

**THE SOCIO ECONOMIC STATUS OF INDIANS  
MIGRANTS' IN MYANMAR IN THE COLONIAL YEARS  
(1824-1948): AN OVERVIEW**

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**Abstract**

The migration of Indians to Myanmar had been taken place since the ancient era due to Myanmar's proximity to India, but had gained prominence during the colonial era. The British governments' policy had resulted in the large scale migration of Indians to Myanmar. The huge influx of Indians had overtaken the original Burmese population in few pockets of the country and also had slowly occupied the economic activities, administrative position as well as petty workers under British government. Although the Indian population had enjoyed a better livelihood and social status, there also had several problems during those times due to the rise of anti-Indian resentment and xenophobic for foreign migrants of Chinese and Indians. They had also faced severe repatriation in the post-colonial years, as well as later period of colonial rule. This article will thus study the socio economic position of Indians; analyze their privileges and role in colonial Myanmar and how it had changed overtime during the period.

**Keywords:** Indian Migrants, Migration, Chettiars, Anti Separation League, Burmanisation, Japanese Occupation, Diaspora

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## **Introduction**

The migration of the Indian people to Myanmar (formerly Burma), in the colonial era can be best defined by the 'classical theory of Migration', imply the 'pull' factors, that Myanmar had offered to large scale Indian Migrants: - the ample of opportunities, economic development, access to labor market; according to Lee's theory of migration (Gurieva and Dzhioev, 2015, p.102). Over the time the Indian population had increased in so much in number that they used to contribute and largely controlled the economy of Myanmar. The Indians were widely engaged in different types of occupations starting from administration jobs to domestic worker to agricultural laborer etc. The migration had been taken place over the entire period of British colonial rule, but had gained momentum especially after the colonial ruler had annexed the Lower Burma in the year of 1852, and make it a part of British India (Yadav, 2005, p.129). The British government had actively promoted migration of cultivators and agricultural laborers in Myanmar from India; cheap laborers were used to build infrastructure in Myanmar (Yadav, 2005, p.129). The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 had led to increase in trade and thereby witnessed the rise of Chettiar community in Myanmar to give agricultural loans (Turnell, n.d). The other non-agricultural and business profession includes government servants, military personnel, professionals, domestic workers, business etc. (Yadav, 2005, p.130). It can be identified with Everett. S Lee's theory of migration that for highly qualified specialists migration often act as career ladder promotion and increase in income level (Gurieva and Dzhioev, 2015, p.102). This article will thus examine the growth of Indian migrants in Myanmar who later came to be known as 'Burmese Indians' and their influence in society and economic of colonial Burma.

## **The rise of Indian Migrants**

The Indian migrants had grown continuously in colonial Myanmar. Although the huge scale of migration was taken place for the entire phrase of British rule in Burma, but the data available from 1872, as the first systematic census were conducted in 1872 and then on 1881 and after that it had been taken place in every 10 years (Baxter, 1940). The annexation of Burmese land and creation of jobs by British government were majorly acted as 'pull' factors for many Indians who had migrated to Myanmar. For Indians, Myanmar was considered as 'Suvarnabhumi' or the 'golden land' with immense opportunities(Ghosh, 2016). On closely observing the rise of Indian population it can be found that the rise of Indian population had outnumbered the Burmese

population in certain area, especially in Rangoon (now Yangon) city concentrated in lower Burma region. It is also important to note that Indian population were consisted of all religion and races among the migrants, although majority were Hindus, the migrants also consisted of Muslim, Sikhs and Christian from India.

The Table1 shows the percentage of Indian Population in Rangoon to the total population of Rangoon from year 1872 till 1932. The following table has been taken from Bhattacharya (2003); article ‘Indian Diaspora in Myanmar’ in Sarva Daman Singh and Mahavir Singh(ed), Indians Abroad (Bhattacharya, 2003, Table 5).

Table .1

Year	Percentage of Indian Population to total Population
1872	16
1881	44
1891	48
1901	48
1911	56
1921	55
1931	53

This percentage chart is important to study, as it shows the percentage of Indian population continued to grow and had been more than half of the total population of Rangoon.

