planned nationalist economic drive by the newly formed government under General U Nu (in Burma) instituted a series of sanctions, which prohibited "non-citizens" from owning land and property, making investments beyond a certain limit, and sending remittances back home from Burma.

IV. Statelessness and Questions of Citizenship: Immigrant as the New Minority?

Markets gradually recovered from the economic depression. But a fundamental shift in political structures and ideologies had refigured the relationship between different communities and ethnic groups that had co-existed in Burma (and Southeast Asia in general) for generations. Indian and Chinese diasporic communities found themselves the target of a rising tide of local nationalism in Burma and Malaya and throughout the region. Young local men blamed "immigrants" when they found their paths to employment blocked and their prospects as entrepreneurs limited. A contemporary British observer wrote: "the Burman is continuously and

acutely made aware of the alien control of the business activities of the country, of the steady infiltration of immigrant workers.”⁵¹ Rising awareness of inequality provoked competing claims of entitlement. The shock of the depression sharpened debates that had brewed in the 1920s about who belonged where, and what they owed to the place they earned their living in. For example, during the motion regarding the separation of Burma from India in the Burma legislative Council in 1933, Burmese nationalist leader U Ba Than spoke:

Indians are progressing in wealth, while Burmans are becoming poorer and poorer. The longer Burma is kept attached to India, the quicker Burmans will become poor. They are now buying lands and houses and are even buying up Burmans. Nobody can deny this. If the present state of affairs in Burma continues like this, what will be the position of Burma after ten years...there will be no Burmese nation in Burma then. Burmans will no longer own any agricultural lands and houses. There will be no pure Burmans left.... I will compare the positions of Burmans and Indians [in yesteryears and now].... When I was in school, young Indian friends studied together with me. They then had Indian names, being the sons of Indian parents, but after passing their school examinations they applied for jobs with Burmese names.⁵²

A popular political writer of the day wrote in his much-circulated booklet published immediately after the 1938 Indo-Burmese riot:

Betelnut sellers, donut sellers, cloth merchants, storeowners, and wholesalers, all are Indians. Indians are everywhere: shoe makers to factory owners, policemen to high court judge, medical orderly to physician, prison guard to prison warden, all positions are monopolized by Indians⁵³

Indian representative M.M. Rafi (in the Burmese legislative council) replied to these

⁵¹ A. Narayana Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma* (Rangoon, 1933).214.

⁵² U Ba Than, “Motion Regarding Separation” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (29th April 1933).

⁵³ Maung Thein Pe, *Indo-Burma Conflict* Rangoon, 1938 reproduced in U Thein Pe Myint, *Socialism and Our Burma* (Rangoon: Saok Phyant Cheeyay, 1954), 174.

accusations with some passion and fury.

Frankly speaking, I can understand such attacks by my Burmese friends, although I consider that even they have grossly exaggerated the alleged evils of Indian connection and that in fact the so-called Indian menace is only a figment of the imagination of uninformed or misinformed persons.... This honorable council member said that Burma was in danger of losing her nationality on account of the Indian invasion. And as a proof he asked how many Burmans does one see in Rangoon. But Rangoon is not Burma and the fact is that the Burmese nation is quite safe from Indian absorption. He ought to have known that the Indians are concentrated in the towns mainly in the seaports and industrial centers and if the Burmans are in a minority in these places it clearly shows that Burmese nationality is free from Indian association which means that so-called Indian menace does not even touch the fringe of Burmese nationality, not to speak of swallowing it up all-together.

India has given Burma her religion, her culture, and even her script in the past and in the present India offers Burma her best markets. India supplies money to Burma's agriculturalists. Indians have contributed lavishly to Burma's university.⁵⁴

In 1931-32, as part of a wider series of constitutional negotiations over India's political future, the Burma Round Table set a date for "separation," which would take effect on the 1st of April, 1937. Part of this political process would be the introduction of a series of immigration reforms that would prevent Indians from coming into Burma freely for reasons of employment and then leaving for home. As described in the previous chapter, at the heart of the controversy was the definition of "domicile," a concept that continued to shaped debates about migration even after 1945. "The determination of intention" to settle, or to return, was difficult to prove where the movement between India and Burma was circulatory. The legislative council members sought, in vain, to recognize a distinction between Indians who had accepted Burmese citizenship or were "domiciled" in Burma (who paid taxes, who owned property or made

⁵⁴ M.M. Rafi, "Motion regarding Separation" *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (3rd May 1933). Rafi wrote a larger response to these questions and accusations in a pamphlet. See M. M. Rafi, *The Problem of Indian Settlers in Burma* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of International Affairs, 1946).

investments) or were “useful temporary residents of varying degrees of permanence,” who would enjoy “civil and political rights as British subjects,” but not as Burmese citizens.⁵⁵

It was a difficult time for many Indian residents in Burma - many felt that political change would make little difference to their daily lives; others feared for their futures. Playwright and journalist Ve. Swaminatha Sarma published a book in 1936 on the coming separation. He began with an account of Burma’s links with India from the earliest times, the rise of Burmese nationalism through the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, followed by an era of constitutional change, and finally the biggest question of all: “the two peoples - do they have a common future?”⁵⁶

The Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam during this period published a series of reports/conclusions by the Sangam’s discussion forum or literally the “Supervisory/Discussion Committee” which reflected on the consequences of some of the changes that were happening in Burma and the programs launched by the newly formed government. In the next section, I will explore these reports to see how the Chettiar community responded to some of these challenges to their citizenship status in Burma and concurrently to their claims to land property.

The Land Question and Expulsion from Burma

Recapitulating some of the problems that the new Burmese government was faced with rights of Burmese peasantry to the land, British government officials wrote in 1953:

⁵⁵ See section “Acquisition of Citizenship” in Constituent Assembly of Burma, *The Constitution of the Union of Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947).

⁵⁶ Ve. Swaminatha Sarma, *Pirikkappatta Burma* (“Separated Burma”) (Rangoon: Navinakata Press, 1936): pamphlet in the collection of the Roja Mutthiah Research Library, Chennai [RMRL].

The case for agrarian reform in Burma is so strong no independent Government could conceivably refrain from taking action. All political groups in Burma admitted the urgency of reform, and the unhealthiness of the situation had long been a source of equal concern to the British authorities in that country. Modest attempts to remedy the admittedly deplorable situation were made over a long period of years, but with little effect, and it is probable that only a drastic measure such as the Land Nationalization Act of 1948 could cope with the problem.

It was the accepted policy of the Government of Burma in the British period that a land-owning peasantry should be encouraged, but owing to a variety of circumstances, which found their parallel in most parts of South-East Asia, land in fact tended to pass from the hands of the cultivators into the hands of landlords. In 1937, in Lower Burma, out of a total cultivated area of 11,201,766 acres, no less than 5,306,017 acres were owned by non-agriculturists: i.e. 50 per cent of land was no longer owned by its cultivators. Indeed, the percentage was really larger than this, for many owners who were officially classed as agriculturists did not cultivate all their land but let part to tenants, so that the area occupied by tenants was larger than is apparent. It is estimated that by 1939, in Lower Burma, 59 per cent of land was cultivated by tenants, not by peasant-proprietors. In addition, much of the remaining land was mortgaged, and it is believed that by 1941 only 15 per cent of agricultural land in Lower Burma was both owned by genuine cultivators and free of mortgage.

In total, in both Lower and Upper Burma, of 19,304,907 cultivated acres, 6,442,033 acres had, by 1937, passed into the hands of landlords, while disguised landlords held an additional unascertainable area.

It was unfortunate that many of those into whose hands land passed were aliens. This was not so marked a tendency in Upper Burma, where the moneylender-landlord was more commonly a Burman; but in Lower Burma, at the end of the 1930s, Indian moneylenders of the Chettyar caste had come into possession of nearly 3,000,000 acres of land; so that of the land which had been lost to the cultivators, about half was owned by Indians. Chettyars also had an interest in much of the land, which was nominally still owned by cultivators but was in fact mortgaged. The Chettyars were less extortionate than the Burmese moneylenders; but the fact that they were aliens added greatly to the widespread sense of grievance, which the agrarian situation produced.⁵⁷

- Correspondence between L. B. Walsh Atkins (Commonwealth Relations Office) and Sergeant R. W. Selby (Foreign Office).

In 1947, the Tenancy Standard Rent Act was passed. According to the Act, the landlord who was already paying a land tax to the government, also needed to pay a standard rent,

⁵⁷ Correspondence between L. B. Walsh Atkins (Commonwealth Relations Office) and Sergeant R. W. Selby (Foreign Office) in "Indian Citizens in Burma" (Foreign Office Files India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, 1947-1964) FO 371/106862. *National Archives of Great Britain.*

roughly twice the amount of the revenue tax he was earning from his tenants. The standard rent however was not applicable. On January 3rd, 1948 the day Burma became independent, the Transfer of Immovable Property Restrictions Act was promulgated. This forbade the transfer of immovable property to any foreigner for a term exceeding one year. Originally the term “foreigner” did not include British subjects domiciled in Burma, but in February 1948 the act was amended to include all noncitizens of Burma. In case of non-Burmese using relatives’ names to purchase and own land, it would be recognized as a punishable offense.⁵⁸

Thus, soon after independence, the Burmese state drew firm lines between citizens and outsiders. The Land Nationalization Act of 1948 removed most property rights from non-citizens, and together with new laws on tenancies and land transfers, marked the start of “sweeping measures to liquidate Indian landed interests” in Burma.⁵⁹ Distraught Indian landowners wrote to India’s Ministry of External Affairs, detailing their dispossession by Burma’s new laws. Hem Chandra Bannerjee, formerly an advocate of Rangoon’s High Court, wrote that “Indian nationals in Burma hold nearly one-fourth of the arable lands ... and it will be a great tragedy if they lose them.”⁶⁰ In the general atmosphere of the time, when there seemed to a political necessity for re-distribution of land in India, outward sympathy for Indian landowners in Burma, and for the Chettiers in particular, was limited. For all their losses, they appeared to be precisely the “vested interests” that freedom and socialism would sweep away everywhere in the new Asia. Mindful of this, petitioners often took a different approach: they emphasized that

⁵⁸ *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti* (“Burma Nattukottai Chettiers’ Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, First Report”) (Chennai, 1949): [RMRL]. (*Alocanaik* roughly translated as Supervisory Committee or Discussion forum).

