



Migration, Displacement, and the Second World War: The Forgotten Long March in Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam*

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Abstract

This paper revisits the 1942 exodus of Burmese Indians during the Japanese invasion of Burma, as depicted in Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam: A Forgotten Exodus in which Thousands Died*. The novel portrays the displacement and human suffering endured by Indian migrants, highlighting their long-term settlement or temporary labor-driven migration to Burma. Often overlooked in historical and literary discourse, this event is compared to the Partition of India in its scale of tragedy and displacement. Through the lens of migration and displacement, the study underscores how such narratives foreground human resilience and cultural disruption, reclaiming an invisibilized chapter of World War II history.

Keywords: Migration, Displacement, Identity, Colonialism, Fear, Other

Introduction

The pervasive losses of the twentieth century need to be engaged from the perspective of what remains. . . . This attention to remains generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary.

—David Eng and David Kazanjian,

"Introduction: Mourning Remains"^[1]

Women carry with them incorporated traumas swallowed whole.... Political failures have brought about a disidentification with the nation that fails to represent women.

Ranjana Khanna, "*Ethical Ambiguities and Spectres of Colonialism*"^[2]

Migration has always been an integral part of human civilization. The reasons for humans migrating from one place to another can be economic, political, and social. The twentieth century witnessed migration on a scale much larger than previous centuries. Thanks to print as well as electronic media for the never-seen-before ways of documenting and recording. The Industrial Revolution that heralded a profound social and economic transformation and Imperial expansion are two of the major contributing factors of migration. Imperial expansion aided by rapid progress of industrialization made possible flow of goods, capitals, human labours on an unprecedented scale that have never take place before.

Since migration has become quite a ubiquitous phenomenon that involves movement of humans from one place to another in a way that it transforms the cultural and social landscape in the host country or place and in turn the migrant subjects also get influenced by the cultural and social structures, it has attracted serious academic engagement across disciplines.

In the recent times, there has been a stupendous growth in the scholarship and discourse on migration studies. History, anthropology, geography, social sciences, literature have exhaustively studied the phenomena of migration and migration patterns that have taken place in different parts of the world in different historical moments.

¹ Eng, David, and David Kazanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. 2002

² See Ranjana Khanna. "Ethical Ambiguities and Specters of Colonialism." In *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, edited by Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, p.111–125.

Within the context of South Asia itself, there is a significant corpus of literary works on migration related to the Partition of India (1947), as it remains one of the most important and traumatic events that the subcontinent has seen in its history. A lesser researched and documented event but yet significantly important for the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia at large has been the mass migration or the exodus of Burmese Indians from Burma in 1942 after the Japanese invasion of Burma during the Second World War. Although some historical and anthropological works have studied this event but it did not receive the same attention and discourse that the Partition of India has. Moreover, this event has also remained largely hidden and underrepresented in literary works. The British historian Hugh Tinker refers to this event as “the forgotten long march” in his essay, ‘A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942’^[3] and rightly so, as it has been differentially treated by history despite being comparable in the degree of tragedy, sufferings and displacement of people the event had generated.

Elsewhere the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh has also commented upon how this tragic episode in the modern history of India has remained neglected. Ghosh’s historical novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000) set during the period of the third Anglo-Burman war and the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty, during the Second World War is one of the few novels that reflects upon the devastating effects of the war. However, the migration in itself is not the primary focus in the novel. Another literary work that refers to this exodus is Easterine Kire’s novel *Mari* which is set during the Second World War in Nagaland and the Japanese invasion of Burma had led to massive exodus and Nagaland happened to be one of the destinations where the displaced Burmese-Indians came to seek refuge. It is through the description of the sight of the displaced migrants as presented protagonist and narrator of the novel, Mari that the readers get to know that a huge number of the displaced Burmese-Indians have spreaded across different towns in Nagaland.

This paper will be an attempt to revisit the exodus of Burmese Indians of 1942 from Burma as represented in Debendranath Acharya’s Sahitya Academy award winning novel *Jangam: A Forgotten Exodus in which Thousands Died* which was originally written in Assamese in 1984 and later translated into English by Amit R Baishya in 2018. The Japanese invasion of British colony of Burma and the subsequent capture of the capital city, Rangoon and the retreat of British forces heralded the massive population of Burmese Indians. Using displacement as the optics, the paper argues that when a deliberately invisibilised and side-lined tragic historical event of such degree is written about, the text posits itself as a reminder of human tragedy caused by loss and displacement during the Second World War. The text foregrounds the experiences of the Indian migrants in Burma who have either settled for a long time or who have gone to Burma as temporary unskilled labour for livelihood. Using migration and displacement and cultural discourses, this paper attempts a critical reading of *Jangam*.