The second table shows the percentage Burmese population in Rangoon. The percentages of Burmese population were continuously declined as the Indian populations were continuously rising in Rangoon. The following table has been taken from Bhattacharya (2003), article ‘Indian Diaspora in Myanmar’ in Sarva Daman Singh and Mahavir Singh(ed), Indians Abroad (Bhattacharya, 2003, Table 5).

Table .2

Year	Percentage of Burmese Population to total Population
1872	70
1881	50
1891	40
1901	33
1911	31
1921	31
1931	32

By comparing both the rising Indian population and declining Burmese population in Myanmar, it can usually be determined the rising influence and growth of economic and the other opportunities that helped Indians to migrated there outnumbering the local Burmese.

The area where most of the Indians Migrants in the Upper Burma region were concentrated was in the area of Mandalay, Kyaukse, Meiktila, Myingyen and Yemethin (Baxter, 1940). In Lower Burma Indians were mainly constituted in Arakan, Pegu, Irrawaddy and Tenasserimregion (Baxter, 1940). The Indian population mostly the Bengalis were from present day Bangladesh mostly from Chittagong apart from present state of Bengal and the other migrants were mainly from present day Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, especially from the Coromandel Coast along with present day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Baxter, 1940).

### **Economic Stratification and Socio Economic Status of Indian Migrants**

In order to analyze the socio economic status of the Indian migrants in Myanmar, it is important to classify them on the basis of their profession in Myanmar during the colonial years. The migrants were basically divided in agriculturist and non-agriculturist. The non-agriculturalist populations were involved in professions like government service, police and military, professions include doctor, lawyer etc., trade and banking and domestic service etc. (Yadav,

2005). As the government jobs were mainly in the hands of Indians there were seen to be the rise of babu<sup>1</sup> classes in some regions of Burma like Rangoon, Akyab, Moulmei, Mandalay, Syriam to name a few (Bhattacharya, 2003). The Indians were seemed to enjoyed privileges in the colonial Burma as it involved Indians who owned the saw mills, rice mills and shipping companies etc. (Bhattacharya, 2003). The British government in 1894, had also leased out 15,000 acres to Indian Zamindar from Sahabad district of Bihar, who was also the Dewan of the Maharaja of Dumraon i.e., Irawaddy grant and Toungoo District of Burma (Yadav, 2005), which was the another reason for large scale migrations from those districts to Myanmar.

Bhattacharya in her article 'Indian Diaspora in Myanmar' (2003) had categorized the Indian migrants in Myanmar based on their profession in five to six categories, the first category was of simple Indian laborers who used to work in oil industry, wood industry, metal working, ceramics and various other industries; the second categories were of service holders of various sectors; the third categories were of saw mill, rice mill, shipping agencies owners who were basically the affluent class; the fourth categories of the people who had enjoyed the administrative position under British government and the people involved in profession like judges and University professor; the fifth she categorized the Chettiars moneylenders (Bhattacharya, 2003).

Apart from the occupational stratification, the Indian migrants can also be based on the places of origin or linguistic basic (state or region of India) or sometimes on their religion (Sikhs, Christians etc.), though, the majority of themigrants belongs to Hindu community. The most of the migrants were especially from eastern part of India and they had been classified as Telegu, Tamils, Hindustani, Bengalis etc. in Baxter Report (Baxter, 1940), their statuses has been described below:-

To start with the one of the largest migrants group of Indians to Myanmar, the Bengali migrants from India were from undivided Bengal which happens to be consists of both West Bengal and present day Bangladesh, especially from Chittagong. The upper and middle class Bengali migrants used to hold several posts in government service such as municipal officials, jail officers, medical officers, school teacher, post master, rail way clerks as well in judges,

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<sup>1</sup> A Bengali respect term for officials and administrative workers

attorneys, advocate etc. The main reason for this privileges as because they could communicate in English as English was introduced as higher education in Bengal (Bhattacharya, 2013). Apart from enjoying privileges Bengalis were also in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs domestic helpers etc. The Bengalis were also taken up business and established rice mills especially in Akyub region(Bhattacharya, 2013).