⁵⁹ Notes by the Indian Advisory Committee to the Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Association on the Land Nationalization Act of 1948 in *Ibid.* (Chennai, 1949) [RMRL].

⁶⁰ Letter from Hem Chandra Banerjee, Calcutta to K.V. Padmanabham, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs (New Delhi), 7 June 1952: NAI, Ministry of External Affairs, Burma I Branch, 1950, File No. 48-65/50.

“poor and middle class people” of the Chettiar community, too, suffered “as a result of their inability to discharge their debts raised in India for their Burma business during the pre-war days.”⁶¹

Faced with eviction, the Chettiar Sangam members wrote pamphlets registering their protest. The immigration agreement, as some said, “had caused Chettiars and all Indians considerable disquiet and concern.”⁶² The assumptions under which they had invested millions in Burma had been overturned. Many Chettiars had already been expelled from Indochina in the mid-1930s, as the French colonial administration brought in new legislation to restrain creditors; they suffered loss and violence in Burma.⁶³ The immigration agreement took no account of the longstanding pattern of circular migration across the Indian Ocean. Anyone who happened to be in India when the act came into force, despite “having spent long years in Burma and acquired knowledge of language and local conditions” would be “excluded ...and dealt [with] as new immigrants.”⁶⁴ The Constitution of 1947 had introduced two kinds of citizenship, distinguishing, again, between citizens-by-descent (those who “belonged to any of the indigenous races of Burma”), and citizens-by-registration. The latter were given a deadline of April 1950 by which to submit applications for citizenship—in Burma, as in Ceylon, the documentary bar was high; amid the uncertainties of the time, many Indian residents failed to realize the importance that

⁶¹ Indian Supervisory Committee, *Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam, India Alocanai Kamiti Mutal Arikai* (Chennai: Roja Mutthiah Research Library [RMRL], 1949).

⁶² *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars' Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, Second Report)* (Chennai, 1950), [RMRL].

⁶³ For study on local attitude towards Tamil traders in general in French Indochina see Natasha Pairaudeau, “Vietnamese Engagement with Tamil Migrants in Colonial Cochinchina,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5:3 (Fall 2010): 1–71.

⁶⁴ Telegram from President, Nattukottai Chettiars Association to Overseas Members in *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti Currarikkai (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars' Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, Overall Report)* (Chennai, 1949), [RMRL].

pieces of paper would hold.⁶⁵ W.S. Desai, a retired History professor at Rangoon University wrote, after his return to India, of the “elaborate procedure applicable to those who desired to elect the citizenship of Burma. The applicant is required to approach the court, of the district concerned, with an affidavit concerning the particulars of his residence in Burma.” Those who lacked documentation of their journeys and their intentions had to create a convincing narrative. But any local resident was free to object to an application within six weeks of its submission, opening the way for personal rivalries and neighborly feuds to block applications for citizenship.⁶⁶

Indians who failed to apply for Burmese citizenship were permitted to remain as temporary residents: they had to register with the police and acquire identity cards. If a temporary resident left the country for more than sixty days, “the identity certificate lapses and with it his privilege of residence in Burma.” Thus, circular migration became impossible. The movement of money was stemmed as decisively as the movement of people. In 1948, remittances from Burma were limited first to 1500, and then to just 250 Rupees. Each exchange transaction required the permission of the Controller of Foreign Exchange, who refused to recognize the obligations of Indians in Burma to support families back in India -- in limiting remittances, “the Burmese government struck at the root of the Indian family system.”⁶⁷

Three more laws in 1948 had even more far reaching effects. The Land Nationalization Act prohibited non-cultivators from owning land, and cultivators from possessing more than 50 acres.⁶⁸ Further, the Land Alienation Act of 1948 aimed to prevent the sale of land to persons

⁶⁵ Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, 182-186.

⁶⁶ W.S. Desai, *India and Burma: A Study* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1954), 97.

⁶⁷ Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, 181-182.

⁶⁸ Indian Supervisory Committee, *Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam, India Alocanai Kamiti Mutal Arikai*. Prime

other than Burmese nationals. The Disposal of Tenancies Act, of the same year empowered the government to lease to tenants of its own choosing the maximum area that a single tenant could cultivate efficiently. Thus, village agricultural committees under the supervision of district standard rent committee would decide what crops to be grown, which fertilizers and other tools to use, what time the harvest would take place, the daily wages of employees and whether employees/tenants needed to be changed.⁶⁹

The effect of the passing of the laws on the Indian community members was extremely unsettling as evident from the communiqués between the Sangam's spokespersons and the Indian government.⁷⁰ Although the enforcement of the law was to be gradual, its ultimate effect on Indian landowners was easily foreseeable. The problems were discussed in the minutes of the meetings of the members: "because of these laws the value of the land is decreasing and even if the land is given back to the government, adequate compensation is not being discussed. It is actually a ploy on the part of the Burmese government to take away their lands in order to *make them refugees in their own country* (my emphasis). Instead of taking away the land illegally, it is

Minister (Thakin) Nu on 26th May 1948 had introduced the 15 points program whereby according to the seventh point he demolished the landlord system. Land should be distributed amongst farmers and laborers. To make it into an Act during the month of September, Nationalization of Land Bill would be introduced in the Burmese parliament. Only after the nationalization would the Burmese government think about compensation. The multi-party coalition of the new Burmese government – the Socialist and the Communist Parties and the P.V.A Party (Promote division) also accepted the program.

⁶⁹ "Discussion on the Nationalization of the Land Act" in Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. The decisions of Thakin Nu were published in pamphlets and distributed throughout the country. The Indian government on its part was approached by the worried members of the Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam members and the South Indian Business Association about the repercussions of this program on the landholder Indian community settled in Burma. Representatives from the Burmese embassy were called in to meet with the Indian ambassadorial team (Indian ambassador to Burma) in order to ask the Burmese government to send its ministers to discuss these bilateral issues. If the nationalization of land continued then adequate compensation needed to be decided for the people affected. Since the Burmese government was not in a financially sound position and it would take four-five years to recover it would be prudent to allow the Chettiar community to sell the land.

being done through a legal route.”⁷¹ The idea of citizenship and the sense of belonging to Burma was now to be repeatedly deployed in their community representations and dispatches to the Burmese government. The second strategy was a public campaign for their cause. The objections to the laws were raised by a number of business organizations in India - the South Indian Business Corporation, the Andhra Business Corporation, the Tuticorin Vyaparam Sabha, the Bombay Indian Businessmen Sabha and the Indian Business Corporation - who forwarded their letters of support for the Chettiars to the Indian government.⁷²

During their political visit to New Delhi in August 1948, the Chettiar Sangam led by the president Sir Kumara Raja Chettiar met several senior members of the foreign ministry including Chief Foreign Secretary Sir Girija Shankar Vajpayee. The Chettiar Sangam forwarded the landlords resolution to the Burmese government. In the beginning of this series of communications, the Chettiars wanted to emphasize and repeat at every stage their significant contribution to the economy of the delta since the opening up of Burma by the British (in the nineteenth century) and how excluding them from the new Burmese nation now would be disregarding this support. They were keen to work for the development of the country and cooperate with the Burmese government and the people towards this end.⁷³ Also, they should be included in the political dialogue, being the important member(s) of the Burmese Legislative

⁷¹ “Thakin Nu and Nationalization of Lands Act” in Indian Supervisory Committee, *Burma Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam, India Alocanai Kamiti Mutal Arikai*.

⁷² *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattuintiya Alocanaik Kamitti (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars' Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, Second Report)* (1950). The financial situation of the country was deteriorating as was evident from the annual report of the National Bank. Burma's Union Bank had receipts, loans and despatchers worth 1324 lakh rupees when it only had reserves/deposits worth Rs. 1283 lakh rupees. This deficit needed to be urgently made up by increased investments in agriculture and trade. The Burmese government in fact resorted to requesting aid from the commonwealth countries. However, they were willing to extend favorable terms of trade and investment to other countries including Britain but the same facilities were not being extended to Indian merchants according to the Chettiar committee report. Therefore, these financial and bilateral issues, they felt needed to be addressed through ambassadorial level meetings.

⁷³ “Sangam visit to New Delhi” in *Ibid*.