Colonial Modernity and Anxiety

The development of commerce and industries in Burma during the colonial period coincided with the influx of workers, traders, artisans, professionals, intellectuals to Burma. Burma could not depend entirely on its local workforce and there was a dire need for free supply of external and immigrant labour to meet the increasing demands of goods from the western world^[4], especially Burmese rice which was fast becoming a major commodity for the British Empire. What colonial modernity also brought was improved connectivity and flow of goods and labours. Although Indians emigrated to Burma during the first Anglo-Burman War for better work prospect, it was during the second and third Anglo-Burman wars that the population of Indian emigrants to Burma had surged and changed the economic, cultural, and demographic landscape of Burma. The highest concentration of Indian emigrants was recorded to be in the capital city, Rangoon. The third decade of the 20th century saw a series of riots targeted at the Indians and an increasing anxiety and resentment of the native Burmese towards the Indian migrants. The Indians were seen as foreigners in the eyes of the native Burmans, although some of the families have lived there for generations. The resentment towards them is expressed by one of the Burmese characters in the novel, Gusenpung. Cited is an excerpt from the novel;

The British devastated this country tremendously during their reign. Burma became infested with foreign traders, landlords, office bearers and workers. The foreigners became rich sucking the fat off the land. Now, when the king’s reign will begin again, not a single foreigner will be allowed to spit on this hallowed land^[5].

Located at the interstices between colonial modernity on the one hand and displacement on the other, *Jangam* remains a historically significant literary text that captures this tension in all its complexities and illuminate the extreme form of human sufferings as a result of forced migration and movement. It not only offers an oblique critique of the *laissez faire* policies of the British Empire including the unregulated movement of Indian migrants to Burma but offers to tell the dismissed and silenced stories of those who embarked upon the long and arduous journey propelled by the extreme desire to survive and those who lost their lives on the way, as Yèn Lê Espiritu says, “to conjure up social, public, and collective remembering.”^[6]

Identity in transition

The novel’s plot is centered around the character of Ramagobinda, a Burmese-Indian worker born in Burma, his family who lives in a small hamlet village called Manku, and the subsequent long march as the Japanese took over the capital city of Rangoon. For people like Ramagobinda and his family, their identity is always in a state of flux. The unstable nature of their identity is reflective of a larger condition of how migrant subjects are not considered to be a natural part of the host culture, in this case that of the Burmese native culture. As people who have moved from one cultural and geographical location to another, the identities that they carry also move.

³ Hugh Tinker, ‘A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942’. 1975.

⁴ The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 accelerated the demand for Burmese rice which in turn led to the rapid expansion of cultivation in the lower parts of Burma.

⁵ See Debendranath Acharya, *Jangam: A Forgotten Exodus where Thousands Died*. 2018. p.38

⁶ Espiritu, Yèn Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*, 2014.

Katrina M. Powell in *The Anguish of Displacement* opines,^[7] Persons in the process of being displaced are on the move—their individual and community identities are in the middle of enormous change’ (*Anguish of Displacement*, 142)

The movement and changes in the identities of the displaced people is recorded in the novel through a profound representation of the anguish that the characters express and questions. When the news of the need for Burmese-Indians to leave Burma for their own safety comes, Ramgobinda who has known Burma all his life and has only heard of the village in India where his ancestors once lived expresses,

This is my own country, you are my countrymen. We will stay here on this assurance. We don’t know anyone else. Who will give us refuge? Who will embrace us as their own?^[8]

Ramgobinda and many other Burmese-Indians like him and their sense of identity is closely tied to the land where they have settled for many years now. However, this sudden disruption not only causes a confusion but a deep sense of fear and anxiety about the potential loss of an identity that have been holding on to as precarious migrant subjects living in Burma.

If one looks at displacement induced change and shift in identities, it involves a violent action where one is suddenly uprooted from their place and sense of belonging. What often underscores the unfathomable fear and anxiety of the displaced people is the uncertainty and the new conditions that will force them to negotiate with an altogether new cultural, social, and political setting. Oftentimes, there are powerful forces that will thrust upon them new identities, mostly that carries with them negative connotations.

Several examples from the past as well as contemporary times will point out how new identities for the displaced subjects are created through insidious ways. They are often described as pests that can harm, damage, and destroy and can contaminate and pollute. This idea of something pure being dirtied and polluted by displaced subject is represented in Flannery O’Connor 1955 novella *The Displaced Person* where the Polish émigrés are being described as “rats”. Fear is used differently in the case of the construction of the identity as despicable creatures. It is produced, manufactured, and perpetuated through stereotyping as well as dehumanizing.

This inhuman abjection of displaced and migrant persons into wretched subjects can be explained through the concept of *othering* which facilitates a sharp contrast between human beings. It involves a process of creating fundamental difference and manufacturing inferiority complex of the other to oneself. This also involves a complex social process where individuals and groups are marginalised through various mechanisms such as apathy and violence.

Conclusion

What Acharya in the novel attempts to do is to not point fingers at who and what caused and accelerated this mass exodus but to bring out the impact that it has on the human psyche. He does this through a representation of the journey itself. The perils of the thousands of Burmese-Indians is represented in the arduous journey that they undertake. The thick jungles in which they wade through are described as hostile. Running out of food and basic necessities like water,

many people died on the way. Ramgobinda’s mother could not carry forward and succumbed to death. He also lost his beloved wife Lachhmi.

This tragic story of the displaced Burmese-Indians who undertook the journey is given the recognition and attention that it deserves. Acharya provides a space in the literary text the plight of the people who have been treated ruthlessly by history through a reimagination of the journey. It is with a humanist perspective that Acharya represents the story.

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⁷ See Katrina M. Powell, *The Anguish of Displacement: The Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2007.

⁸ See *ibid*, p.52