Another provinces which had witnessed a large scale migration in search of better opportunities or for the ‘pull’ factor was from Tamil Nadu. The Tamil population had increased tremendously during the British period, mostly as agricultural labor under the maistry<sup>2</sup> system (Guilmoto, 1993, p.115). Other professions that Tamils were involved mainly in business and service also they were the mill owners enjoyed prosperous life in Yangon (then Rangoon) (Guilmoto, 1993, p.115). Tamil community who were more prosperous and had enjoyed privileges are the Chettiers community of Tamil Nadu who were especially the money lenders who were arrived in 1826, (Turnell, n.d). The Chettiers loans were used for agriculture as well as trade (Turnell, n.d). The Chettiers acquire powerful clout in Burma as well enjoyed most political and economic influences than any other community of India (Devare, 2006) till 1937.

Not only Tamils from South India, the Telegupopulation were also one of the largest migrants to Burma. Although the Telegu population had migrated to Myanmar much before British rule, but during British rule, they mainly took the job at British industry of rail and rubber plantation, rice production etc. (“Telegu Population”, 2018). “As per 1931 census, the highest linguistic population from India to Burma was Telugus” (“Telegu Population”, 2018).

Among the other South Indian state although the erstwhile princely state of Travancore and Cochin were not part of British India, the immigration data was not provided in 1931 census, but it was stated that were around 3205 Malabarais and 9441 Moplals (Zachariah, Mathew & Rajan, 2003), who were engaged in estate and non-estate sectors and engaged in dock and construction works, mines and factory etc.

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<sup>2</sup>Derived from Tamil ‘maistry’ or supervisor used to recruit laborers to Burma

Other provinces from British India which consisted of most number of migrants from India to Myanmar were from the present day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where most of them had migrated mainly for better opportunities and set up businesses there. The first batches of migrants were consisted of 3,000 farmers who were brought in 1889 and the second groups were brought in 1902, consisted of 4,000 farmers (Roy, 2014). The large scale migration was the result of the 20,000 acres of land which were in and around Ziyawadi which were gifted from British government on a 30 years lease (Roy, 2014). Also many farmers from Azamgarh had migrated to Burma. So, the huge migration from the united provinces, were serve as manpower to British government in Myanmar.

From the western parts of India, the Sikhs were a part of British Military service in Burma. It was estimated that around 1931 there were around 10,000 Sikhs in Myanmar. Like the migrants from Bengals many belongs to undivided Bengal which also parts of present day Bangladesh, the most migrants Sikhs (Maini, 2015).

As Myanmar opened a pool of opportunities for the Indian population in British Burma, the talented Goan musician found opportunities in the large cities of British Burma (Ezdani, 2016). It is interesting to note that many Goanese used to held Portuguese outfit, Christian in belief spoke English had took a distinct Burmese Goanese identity in Burma (Ezdani, 2016).

It can be easily identified that Indian population were engaged in different position of work during the colonial era and some of them even enjoyed privileged position and enjoyed high status and economic opportunities in Myanmar, especially the business class, the administrators and professionals etc. Other people had also found their livelihood in Myanmar. So, the Burma was the land of opportunities for all the migrants Indians.

### **Changing Status of the Migrants from 1937 and Onwards**

It can be observed the Myanmar or the 'Golden land' or 'Suvarnabhumi' holds ample of opportunities for Indians, but soon it had proved to be short lived. There had laid several anti-India sentiments in Myanmar. By 1931, the Indian population was over one million with total population of Burma 14 million (Cockett, 2015, p.17). There were continuous rise of anti-India

sentiment in Myanmar, and the demand from separate Myanmar as administration under British India. The first attack targeting Indian population was on 1930's resulted in killing and wounding hundreds of Indians (Bhatia, 2016). Although not all pro- separatist groups were concerned of rising Indian population in Myanmar but they were also against the rise of other immigrants' community in Myanmar like Chinese. On the economic front it was argued that Burma as provinces of India used to incur heavy economic losses and the separation would bring positive for economy (Kent, 2017). The British interests in separation of Burmese province from India had led to the rise of anti-Separation League in Myanmar who had also won the general election of 1932 by defeating the league of separation league of Myanmar (Kent, 2017). But the winning of anti-Separation League had not led any effect on the decision of British government to separate Burma from India. The British government had considered the Government of Burma Bill of 1934-35 and the separation of Burma came into effect from 1 April 1937 (Bhatia, 2016). The British government decision to separate Burma was to stop the anti-India resentment in the country.