Council. They further advised that it was not the right time for the Burmese government to go ahead with nationalization scheme because of the political disturbances in the country and the interim nature of the parliament and the political process. Also, since the government was also nationalizing its forests and shipping, the government should not include land, as it would create further economic problems for Burma.⁷⁴

As the months passed, the members realized that the Burmese government was serious in pursuing their agenda on the national forum. Their focus shifted therefore, to compensation for their investment in Burma.⁷⁵ The manner of deciding the compensation amount became a contentious issue during this process of dialogue. The Burmese government agrarian sub-committee under British official J. S. Furnivall used land tax as the basis of compensation and recommended twelve times over the land tax as reimbursement. The members of the Sangam disapproved of the method and the insignificant amount they were due to receive. Rather they insisted on rate of rent in the pre-Second World War period.⁷⁶ Repeated telegrams and memorandums sent to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Burmese Prime Minister Thakin Nu and other important ministers in the Indian Foreign Affairs Department urged an early and just settlement.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti (Burma Nattukkottai Chettiars' Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, Third Report)* (Chennai, 1951), Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai [RMRL]. The maximum compensation to be paid to the dispossessed landlords was set at 12 times the land tax being currently paid, which ranged from Re. 1 to Rs. 5 per acre, and in no case should it exceed Rs. 60 per acre. After constant lobbying done by the Sangam's president Sir Kumara Raja Chettiar and several other prominent members a delegation was to be sent to discuss the compensation question, but in February 1949 the government of Burma due to security reasons asked that its arrival be postponed. Seven months later, the Burmese government appointed a committee to determine the basis of compensation and methods of payment.

⁷⁶ "Question of Compensation" in Ibid. If the land tax was subtracted from this amount and if the government gave twenty-five times more than the final amount, then they would accept it.

⁷⁷ *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti* (1951). In June 1950, a conference was organized in Rangoon to deliberate on the question in Rangoon. Representatives from India attended as observers.

While the Burmese government claimed that these laws were not discriminatory, in that they applied equally to all “aliens”, their combined effect could not be but highly detrimental to the Indian interests in the country. Not only had the price of property fallen but also according to the new law (Transfer of Property Act) they could not sell it and there were not enough Burmese who even had the necessary capital to purchase the property. In an official reply to their petitions, the Burmese government proclaimed that the essential duty was to protect the basic rights of the Burmese peasants. “This Act in its essence was not to disturb non-Burmese. But if anyone has problems with this Act then they could change their nationalities and solve this problem.”⁷⁸

The question of nationality and citizenship therefore became an important factor in the discussion on legal rights for compensation. The Interim Government of Burma had announced its decision in 1946 to limit franchise rights to Burmese nationals only. On 5th July 1947, the foreign Minister of Burma declared that the Constituent Assembly would define the term “Burmese national”, and offer possibilities or options to acquire it. Any person both of whose parents belong to the indigenous race became automatically a Burmese citizen. A person of purely Indian or Chinese ancestry who was born in Burma and who had lived in Burma eight out of ten years or the ten years immediately preceding 1st January, 1942, could become a citizen of Burma if he declared his intention to reside in Burma permanently and renounce his citizenship to any other country. Under clause II (iv) of the Constitution, any person, born outside the Union

They wanted to know if the Burmese government would pay cash for a portion of their holdings, compensating them for the remainder in interest-bearing nontransferable bonds, and also whether Chettiars would be included as members of the land committees (set up to supervise the distribution of nationalized land) in those areas where there were considerable Chettiar investments. The government hedged in replying to these questions, made no definite commitments beyond promising non-discrimination and a gradual enforcement of the nationalization law. (*The Burman*, June 12th, 1950).

⁷⁸ “Burma Government Reply to Indian Petition” in *Ibid*.

of Burma's territory but within the British Commonwealth who qualified by a prescribed period of residence in a union territory, could elect to be a citizen of Burma.⁷⁹

The Burmese government fixed a time limit up to 4th April 1949 for Indians to register as Indian citizens under the Registration of Foreigners Regulations or to elect for Burmese citizenship. The All-Burma Indian Congress offered recommendations to different groups: (a) since the mercantile community was capable of looking after its own interests and was aware of the pros and cons of acquiring citizenship, they could make their own decisions (b) the professional class had been in fact permanent residents of Burma. They were advised to take up citizenship (c) a majority of the Indian laborers according to the Congress were "transient visitors" to Burma and had left families in India. They were therefore not advised to apply for citizenship (d) The ABIC emphatically called upon the Indian agriculturalists or tenant cultivators to take up Burmese citizenship as "they had a permanent stake in Burma. However, the twin factors viz. (i) gross ignorance coupled with a sentimental attachment to India on the part of the Indian peasants and (ii) their diffusion in inaccessible rural areas, dampened the initial enthusiasm with which the ABIC had addressed itself to the problem, during its own early days."⁸⁰

While the rules seemed pretty comprehensible on paper, the reality of the process of acquiring Burmese citizenship or getting registered under the Foreigners Registration Act was an arduous process for many applicants. There was first of all the problem of disappearance of long pending files of application papers. It was also an expensive process: under the Act, every

⁷⁹ The Union of Burma Citizenship (Election) Act, 1948, stipulated this period to be not less than eight years immediately preceding 4th January 1948 or immediately preceding 1st January 1942.

⁸⁰ Usha Mahajani, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, 184. On his visit to Burma in 1948, the Dr. Rajendra Prasad (the future President of India) brought home to a crowd of Indian peasants the disastrous consequences of an experiment with Fiji Indians who were repatriated to India but could not readjust themselves to the Indian conditions.

foreigner was to get a registration certificate by paying an annual fee of Rs. 50. Thus, a family of six had to pay Rs. 300 per annum in order to be able to stay in Burma. With an increment of “extra consideration” to expedite matters, the actual amount often increased beyond the means of an average foreigner. As discussed in the previous chapter, from 1937, the laboring classes coming from India to work had been put under severe restrictions of the length of time that they could stay within the country. The present law made it even more stringent.⁸¹

The Rangoon immigration office at times dealt with 2000 daily applications for the renewal of certificates, which led to gross delays in the examination and disposal of cases. Moreover, changes of address or expiry of certificates or temporary travel plans were to be reported to the nearest police station and ignorance or oversight made the applicants liable to be deported under the Burma Immigration Act of 1948. In 1950, the All-Burma Indian Congress (ABIC) presented a memorandum to the Indian government voicing major grievances of the Indian community in Burma under constant threat of deportation and the possibility of revoked citizenship. The Chettiar Sangam on their part was dismayed at the harassment of their members who had to travel between India and Burma for business purposes. Amongst the list of their complaints: they could not assume Burmese citizenship but at the same time they felt that they should not be considered evacuees or grouped with people of the laboring class. Not being given proper immigration status and identification papers was seriously affecting their business. Also, maintaining offices and firms in Burma without adequate staff support was difficult. Therefore, the government needed to allow proper registration papers for the staff members.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., 185. On the part of the authorities there was a legitimate fear that Indian applicants were seeking Burmese citizenship for merely pecuniary gains. On the other hand, Indians often complained of racial discrimination even after they became Burmese citizen.

⁸² “Registration of Foreigners Act” in *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiyarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti (Burma Nattukottai Chettiars’ Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, First Report)* (Chennai, 1949), Chennai [RMRL].

The Chettiar Sangam was also concerned about the number of new taxes being introduced that were likely to hurt their business interests. There was for example, manifold increase in sanitation, electricity and water tax in Rangoon. The Burma Indian Business Association and Burma Sangam opposed these hikes and sent a detailed letter to Burma. A case was also filed against the Rangoon Corporation claiming that they had no right to hike the tax and it should be recalled. The matter even went to the Supreme Court. But the case was dismissed as the bench felt that the administration was fully within its rights to increase the tax and they were nominal. The residents had to pay them. There were also incremental increases in air postage between Burma and India as well as shipping rates. The losses feared by the Burma India Steam Navigation Company made them send a letter to Burma Chettiar Sangam. They wanted the Sangam to support their case before the Indian government and to intervene with the Burmese government against the recent increases. The Chettiar Association was also concerned about the regulation changes that were being introduced on the amount of remittances that could be sent back home. Up to 1948, everyone was allowed to remit monthly a sum of Rs. 1500. In the same year the figure was reduced to Rs. 275. Also, earlier there was no restriction on the number of money orders that could be sent and Rs. 50 was freely allowed per money order. But in order to keep a check on the amount of money that could be allowed out of the country only persons paying income tax in Burma were now allowed to make remittances abroad. And this was to be only Rs. 30 per month by foreign money order to dependents according to the Foreign Registration Certificate.⁸³

Restrictions on entry and exit, and on the import and outflow of goods and currency stimulated border crossings of all kinds. Just one example of many can be found in the oral

⁸³ “New Taxes on the Indian Community” and “Rules to Send Money to Burma and India” in *Ibid.*

histories collected by the Burmese writer, journalist, and folklorist Ludu U Hla in the late 1940s while serving time in Insein jail. One of his interviewees, a fellow prisoner, was a Tamil youth called Kanniya, who gave an account of how Indian merchants and laborers maintained their links across the Bay after 1945:

The Indian merchants who did business on Moghul Street usually sent diamonds and jewellery to India on ocean-going steamers plying between Rangoon and Indian ports. The ships' officers acted as couriers, the gems being packed in boxes of Cuticura face powder. I remember seeing on one occasion the European captain of a ship being handed such a box. Other favorite places of concealment were false compartments in suitcases, hollow heels of European style shoes and handles of umbrellas and bicycles.⁸⁴

Kanniya himself went back and forth between his father's family in Madras and his mother and stepfather in Burma, continuing a long tradition of circular migration. Restrictions on entry and residence could be overcome, for those who knew how they worked, and where their loopholes were. Making movement illicit made it more dangerous; borders were never sealed, but there is no question that they became harder to cross.⁸⁵

Premier Thakin Nu during his visit to Madras in 1950 gave an interview to the national newspaper "The Hindu" and said that the Indians and Burmese people had harmonious relations for years and all the programs launched by the government were ideas in the pipeline and they needed to be discussed. He said about the policy on nationalization of land: all Burmese and Indians were not allowed to own more than 50 acres of land and the government could not permit landowners to sell it to anyone. Only the government was allowed to take over and

