

BURMA COLONIES OF WEST BENGAL: A STUDY OF THE CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF BURMESE INDIANS

ANKITA CHAKRABORTY*

Abstract

India and Myanmar had shared their common linkages from the ancient era, due to its proximity with India. In present days, Myanmar shares border with four states of Northeastern India and provides India its gateway to South East Asia. The migration of people from India to Myanmar had been primarily taken place during the colonial era when both of them were under the British colonial rule. The Britishers' during those periods had mainly relied on Indian for administration and other official work in Burma purposes and also for the supply of labor and petty workers. There had been seen the rise of business class from India to Myanmar, the most prominent of them are 'Chettiars' of Tamil Nadu. During the British period Rangoon became the centre of Indian migrants with Burmese turned into minority. But the main troubles were faced by Indian migrants during the post Colonial era, when Burma introduced Nationalization policy, Burmanization policy and Citizenship law. Most of the Indian people had lost their job or business and which compel them to leave Myanmar. The government of India had then given them land or money to settle in India in few pockets of India which is known as 'Burma Colony'. The Burma colony with Indian Burmese or Burmese Indians had still exist today while some of them still strive for proper livelihood. In this connection this article will describe the Socio Economic status of Burmese Indians currently living in West Bengal and also their condition during expulsion in the post colonial era.

* ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore

Introduction

The term 'Burmese Indians' is usually referred to the People of Indian Origin who were repatriated from Myanmar (formerly Burma) during the post colonial years. These Burmese Indians were migrated to Myanmar during the colonial period in search of better opportunities and livelihood there; some of them were also employed under colonial ruler. These people were repatriated to India during the turbulent period of Japanese Occupation in South East Asia and most of them were send back to India during the post-colonial era of Myanmar, when the government of Myanmar had introduced some stringent Acts discriminating the migrants or the non-Burmese. The Burmese Indians had usually started to return in large number during the 1960's and had settled in few pockets in India, with the help of the government. These people have maintained their distinctive identity of 'Burmese Indians' till date. The dwellings of these people are known in India as Burma Bazar in Tamil Nadu or known as Burma colonies of India, in other parts of India. There are also very few studies related to the contemporary status and condition of Burma colonies in India. The information in this study is basically gathered by visiting some Burma colonies of West Bengal and interacting with the residents living there to know their contemporary situation. The study has also used some secondary data sources which are available. The Burmese Indians are also important to get views of the colonial and post colonial status and expulsion years of Indian migrants in Myanmar along with the contemporary scenario.

A Background Study

To study the contemporary status of Burmese Indians in Burma colonies of West Bengal in current days, it is important to know the background of the people who had migrated to Burma or present day Myanmar during the colonial era. The pattern of migration can be easily derived from the earliest theory of migration (Ravenstein), which had described the push and pull factors as determinants of migration. The push factors is usually referred to the expulsion from the respective country due to the high unemployment rate, inflation, lower wages or stagnation to the industrialized country legally or illegally and pull factors usually refers to the migration to the other country due to the high employment rate, better economic condition, employment rate or livelihood etc (Velazquez, 2000). The migration from India to Myanmar of erstwhile Burma can be usually depicted by the pull factors or better economic condition or livelihood that Burma

used to provides under the British colonial rule, as Burma was known as Suvarnabhumi in ancient Sanskrit text so it means the land of gold (“Suvarnabhumi”, n.d) which had mainly acted as pull factor of the vast number of Indians migrated to Myanmar during those period. Also the British colonial rule and administration has opened a new door of opportunities and services to the Indian migrants acted as pull factors to migrate and settle there.

Myanmar being the neighboring country of India had shared ancient linkages and had cultural connection from the early past. During the reign of Asoka, he had send two Buddhist Missionaries to Burma to propagate Buddhism, also their scriptures was mainly originated from Sanskrit or Pali from India (SarDesai, 2013). But the main linkages and migration from India to Myanmar had mainly taken place during the colonial era after British had annexed the upper Burma after the year 1885 till their independence period of 1948 (“History of Burma” n.d, CFOB). The Britishers’ had used Indian migrants for their administrative as well as daily works. During the entire period of British there had witnessed large scale influx of Indian migrants in Myanmar. The Indian population in Myanmar had tremendously increased during these periods, mostly concentrated in the city of Rangoon, as the percentage of Indians living in Rangoon had increased from 44% in 1881 to 53% in 1931 as against the Burmese in Rangoon whose percentage had severely decreased from 50% in 1881 to 32% in 1931 (Bhattacharya, 2003). It can be easily observable from the above figures that the growth of Indians in the major Burmese city of Rangoon (now Yangon) than with Burmese inhabitants.