After the Burma had got separated from India, there had led to tremendous changes in the life of Indians living in Myanmar. Although the 1935 constitution had provision for protection of minority rights but it had lesser help to Indians (Bhatia, 2016). The Indians were continued to losing their position and it can be said that it was the first start of 'Burmanisation' process in India. There was ending to 'free trade and free immigration' to India (Bhatia, 2016). The Burmese was used as major language rather than English and there was increase to Burmese member in Rangoon municipal council led to majority although the majority of the residents and tax payers were from Indian community (Bhatia, 2016). There was also 'Burmanization process in labor as well as easing control of agricultural land own by Chettiers' in Myanmar; (Bhatia, 2016). There were attempt to change the domicile rule in order to treat Indians as foreigners (Bhatia, 2016).

The status of Indian population in Myanmar had continued to reach its nadir during the short Japanese Occupation from 1942-45. The war had not only devastated the pre-war economy but all the position that India was enjoyed during the colonial rule (Chaturvedi, n.d). The Japanese occupation can be seen as the worst period as it had led to 500,000 Indians left the country or

half of them were dead during the return (Chaturvedi, n.d). Although after the end of World War II, there seems to be no change in the status of the Indian migrants in Myanmar, and the severe discrimination continued to follow in the post-independence period.

It is very important to note that Indians still continue to be one of the uncategorized ethnic groups in Myanmar consisting of 2% of the population (“Why India must”, 2017), their population had seen a tremendous drop since the time of Independence in 1948 from 16% of the total population. The Indian community in Myanmar have been still striving to maintain their own identity and culture and being one of the India’s largest diaspora communities with connection to ‘homeland’.

### **Conclusions**

The position that Indian migrants used to hold in Myanmar in the colonial period had been classified on the basis of their profession as well as from the place of origin, to better understanding of their socio economic position. Although the profession based on place of origin of migrants was heterogeneous, nevertheless we can say that Tamil Chettiar community were much prosperous than other Indian community. There were also seen uneven in the living status of various migrants during colonial period. It has also been observed that colonial Myanmar had act as “pull” factors for Indians and that had led to flourishing of Indian community. Indians were considered Burma as ‘Suvarnabhumi’ (land of gold) which provided them with opportunities and better living condition helped in growing of economics of the provinces.

The colonial period can be also divided into three phrases in order to understand the changing status of socio economic condition of Indian migrants during the British period, the first period can be described from 1824, when British annexed Lower Burma and bought it under British India till the late of 1930’s, the 115 long year which had led to growth of Indian population, and most of the halcyon day of Indian migrants in Myanmar. That first phrase witnessed the rise in socio economic status of Indian migrants in Myanmar and also the Indian enjoyed privileges and higher position. Also it can be seen that that provide a lots of economic opportunities even for the semi-skilled or unskilled laborer for India. There rise in the population and also there remarkable contribution in the economy. There seems development in infrastructure like lands,

roads and railways, in which Indian laborers were engaged. There seems to rise of rubber cultivation and growth in paddy involved Indian workers. The shops, small businesses, professions were all under Indian control and seem to contribute development of Myanmar as well as individual migrants.

The next phrase can be basically from 1937, when Myanmar got separated from India till the Japanese occupation of 1942, that period had led to anti-Indian resentments, xenophobia leading to few Indians back to India and start of declining in Indian population in Myanmar. There were also led to scraping of privileges position that Indians used to enjoy during those periods.

The third phrase can be described from brief Japanese occupation period to 1942-45 till the independence which had again led to decline in Indian population and mass exodus of Indian population to India. The halcyon days of Indians were seemed to be over and even after independence, the stringent laws of country had proved to be discriminatory for Indians living in Myanmar.

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