⁸⁴ Ludu U Hla, *The Caged Ones* [1958], (Bangkok, Tamarind Press, 1986), trans. Sein Tu, 116-21 cited in Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, 281.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 116-121.

redistribute it. Only big landlords would be affected but those who stayed on and settled in Burma would actually benefit in the long run. He also promised reasonable compensation for those who left. Regarding the riots and lawlessness prevailing in the country he assured them that the government and the military were trying their best to bring the situation under control. The Chettiar Sangam however, was not satisfied with these answers as these years saw increase in physical attacks on Chettiars present in Burma, kidnappings and looting their property.⁸⁶

In the climate of fear that gripped Burma—beset, from the moment of independence, by multiple (“Red Flag” and “White Flag”) Communist insurrections, and ethnic rebellions by the Karen and other minorities—many chose to cross the border back to India, once and for all. “Owing to widespread insurrections and disturbed economic conditions,” one Chettiar businessman wrote to the Government of India, “landlords found that the collection of rent was impossible.”⁸⁷ He detailed cases of Chettiars killed and assaulted and abducted as they were caught up in the violence that swept through Burma. In 1942, following the Japanese invasion, the government was obliged to make arrangements for Indians in Burma and Singapore to return back home. The Central government dispatched letters to the provincial government to provide

⁸⁶ “Recent Attacks on Chettiars in Burma” in *Parma Nattukkottai Cettiarkal Cankattu Intiya Alocanaik Kamitti ((Burma Nattukottai Chettiars’ Association, Indian Supervisory Committee, Third Report) (1950).*

During a recent confrontation between the rebel Karen army and the government troops in a town called Yandawn, properties of Chetty houses were particularly pointed out by neighbors and looted. Also, temple idols were taken away. The Chettiar Sangam particularly emphasized the need to bring these back to India safely before more damage could take place. Kidnappings became frequent, for example, in Insein town on 13th January 1949; the owners of Rangoon Ramnathan & Co. R. M. C. Chetty and his secretary Mutthiah had gone to collect tenancy. They did not return but their dead bodies were later identified in nearby villages. In another case in Thetta district on 25th January 1949 the shop agent of R. M. S. R. M. – Vaitha Lingam Pillai had gone directly to the village to collect tenancy. On his return home looters captured him and held him hostage and asked his family to pay Rs. 2500/- Though they were ready to pay them, he was killed.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

adequate financial help for returning refugees who were often left with little resources.⁸⁸ In 1949, evacuation of four thousand Indians living near Insein was arranged, but these were difficult times as with the end of the Second World War and the partition of the country, administrative resources were already stretched. An army officer deployed feared that “apart from creating serious security problems, these refugees would also create problems of relief and rehabilitation.”⁸⁹

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the processes through which the figure of the Indian immigrant was created in the official and the Burmese public sphere in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this chapter, I focused on the time period - 1930s and 1940s, when during an atmosphere of economic crisis and the impending political separation of Burma from India, the Chettiar mercantile community became a target of anti-Indian sentiments in Burma and many other parts of Southeast Asia. I demonstrated how new citizenship rules shaped distinctions between domiciled citizens who were allowed to own property and work and non-citizens (immigrants and even refugees) who were outsiders and therefore were entitled to limited rights. Further, how the upper class Chettiar merchant through his political articulations and representations and the significant investments he had made in Burma, claimed citizenship rights. However, the era of the circulating merchant was on an end. Apart from new official rules

⁸⁸ Government of India, “Letter from Secretary, Home Department, Government of India to Chief Secretary, Government of Madras Regarding Evacuation of Indians from Burma and Singapore’ USSF No. 1482,” January 27, 1942, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁸⁹ Letter from Army Headquarters Liaison Officer, Shillong, to Military Intelligence Director, New Delhi, 26 March 1949: *NAI* cited in Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, 281. Also see, C.A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

that harmed their business interests many of the Chettiar community members decided to relocate with fear of being physically harmed.

To give an example, a prominent spokesperson for the Chettiar community in the Burma legislative council during the 1930s had been A.M.M. Vellayan Chettiar. Apart from his political career, Vellayan Chettiar's aim in Burma had been to make a significant difference to the A.M.M. Chettiar family business. Unlike other Chettiars in Burma who stuck to the traditional banking business and were left with only land property – on which returns were marginal, and which the Burmese government took over without payment of any compensation after Burma's independence in 1948 – he ventured into businesses which may have had a greater element of risk but their returns were much higher. Even more foresightedly, Vellayan had repatriated to India most of the substantial profits that the business had brought in. With the result that in post-war independent India committed to industrial development, the family firm (A.M.M) was in a strong financial position to make a head start. Despite setting up a successful business in Bombay, Vellayan frequently thought of returning to Burma and right through the Second World War he had kept up with Burmese political affairs. In 1946, A.M.M. Vellayan Chettiar decided to board the ship to Rangoon in order to be part of a government committee, which would evaluate the conditions for the safe return of Indians to the country. However, he was assassinated, most probably by an Indo-Burman or (as family members claimed) for political reasons, as he was about to negotiate with the Burmese government for maximum possible concessions. With his death, the family decided to close down its establishments overseas: in Burma, Malaya and Ceylon and planned to focus only on India. An era of circulation of mercantile diaspora in the Bay of Bengal arena had indeed come to an end.

Conclusion

In the book *Religious Problems between Burmese and Muslims* (1952, second edition), the author U Ka begins by sharing an anecdote with readers in order to outline the nature of the problem of Indian immigration in Burma. A young boy boards a very crowded compartment on a passenger train between Paunde and Prome (towns in Burma). After a few hours, being tired of standing and with no seats available, he tries to sit down on a gunny bag lying on the floor of the train compartment. Just as he was about to do so, an elderly Burmese lady shouts out, “*kala* boy, how dare you try to sit on my bag!” The young boy feeling insulted on being spoken to in such a belittling manner, retorts that it was a passenger compartment and not a cargo train and everyone was entitled to get a seat on paying for a ticket. With some difficulty, the rest of the passengers mediate and separate the arguing pair. Using this incident as part of the opening remarks, the book then proceeds on to ask this larger question, “why should an Indian (*kala*) feel insulted for being addressed as such? Wouldn’t it be obvious to call an Indian a *kala*, just as an indigenous person with Buddhist beliefs, a Burmese?”¹

The book is structured into a series of informal discussions between several prominent Burmese and Indian (Muslim) community members who relate the long history of presence of Indians in the country and how the situation had changed in the twentieth century. The author then goes on to explain the reader that the word *kala* was a pejorative term that could not apply to all Indians present in Burma. Rather there was a clear distinction on the lines of caste, class, religion and origin within the Indian community and needed to be acknowledged as such. Thus, the coolie Indian who worked in the paddy fields or the rice mills, or the rickshaw puller or

¹ U Ka, *Lmyo Bada Pyathana* (Religious Problems Between Buddhists and Muslims in Burma) (Prome, Burma: Pyinsa Rupan Press, 1952) (2nd Edition), 3-5.

lavatory cleaner in Rangoon belonged to the lower caste and class and it was evident from the color of his/her skin, his demeanor, mode of dressing, language and living habits. This was however different from Indians who had been settled in Burma for generations and owned property, worked in the government administration and were educated and belonged to a higher strata of society. Thus, in the view of the author, *kala* was a term most suitable for people who belonged to the coolie class or the lower class therefore it would be normal for others (of Indian origin) to feel offended on being addressed in such a derogatory language.

I begin with this anecdote discussed in this extremely popular book on Indian immigrant to Burma (written during late 1930s) in order to reiterate some of the main propositions and arguments I have made in this dissertation. My aim through this project has been to understand the process through which the archival and linguistic category of the immigrant emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the Indian Ocean arena. Specifically, I set out to investigate how did the image of the Indian immigrant become associated with such negative connotations. What were the socio-economic and political transformations that were taking place in early twentieth century Burma? Who were the actors in this narrative and how did they comprehend, receive, use or reject these categories? During my research, I discovered that the classification “immigrant” far from being a nebulous category during the early twentieth century came to refer to *certain groups of people* from India who had come to find work in Burma or invest money in Burma only to return back home with the profits. The question *who belonged where and what did they owe to the place they were working in* seem to have a definite class, caste and religious connotation. For Abdul Karim Gani—a Tamil-speaking Muslim journalist who spent the 1930s in Rangoon and sat in Burma’s Legislative Assembly—there was a clear distinction between Indians rooted in Burma, on the one hand, and the sojourners whose loyalties were in India. Gani

pointed out the difference between “Indians who have no stake in Burma” (the laboring poor) and those with “vested interests” (referring to the Chettiars). Gani criticized the Burmese nationalists’ tendency to lump together these different groups of Indians and demanded that full rights of Burmese citizenship should be open to “anybody who is born, or who has permanently settled, in this country provided he does good to the country and provided he is true to the country.”²

Thus, the central idea of this study was to break down the category of the immigrant. With this focus, the dissertation aimed to do a number of things: first, it tried to understand how certain negative stereotypes of migrant labor were created and normalized during official and public debates in Burma. Second, it sought to understand how these negative stereotypes were used by upper and middle class Burmese, Indians and Europeans to blame lower class migrant Indians for economic and social problems in Burma. Third, the purpose was to contextualize these debates in Rangoon and put them into perspective amidst similar debates on immigration elsewhere in the world in early twentieth century against the backdrop of the growth of nationalism in Asia and larger economic and political changes taking place in Europe and British Empire. Finally, my attempt was to hear the voice of migrant himself and his experiences traveling to and living within Burma through published books, journals and novels. Though fragmentary, these voices could possibly provide an alternative narrative to the archives of the state.

The chapters have been organized both thematically as well as provide sort of a time arc of presence of Indians in Burma and the larger Bay of Bengal arena. The first chapter discussed the realm of the Bay of Bengal arena in early modern period (till the eighteenth century) and the many different actors that circulated in this zone. With the establishment of the British colonial

² A.K. Abdul Karim Gani, *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (22nd March 1939).

rule during the mid and late nineteenth century, there was a drastic transformation in Burmese social, economic and political life. The manifold increase in the presence of foreigners and particularly Indians in this group marked the beginning of a transformation in the manner in which Europeans in Burma and the indigenous people perceived Indians in their midst: it came to be defined purely by their work or place in the colonial economy.

The second chapter focused on the experience of travel by passengers on the steamships. The act of boarding the steamship exposed the individual traveler to the policing of the colonial state. The efficiency in prevention of disease through quarantine, forcible inoculations, provisions of adequate food, cooking facilities and general amenities were meant to standardize the description of the voyage and arrival of persons on port. Different classes, castes, regions and religious groups from the subcontinent were packed into the category of “immigrant.” However, more affluent Indian passengers demanded to be treated differently than their inferior countrymen and often-lodged protests with the authorities and wrote in newspaper columns. I sought to place this experience of travel beyond the confines of the steamship from the port of departure (in India) to the migrant’s arrival in the city of Rangoon. My questions were: why did the Indian migrant choose to go to Burma in the first place? What were his expectations in Burma and how and to what extent did the reality (once he arrived there) match his expectations? In the imagination of Bengali novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya (1876-1938) travel to Rangoon for work, despite its financial benefits, assumed the metaphor of “exile” for the Bengali middle class clerk. It was a journey fraught with difficulties and physical hardship. But beyond the journey aboard the ship, life in Rangoon itself was full of challenges: coping with unfamiliar surroundings, homesickness and a hostile environment.

The third chapter was on low-income housing, city planning and immigration restrictions

in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma. I used Legislative Council debates, committee reports and newspaper commentaries to show how municipal concerns and housing problems in the Rangoon city became an occasion for European, Burmese and Indian propertied elites for identifying certain indelible traits of the Indian immigrant. Low-income groups in the city were identified exclusively as Indian. They were seen to over-crowd and reduce the standard of city life. Over a period of time, the information gathered through these surveys and debates were used to create legal categories of “domiciled” and “undomiciled” whereby unskilled manual laborers migrating from India were solely identified as the latter class. Thus, a very specific municipal problem in the city became an occasion to create immigration restrictions Acts.

The fourth chapter on mixed marriages and immigration restrictions in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon engaged with the question of women, colonial modernity and nationalism in early twentieth century Burma. During the early twentieth century, the stereotype of the “modern,” avaricious and materialistic Burmese woman who entered into marriage of convenience with the foreign immigrant man (circulated in popular colonial and nationalist discourses) became a symbol of the ruined Burmese race. In this chapter, I discussed legislative council debates where male legislators argue for specific laws and immigration restrictions designed to discourage mixed marriages and rescue Burmese women being abandoned when the man returned to his native country. Further, I showed how the woman’s question was transformed from the perils of temporary marriages to the impact of foreign immigrants on Burmese nation. Beyond these official debates, I explored certain aspects of print culture in early twentieth century Burma where women writers expressed their opinion on this issue. Specifically, I used the Burmese feminist author Ma Ma Lay’s short stories (in Burmese) where the central female characters represented the Burmese nation itself and marriage to a foreigner (and an Indian at that) was

shown as equivalent to loss of honor for the entire nation.

The fifth chapter then discussed the role of mercantile diaspora from the subcontinent performing the middleman function in colonial economies in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I focused on the Nattukottai Chettiar community during the 1930s and 1940s when they try to cope up with the changing economic and political conditions. The formation of the Nattukottai Chettiar Sangam (or association) was to bring the community members together on a political forum in order to make demands and present grievances to both the Indian government and the governments in Burma and Straits Settlements. I discussed the Legislative Council debates, which passed the Land Tenancy Act against the Chettiar ownership in Burma. At this juncture, they were faced with intricate questions of legal claims and citizenship. Using the Nattukottai Chettiars as an example of merchant diaspora that are on the retreat in the Indian Ocean arena during the mid-twentieth century, I concluded this dissertation with thoughts on how decolonization and rise of new nation-state categorizes and circumscribed movement of people and groups.

The purpose of this dissertation is to raise a larger set of questions on how do we study histories of people on the move in the Indian Ocean arena in the colonial period. These particular concerns have not only guided my present work but have provided the roadmap for further research. The first of these concerns is methodological: the need to interrogate some of the concepts and categories borrowed from colonial archives and recordkeeping that have unconsciously or in a deliberate manner permeated historical writings on migration. For example, as I argue in chapter three, statistical records indicating the increasing numbers of Indians in Rangoon are by themselves an inadequate explanation for anti-Indian rhetoric in Burma during the 1920s and 1930s. The more pertinent question is to find out *how* and *why* and

under *what* particular circumstances were these numbers employed to bring about immigration restrictions against a certain group of Indians travelling to Burma.

Secondly, my work has reaffirmed the need to discover sources that are strictly beyond the colonial archives. My future work will bring forth previously unexplored printed Burmese language newspapers from this period - articles, editorials, short stories, town gossip columns, cartoons, advertisements and film posters to understand how the Indian migrant is represented in literary pieces and accompanying images and how this category might be contrasted and projected as an “outsider” to Burmese society.

There was an explosion of print culture in early twentieth century Burma. By the end of the 1930s, there were over 200 newspapers and periodicals published in Burma with the eight most popular Burmese dailies in Rangoon alone comprising a circulation of 31,500. The average cost of a newspaper decreased from six *pyas* in the early 1920s to three and a half *pyas* in the mid-1930s, making it more affordable than it already was to the average Burmese family.³ Prominent publications included: *Thuriya*, *Deedok Weekly Journal*, *Bandoola*, *Toetetyei* and *Dagon*. I see these newspapers as a medium through which certain identities and stereotypes are fashioned and become normalized: the Indian is repeatedly described as a single migrant male, uneducated, uncultured (in contrast to Burmese) and his presence in Burma is often temporary and purely for the purpose of earning money rather than investing or contributing to local interests. This message is often translated visually in the form of advertisements of daily use products (medicines, soaps, detergents, toiletries, clothes) or financial services like money orders, which show the Indian as unskilled and someone immutably belonging to a lowly social

³ *Pyas*: smaller denomination than a rupee. U Thant, "The Press, the Public and the Pandemonium," *Ngan Hta Lawka* 24:168 (1939), 537- 38.

rung on the colonial social ladder. As compared, middle-class Burmese men and women in these prints are projected as far more educated, cultured, domesticated householders and pliant recipients of westernized culture and political modernization. This self-fashioning was used repeatedly in critical debates during the 1930s Burmese nationalist movement, when leading Burmese writers, editors and national leaders argued for separation from British India or greater reform for Burma with the justification that the electorate in Burma was far more politically mature and therefore more deserving of, even prepared for, self-determination than their Indian counterparts.

Thirdly, ideas like people and commodities were in circulation between India and many port cities of the larger Indian Ocean arena in the twentieth century. For example, prominent Telugu labor leader, A. Narayana Rao, an ardent supporter of the cause of the Indian migrant in Rangoon, was trained as an economist from the Madras University and found his true vocation in Burma. Within three years of his arrival in Rangoon (in 1920) he was elected as the Legislative Council representative for East Rangoon, a post he served intermittently until 1928. During a debate on whether to impose a tax on arriving passengers, Rao observed: “The Indian is not welcome, but his money is quite welcome.”⁴ Rao edited the *Karmika Patrika*, a weekly journal that exposed the malpractices of *maistries* and recruiters. He championed the cause of Rangoon’s Telugu rickshaw pullers in 1923, proposing a bill in the Legislative Council to regulate the trade, Rao organized Cartmen’s and Bag Lifters’ Associations in 1928. Because of his activities, British authorities saw him as a dangerous figure, and he was put under surveillance. In 1930, after inter-ethnic violence on the docks of Rangoon, the British government expelled him to India. He returned to Burma a year later, and continued his efforts, publishing an exhaustive and

⁴ A Narayana Rao, “Sea Passenger’s Bill” *Burma Legislative Council Proceedings* (23rd March 1925).

passionate account of Indian labor in Burma. “Burma could not have built her splendid Railway systems, cleared her inaccessible, extensive forests and transformed them into smiling fields, operated her factories amidst dust, fumes and high temperatures,” he argued, “but for these patient, long suffering, obedient, faithful and grateful but much maligned sons of India.”⁵ My aim is to highlight these multiple connections--Indians traveling from the subcontinent to these different port cities particularly in Burma, but also to Malaya and Ceylon and the manner in which the print literature produced on conditions of Indian diaspora in these distant places were brought back to the colonial public sphere in India and contributed to the growing debate against Indian emigration to different parts of the British Empire.

Finally, beyond this historical narrative, I am interested in how Indian communities in Rangoon (Yangon, Myanmar) live today. What are some of the social, economic and political problems the Indian diaspora is faced with? Which are the different groups within this larger Indian community? As the country (Myanmar) emerges from the political seclusion under the rule of the military, what does it mean to be a person of Indian origin living amidst this political transformation?

Writing nearly a century earlier, a European traveler to Burma, Gilbert Little Stark presented a picture of Rangoon and the many different Indian communities that he saw on the streets of Rangoon:

As we drew near to Rangoon, the first object that lifted itself above the level land about us was the golden spire of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, and the next distinctive feature was the elephants piling teak logs along the shore...Rangoon is broad-streeted and dusty, and has a new, unfinished appearance everywhere, except in the hotel, which appear to be of about the same date as the First Crusade. The population is even more cosmopolitan than in Singapore, and Klings, Tamils, Bengalis, Punjabis, Sikhs, Gurkhas, Jews, Chinese, Arabs, Armenians, Malays, Shans, Karens, Persians and Singhalese jostle one another in

⁵ A. Narayana Rao, *Indian Labour in Burma* (Rangoon, 1933), 66.

the noisy streets, where barbers and cooks jostle one another in the noisy streets, where barbers and cooks ply their trades on the curb and every third shopkeeper is reading aloud of the Koran. The strange fact is that about one man in a hundred is a Burmese – south India has seized the town...⁶

Today Indians have been reduced to a visible minority in Rangoon (now Yangon) and several other cities in Myanmar. My archival research during 2009 and 2010 took me to the archives in Britain, India and Myanmar (Burma). Rummaging through old manuscripts, letters, official reports, government directives and maps in the archives, I could only imagine how Rangoon looked like in the beginning of twentieth century. Every week steamships arriving from Madras or Hooghly (from eastern coast in India) at the Rangoon river port would bring hundreds of passengers with them. The promise of new opportunities and higher incomes, and the potential for a new beginning drove many from the famine stricken villages of southern India to Rangoon and the larger delta region. On arrival they would crowd around the rice mills, docks and live in slums nearby. Thirty or more would crowd around in small rooms without ventilation. Many would be forced to sleep on the streets on stones, near open sewers, even during the rainy season. Disease and pestilence were rampant, with no medical facilities in hand. The newly established city had a housing shortage, sewage disposal problem and rising crime rate.

Over the years these slums in eastern Rangoon (Yangon) have been replaced by more permanent structures. Not far from the Rangoon river port, the area is called the downtown with its center at the Sule Pagoda. Narrow streets, with multiple blocks are inhabited by thousands of Burmese, Indian-Burmese, Nepalese and Chinese family businesses. Hawkers, peddlers and shopkeepers crowd around these narrow lanes and by-lanes selling everything from fruits and

⁶ Gilbert Little Stark, *Letters of Gilbert Little Stark, July 23, 1907-March 12, 1908* (Cambridge, England: Riverside Press, 1908).

street food to clothes, gold jewelry and electronics. And like any other bustling Asian city, traffic snarls and fumes are a common occurrence. The buildings are often at least a hundred years old and two or three generations have sometimes lived in the same house. Every street corner is marked by a temple, mosque, or a small *paya* (pagoda) denoting the religious affiliations of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Bollywood movie posters advertised by popular cinema halls form a common backdrop. During my stay there, at the end of the holy fast of Ramadan and celebrations of *Eid-ul-Fitr* (2010) crowds thronged to the theatre to watch the new film by their favorite Bollywood hero Salman Khan. Posters of popular Bollywood actors adorn stores selling everything from washing machines to televisions. Though many middle-class families cannot afford to buy washing machines, refrigerators or many electronic goods (most of them imported from Thailand or China), the growing number of new style shopping malls in the city have put them on display obviously for the benefit of the higher income groups.

Beyond Rangoon and Mandalay, Burmese Indians are still part of the country's landscape. Of the Indian communities still living in Burma there are the 10,000 to 20,000 strong Manipuri *ponna* community members. Derogatorily referred as the *ponnago*, they are regarded as smugglers, often as suppliers of drugs, illicit pornographic movies or smuggled goods. Large Indian settlements can be found in the port cities of Moulmein, Patheingyi and Sittwe (formerly Akwab), along the Mandalay-Pyinmana-Toungoo-Pegu eastern commercial corridor as also between the towns of Toungoo and Pegu (where strong Bihari and Oriya Hindu influences can still be noticeably felt). Apart from these, Burmese Sikhs (often soldiers who fought during the Second World War) present in Burma have been registered as Buddhist from 1947, as their intermarriages with Burman, Mon and Shan spouses and willingness to stay back has assimilated them far more greatly into the Burmese society (as compared to Hindu or Muslim Indians). For

example, around 350 Sikh families still live today in Myitkyina (northern Kachin state) mostly carrying on petty trade with Yunnan traders.⁷

Like diasporas in many other parts of the world, these groups have recreated their own indigenous cultures in a foreign setting. Various institutions discreetly promote what is still perceived as their distinct Indian identity: language, religion, social traditions, as well as oral history.⁸ A branch of the Arya Samaj was established in Mandalay in 1897 and in Rangoon in 1899, primarily aiming to bolster the literary study of Hindu culture and civilizational background throughout Burma. It still runs a few religious offices in its Rangoon temple on Anawratha Street today. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (a Hindu ideological organization founded in India in 1964) interestingly managed to enter post-independence Burma and, along with the All Burma Hindu Central Board (ABHCB) founded in 1953 in Rangoon, has ever since been trying to promote Hindu festivals (Durga Puja, Holi) and develop other socio-religious gatherings of Burmese Indians. ABHCB still has branches in Moulmein and Kyauktaga. The Tamil Hindu Society also organizes a few workshops on various cultural activities (allowed by the current Burmese military authorities) and participates in the renovation of the most impressive Hindu temples of the country, which often boast high South Indian-style gopurams (compared to humbler Bengali Shaivite temples, mostly dedicated to the goddess Durga). Rangoon's Sri Kali Temple Trustee enjoys a fair amount of private donations, which enabled it to restore and/or construct various community-oriented charity wards. Also on Anawratha Street, the Ramakrishna Mission Society (renamed Shri Ramakrishna Temple Trust in 1977) tries to

⁷ Renaud Egreteau, "Burmese Indians in Contemporary Burma: Heritage, Influence, and Perceptions Since 1988," *Asian Ethnicity* 12:1 (2011): 33–54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43–45. Also see, Khin Maung Kyi "Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society" and R.H. Taylor, "The Legal Status of Indians in Contemporary Burma" in K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani, eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993), 624–682.

maintain primary school for Hindu Indian students in Burma, while running a free dispensary (since 1947) for the poorest. The Sanatan Dharma Swayamsevak Sangh (SDSS) founded in January 1950 in Rangoon as a branch of India's Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, 1925) is far less radical than its Indian counterpart. The remote northern Kachin city of Myitkyina boasts an Arya Samaj Temple and a large 1963-rebuilt Sikh Gurudwara. The Guru Nanak Free Dispensary in Rangoon and several regularly refurbished gurudwaras in Mandalay, Pyawbwe, Kalaw, Pyin U-Lwin or Maymyo also attests the social and welfare activities and strength of the Burmese Sikh community.⁹

The Burmese Indian Muslims too still display their non-Buddhist faith through mosques, social trusts and funds, private libraries, or community-oriented hospitals, whether Sunni (Myanmar Muslim Organization) or Shia (All Myanmar Shia Muslim Organization). In Rangoon, the Variav Sunni Vohra Panchayat Trust (established in 1895), the Jamiat Ulama El-Islam (1916), the Cholia Muslim Religious Fund Trust (since 1921), the Muslim Central Fund Trust, the Muslim Free Hospital (built in 1937), the Islamic Religious Affairs Council, the Surtee Sunni Jumma Masjid Trust Office, and the Ma-U-Gom Muslim Welfare are all run by Burmese of Indian origin. More interestingly, in recent years, a growing number of Chittagonian- Bengali (or Rohingya) religious trust funds and mosques have been spotted throughout the former capital, attesting the increasing presence of Burmese of Rohingya origin beyond the Arakan State (as proved by the wealthy Chittagonian Sunni Arkaty Bara Masjid on 30th Street for instance). Since 1949, both the Ismaili Khoja Jamat Khana on Shwe Bontha Street and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat of Myanmar have been the place of interaction for their community members. The Christian Burmese Indians (probably one eighth of the total population of Burmese of Indian

⁹ Renaud Egretreau, "Burmese Indians in Contemporary Burma: Heritage, Influence, and Perceptions Since 1988," 45. Also, see Tin Maung Maung Than, "Some Aspects of Indians in Rangoon" in Sandhu and Mani, *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 585-623.

origin) have too been allowed to maintain their worship places countrywide, despite being supplanted by Western-origin or ethnic new evangelical churches. In Rangoon, the Tamil-dominated St- John's Church has been funded by the wealthy South Indian Parkavakula Welfare Society, and the Telugu Methodist Church still gathers a strong Christian Indian community on every Sunday.¹⁰

But ethnicity today is a far more complicated issue: the Myanmar government refuses to acknowledge the citizenship rights of persons who are not of pure *Myanma* origin. Even people born in the country but whose parents may have migrated from India or elsewhere, are denied passports. And yet the largely Burmanized Burmese Indians thus still constitute a visible minority in contemporary Burma with an increasing – though very discreet – socioeconomic weight, especially in urban areas. They form despite years of disguised anti-Indian state policies (citizenship rules, nationalizations) a lower middle-class of urban merchants, shopkeepers, traders, restaurants managers and pharmacists. Considering the amount of donations given to Hindu temples or societies, Sikh gurudwaras or mosques and other Muslim funds, one could observe that they have managed to survive and do reasonably well. Along Burma's borders, many of them have also benefited from transnational connections they had bolstered with their Indian relatives that effectively fled the country between the 1940s and 1960s. However, for many observers, the management of Burma's rising foreign middle-class, whether Indian (lower), Chinese (upper) or non-Burman ethnic in border areas, poses new sociopolitical challenges. The Burmese junta still seems particularly aware, and even obsessed, not to let foreign hands back in, as the policies followed during the colonial or Ne Win's era (head of the state from 1962 to 1981). It is, for example, reflected by the regime's obsession to favor

¹⁰ Egreteau, "Burmese Indians in Contemporary Burma: Heritage, Influence, and Perceptions Since 1988," 45.

Burmese (even Burman) business circles in all the most lucrative and strategic sectors of Burma's economy.¹¹

Beyond Burmese popular patronizing attitudes toward Indians at large, various central government or political leaders have used and abused acerbic anti-Kala rhetoric either to scapegoat an easy targeted minority, or to respond to purely racist popular tendencies. Since independence, strong official statements have openly criticized, or even insulted, people of Indian origin, most of the time reviving an old hatred against a formerly dominant minority, or simply reacting to (often) irrational perceptions of threats coming from India. General Ne Win regularly and openly, used racial negative wording lambasting *kalas* in official media or public speeches. In 1982, during a speech delivered at the President House in Rangoon for the promulgation of the new Burmese Citizenship Law, Ne Win publicly condemned the transnational links the (remaining) Indian and Chinese communities had maintained and used for smuggling Burmese national goods and resources. He told his audience:

Some of them – *kalas* to be frank – did not go back to their *kala-pyi* [*'pyi'* is place, country] but went to Singapore, Hong Kong or America. Some *tayokes* [Chinese] did not return to *tayoke-pyi* but went to Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia and America. They left behind a relative, say a brother, here. This brother would contact his brother in Hong Kong and his brother in England, and would smuggle goods out of our country. (. . .) We are aware of their penchant for making money by all means, (. . .) We will therefore not give them full citizenship and full rights.¹²

Interestingly, the image of Burmese Indians is still presented in a much-belittled way in Burmese popular television soaps, state movies or pulp literature. However, today Burmese Indian communities of Hindu, Sikh and Christian background face far less violent and open

¹¹ Egreteau, "Burmese Indians in Contemporary Burma: Heritage, Influence, and Perceptions Since 1988.", 48.

¹² *Working People's Daily*, October 9, 1982.

hostility as compared to the Indian Muslim community. After years of vigorous Burmanization processes, the anti-Indian sentiments have turned towards more Islamophobic tendencies particularly targeting Muslim communities of Indian origins because of the ongoing separatist movement in western Myanmar but also due to events worldwide.¹³ The derogatory term *kala* thus seems now to almost exclusively designate the Burmese Indian Muslims, and even more the Rohingyas – or *kaw tau Kala* (too black) in the Burmese contemporary psyche. Most of these Muslims are openly rejected or discriminated against, not only by the Burmese military administration, but also by Burman and Rakhine societies in central and western Burma. Hostile perceptions reviling the Rohingyas and other *kala* are often illustrated by racist discourses professed even within Burmese pro-democracy circles in Rangoon, Sittwe or in exile. Rakhine intellectuals or political activists (Buddhists) subscribe to racist discourses, swiftly blaming the Rohingya for having “rough and rude Islamic behaviors,” “three or four wives, and fifteen-or-so children,” “hordes of Muslims about to destroy the peaceful Buddhist Rakhine people and culture.”¹⁴

Many Burmese – including monks – have led ruthless anti-Muslims riots throughout Burma in recent years – targeting Indian Muslims at large, not only Rohingyas.¹⁵ In May 2013,

¹³ In early 2001, strong reactions against the demolition of Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban were reported in Arakan and Central Burma, as a reaction to which several mosques and Muslim areas were burned down in Mandalay, Magwe, Pegu and Toungoo. Severe implications of the 9/11 in the United States over Burma’s Muslim communities were also reported through the 2000s. After the 2003 banking crisis in Burma, many Burmese Muslims were again the first and easiest scapegoats to be targeted by an angered popular mass unready to confront directly the Burmese military authorities or the wealthy Chinese business communities.

¹⁴ See Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), Imtiaz Ahmed, ed., *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: The University Press Limited, 2010). Kate Hodal, “Trapped Inside Burma’s Refugee Camps, the Rohingya People Call for Recognition,” *The Guardian*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/20/burma-rohingya-muslim-refugee-camps>.

¹⁵ See Brad Adams, *The Government Could Have Stopped This* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 1, 2012), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/07/31/government-could-have-stopped>. Also, Adams, *Burma: Government*

the government released its official account of Myanmar's most explosive violence in recent years: a 2012 wave of killing, maiming and arson sprees waged in large part by Buddhists bent on "ethnically cleansing" their native Rakhine State of the Rohingya population. On May 7th 2013, Burmese officials charged six Muslim men in the Burmese town Meiktila over the death of a Buddhist monk during an outbreak of religious violence in March 2013. Apart from the monk, Meiktila's violence was almost entirely directed against the Muslim minority. More than 12,000 Muslims have been displaced from their homes since the clashes began on 20th March 2013 and yet so far, despite the evidence that the Burmese authorities possess, no Buddhist have faced any charges.¹⁶ The official report insists that the Rohingyas are merely a stateless group largely descended from farmers led over during British occupation of Burma in the early 1800s. They are described as procreating heavily, failing to assimilate and inviting over their kin to the dismay of helpless local Buddhists living under colonial rule. Myanmar's authorities have since reversed the British Empire's policy: The Rohingyas are now considered non-citizens even though their alleged homeland, Bangladesh, does not accept them either. Thus, through the use of history, a new definition of the "outsider," the "foreigner" or the "immigrant" in Burma has been created.

Forces Targeting Rohingya Muslims (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 1, 2012), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/31/burma-government-forces-targeting-rohingya-muslims-0>.

¹⁶ Jonah Fisher, "Six Muslims Charged over Monk's Death in Burma's Meiktila," *BBC*, May 7, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22433871>.

Clashes were sparked by a seemingly innocuous dispute at a Muslim-owned gold shop, yet soon spread across the region with 43 people killed, at least 800 homes and five mosques torched, plus around 12,000 people sent to ramshackle displacement camps. The violence spread to a further 11 townships, all tellingly without any Rohingya populations. Videos have captured Burmese police officers standing idly by while Buddhist mobs ransack Muslim-owned buildings, and saffron-clad monks participating in the bloodshed.

Charlie Campbell, "Burma Accused of 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Rohingya Muslims," *Time World*, April 13, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/04/23/burma-accused-of-ethnic-cleansing-for-rohingya-violence/>. After her release from house arrest, Burmese pro-democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi was asked for her party's political position on the question of rights of the Rohingya minority. However, she has steadfastly refused to take a stand, preferring instead to blame a lack of "rule of law." The former human-rights champion appears unwilling to alienate her Buddhist support base in preparation for the looming general election in 2015.

APPENDIX

1(a)

Having read your advertisement regarding the vaccination, I put my complaints before your committee.

Last year on 14th September 1916, I started from Calcutta for Rangoon with my wife, child and cousin. When the steamer arrived and was little far from the shore, all the 3rd class passengers were compelled to get down with their luggages in the launch, when the policemen were ordering the passengers to go at the beneath the launch (a very dark and unventilated place) except the men who pay some money. I myself paid eight annas.

When the launch arrived at shore all the male passengers were compelled to go in one godown while the females in the other. After going there the custom officer examined our luggage so hastily that they did not allow us to pack one and open the other box.

After the custom examination we were ordered to go into the next room for vaccination, leaving our luggages there where also we paid some money to police to look after luggages.

In the vaccination hall, they are making the lines of the passengers, where we were ordered to be unclothed and to stand in one line just like coolies.

My dear sir, the government has issued this rule only for unvaccinated coolies and not for high-class people and traders.

I can't understand whether the officers are misusing their powers or they cannot recognize people of high and low classes with their open eyes.

I strictly and heartily hate this system and wish your committee would abolish it and satisfy the public.¹⁷

- Complaint made by Managi B. Mehta, Jeweller,
to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (1917).

¹⁷ Managi B. Mehta, Jeweller, No. 14, Mogul Street, to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee, Rangoon, dated the 2nd October 1917 in Medical Department Government of Burma, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Hardships Caused by the Compulsory Vaccination, Under the Provisions of Section 9 of the Burma Vaccination Law Amendment Act, 1909, of Laborers Arriving in Rangoon by Sea* (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1918), 61.

1 (b)

I beg to lay the following matter to your kind consideration which I hope will receive your immediate attention. I have often travelled in steamers from Calcutta and Rangoon. I herewith let you know of my personal experience thereof by the vaccination authorities. In a word one may say that the treatment offered to passengers when they are brought out from the steamers to the vaccination *godown* is really cruel.

I traveled by S.S. Bangala, which started from Calcutta on 19th June 1916 and arrived here on the 22nd of June 1916. In this journey, my family and children accompanied me. To my utter surprise when the steamer arrived in the port we were one and all asked to mount in a steam launch. The chief characteristic to be noted in this was that she was too small to accommodate all the passengers. We were all huddled together in the hull where it was extremely dark and absence of light and air, which was really disgusting. She was then brought to the Lewis Street Jetty where we all landed and were to be vaccinated by officers in charge. Males were made half-naked and females were separated from males for vaccination and were there examined. This lasted for about one to one hour and a half and we had to wait in the vaccination godown in the time being. While we were in this state we all had to suffer from pushes from passengers and officers who treated us in the most unsatisfactory manner.

We had journeyed for three or four days were hungry and thirsty and were all seasick and this being added to the above sufferings was really inhuman and hence it is the prime essential that this difficulty should be immediately removed.

I am a businessman and have to travel often from Calcutta to Rangoon and have to experience the same difficulties in all my journeys. Therefore, I hope you will be kind enough remove this hardship and have the everlasting blessing of all the afflicted passengers.¹⁸

- Maghanlal Ramchandra Bhagatji,
to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

¹⁸ Maghanlal Ramchandra Bhagatji, 33 E, Merchant Street, Rangoon, to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, Rangoon, dated 27th September 1917 in *ibid.*,57.

1 (c)

As I come to know that a Commission is going to take place to make inquiry regarding the passengers' coming to Burma by B.I.S.N. Company's steamers, I beg to lay the following for your information.

On the 1st April, I left Calcutta by the S.S. Bangala. This was the first time I was coming to Burma and so I did not know the regulations of the Port as well as on the steamer. Therefore I had to undergo lots of troubles on the deck and I had given evidence in the recent Deck Passengers' Committee. On the morning of the 4th April, the steamer came to Phyare Street jetty. All the passengers were landed and all were kept in the godown where there was officer from the Vaccination Department and the doctor standing there and they kept all the passengers in one line without any distinction. Afterwards, the doctor ordered them to take off their clothes. After that, the doctor examined the vaccinated marks. Those who got no vaccination marks were compelled to have vaccination without any pity whether the man was suffering from seasickness or whether he has any place to stay in. After examining one by one, the doctor came to me. At that time, I did not take off my clothes, as I got some jewels and cash in my pocket. So I am afraid to take off my clothes, as my neighbors were almost all coolies and I am afraid that they would come and rob me but I opened out my coat and showed the vaccinated marks to the doctor but he was not satisfied and told me to take off the coat. A number of people lost their things in the process. Besides that, I want to draw your attention to the fact that the lady passengers are separated from their relations and they have to stand for a long time alone among strangers, which is not their custom. A few days ago, I read in the paper that only coolies were to be vaccinated. I do not understand why they compel merchants like me and other respectable men to undergo such inspection. When they put the vaccination marks, they do not easily dry up and so, people like me have to come to town without our coats on, which is very disgraceful.

When I landed, it was about 8 A.M. and it was 3 P.M. when I had the opportunity to go home. On account of vaccination, we had to stand for hours together for doing nothing. This is my own experience I put to you and I hope others who had suffered like this will come forward to you.

I hope you will pay attention to this and make some sort of arrangement.¹⁹

- M. V. Mehta to the Chairman
of the Vaccination Committee (1917).

¹⁹ M. V. Mehta, 14, Mogul Street, Rangoon to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, 1917 in *ibid.*, 58.

1 (d)

I respectfully beg to lay before the Committee the actual hardship and troubles which I had to meet with when I came to Rangoon last and landed on the wharf from a steamer coming from Calcutta.

About March 17th last year with my wife and landed on the Sparks Street wharf. As soon as we disembarked, male and female passengers were separated and required to go into separate sheds for health examination. Accordingly my wife had to separate from me to attend to the female doctor. As to myself after the customs inspection was over, I with other male passengers (most of whom were coolies) had to stand in a batch of about 75 passengers for vaccination examination, before commencing examination we were told to put off all clothes and directed to wear only a small indigo cloth supplied by the department; this indigo cloth, besides being dirty, was so small in size that it could not sufficiently cover my lower half body; naturally I felt it to be disgusting to put it on and requested the official either to let me go unexamined or allow me to have my *dhotar* (lower garment for men) on, in lieu of the dirty cloth but alas! My request was unheard and I had to follow orders against my will. After the examination was over I had to undergo the next hardship; the clothes, which I had put off before examination, were taken away to the vapor room to treat them and consequently I had to undergo considerable pains and trouble to find them as they were mixed with hundreds of other clothes belonging to passengers of the same steamer. After suffering the above hardships at last I went to the gate to find my wife and to my surprise, I found her weeping after waiting for me for hours. The cause of her weeping was that she had to attend to the examination before a doctor who was quite a stranger to her and besides this, when I came she was alone during the long interval as other female passengers had left the wharf.

Under the circumstances stated above I most earnestly and respectfully appeal to the Committee that they should kindly enquire into the matter and will arrange to redress the unbearable hardships described above.

First of all what grieves me is that females are separated from their male attendants, required to put off their clothes before strangers and that too in open places like the wharf. Such kind of treatment towards females is unbearable by Indian passengers whether they be Hindoo or Mahomedans, rich or poor on account of their social customs; I therefore earnestly request the Committee will kindly put a stop to such treatment.²⁰

Secondly, it is really pitiable that middle class men and coolies are treated alike. I therefore draw your kind attention to the fact and request you to do the needful.

Thirdly, most of the passengers have as stated above, to pass long four or five hours on the wharf without any refreshment during customs inspection and vaccination examination; your kind attention to this matter is also drawn to allay the grievances.

Hoping a good deal of hardships will soon be redressed.

- Labhshanker Roopji Trivedi to the Chairman
of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

²⁰ Labhshanker Roopji Trivedi, 49 Merchant Street, Rangoon to the President, Vaccination Committee, Rangoon dated the 26th September 1917 in *ibid.*, 59-60.

1 (e)

The following is my experience regarding the troubles I had undergone during my journey to Burma in 1916 and 1917.

1. The steamer came near the Barr Street Jetty. I and the passengers were put in a launch. At that time, almost all were suffering from seasickness etc. and then the launch was brought to the Lewis Street jetty.
2. At that time, all the passengers were kept in a godown just like a cage. At that time police officers and Vaccinating officers were made present there. They are all kept in a line and ordered by the police constable to take out the shirts and coats. At that time, we had to keep our luggage aside, which are mixed up with others.
3. During this year, I came by S.S. Bangala to Rangoon. At that time, goats and buffaloes were in it. On account of that and of not taking food, I was not feeling well. In June 1916, after my vaccination experience. At that time, I asked the European doctor to give me a letter as he used to give to 1st and 2nd class passengers but he refused to do so. So again, I had to undergo lot of trouble. This is all my experience and I think something should be done for the respectable passengers.²¹

- Pratap Singh and Hathe Singh Barot
to the Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

²¹ Pratap Singh and Hathe Singh Barot, Rangoon to the Chairman, Vaccination Committee, 1917 in *ibid.*, 58-59.

1 (f)

Most respectfully I beg to bring a few lines of my grievances that I have come across at land wharf and hoping the same would meet your prompt attention as to redress them, as early as your good self may deem fit.

That I was one of the deck passengers of the British India Boat "S.S. Coconada" which landed passengers at the Sparks Jetty, on the 28th June 1917. The passengers would be a good number. I could not state exactly the actual number on being collected the tickets; the passengers were driven into a zinc shed, for doctor's examination. The doctor, who was standing at the enclosure in the shed, calling upon the passengers one by one, asking to open the coat and shirts only. We faced the doctor with open chest, and who just puts his hand on the chest and looks at the arms, whether vaccinated and the marks are quite visible, the worthy doctor sent them aside for re-vaccination. I do not understand, whether it is advisable medically to re-vaccinate a person who having once been vaccinated.

The poor ignorant passengers who were removed for the purpose, were served each, with a slip of paper, and I do not know and read the paper what was written or printed on it and the passengers holding such receipts in their hands, were standing for hours together, at one side of the shed, and they were called one by one, to vaccinate. The ignorant passengers, not knowing of why and what purpose the paper in their hands been issued, and I interested towards their attitude, that they were frightened of being sent somewhere for lock up and some of the passengers as for my notice bribed the police constables, near them, to let them go out, and in similar way many of them escaped without any sort of hurries and worries.

There were no water closets, in or near the shed, and if the passengers complain, as to be called suddenly perform their natural duties, and also it is an illegitimate system of fundamental medical law, to vaccinate both sexes, when they were worn out, for seven days, without rest or diet, and to make them suffer more worse, soon on landing.

These practices not only cause heartburn to me but to all who sees with their own eyes and such practices at landing wharf requires speedy redress.

The deck passengers at landing wharf were not only removed for vaccination, and also for the bodily temperature. It is a real fact that the bodies of the passengers would be hot, owing to their no proper diet and also to remain seven days in a crowded steamer of lower decks. The doctor felt the pulse of each passenger, and removes such passenger whose temperature was a little or 5° beyond the normal. Considering as feverish and such removed passengers were badly kept at one end of the shed, in charge of the police constables.

I was one of the victims of this illegitimate practice by the doctor, and nearly twelve would be my mates; and four of them had a private whisper and bribed the police constables to let them get out, and the four men escaped and the rest of us had to remain till evening. We were kept up till that evening, without food and drink, heaven knows our starvation and when I asked the policeman to let me go of a few, but he refused the request, and I again voiced the doctor, that I am starving, and to please grant me permission a few minutes to refresh myself at the shop a few paces by, but the doctor to, refused my saying, asking me to wait for some time. The waiting lasted till evening till

five o' clock, the passengers removed as feverish were kept till the full day of sunset as prisoners, who have been committed for a serious criminal offence.

From morning ten to evening five were under this lock up, without food for the whole day, neither we were sent immediately to the hospital nor we were granted permission to take out food, in the evening five o'clock when all the passengers been finished examining the sickly passengers, called out to give their names, the doctor who prepared a list to the plague hospital, and sent us in charge of two police constables in heavy rain and cold.

The police constables who were protected themselves for cold and rain, drove us to the plague hospital and made over to the assistant of the hospital. There the assistant made us accommodation in the first ward.

Thanking the same grievances would soon be redressed for heaven's sake.²²

-P.S. Ramprasad, Rangoon to the
Chairman of the Vaccination Committee (September 1917).

²² P.S. Ramprasad, Address: 43, Lewis Street, Rangoon to Lieut. Col. Obbard I.A. President, Vaccination Committee, Secretariat Buildings, Rangoon – dated the 26th September 1917 in *ibid.*, 62.

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