It was also important to note that the people from India who had been migrated to Myanmar had belongs to various states of India, that include the present day Bangladesh, which was that time was part of India or from undivided Bengals. The Bengalis’ were mainly from Chittagong area of present day Bangladesh and of present day Kolkata (Baxter Report, 1940). The other Indians in Burma were from the then Madras Provinces or present day Chennai and United Provinces of then India along with the aother parts of India like Punjab, Maharashtra, Goa etc, which had also led to the formation of Bengali, Tamil, Sikh culture and temples of Myanmar.

The census of 1921 had provided the information of the Indian Migrants in Myanmar as district basis; it had stated that from which district of India mainly the migrants had taken place to

Myanmar. It is interesting to find out that that majority of the migrants were from several districts of Madras Provinces, Bengal Provinces (including undivided Bengal) and United Provinces. Other areas from where the migration had taken places were from

The Indians used to hold several administrative and military posts under the British colonial rule as Britishers' had recruited Indians in the civil services and administrative position in the British Burma. Bhattacharya, in her article 'Indian Diaspora in Myanmar' had characterized Indians in Myanmar into five categories: - The first categories was of labor section of the society who used to serve in various industrial sector of Burma, the second category is of the people who used to serve in various public sectors like bank, rail etc under colonial rule, led to the emergence of Indian 'babu' class in major Burmese cities. The third category consists of people who were the wealthy and affluent section of Indians in Myanmar led to the emergence of affluent section in Burma. Those were usually of owner of business. The fourth category that had been referred are of civil services and other administration position or those had enjoyed a better lifestyle during their stay in Burma under the British colonial rule. The fifth category that had been mentioned or separated from the other category were of Chettiars of South India, who were especially of money lenders and also used to hold a great importance in the then society, economics and politics of British Burma (Bhattacharya, 2003).

It is no doubt that. The Burmese Indians along with the other non Burmese community had faced an exodus from Burma during the Japanese Occupation in 1941, had drastically reduced their number in Burma (Baylay and Harper, 2004) the second phase of expulsion was after the Burma got independence from colonial rulers. These had led to severe implications on the life of the people, who were in several occupations in Burma and also used to do business there. There also led to the growth of Burma colony in several parts of India most prominent in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, including the other parts of India. This study aims at focusing on the life of Burmese Indians in the contemporary scenario.

Post Colonial Scenario

The post colonial scenario had left the Indian society marginalized due to the strict laws that were introduced by the then government of Myanmar. When the Government introduced

Burmanization of public services in the 1950s large number of Indians employed in the railways, water transport, customs, post and telegraph, and public works and other departments had lost their jobs. In the year of 1960s under the Burmese Socialist Program, the government even nationalized the petty trade. These measures had led to Indians who used to hold respectable posts in different government sector were dismissed and it was difficult for them to continue their jobs in Myanmar. It is estimated that around 3000 Indians in government job and around 8000 Indians in Government Railways were dismissed (Jha, 2008). The discrimination that had been faced by the Indian migrants in Myanmar was mainly during the Ne Win period, after he came to power by military coup in 1962. This period had witnessed the large scale expulsion of Indians and other foreign nationals from Burma. It is estimated that in the year 1964, around 3000 the Indians in Myanmar had returned to India through ports of Calcutta, Chennai (Madras) and Vishakapatnam and by 1966 around 154000 Burmese Indians have returned to India (Egreteau, 2013) Many of these expatriates were from Undivided Bengal or from present days Bangladesh who were of Hindu faith had choose to returned to India. Also, there were several policies that had been adopted by the government, which had provided to be the discrimination against Indian migrants in Myanmar some of the policy includes Immigration Act, Land Alienation Act, Land Nationalization Act, Immovable property Act, Burma Company Registration Act, etc, which had denied the rights of Indians staying there. The Government of Myanmar had implemented the Citizenship Act of 1982, where the Burmese government had seized the land and property of the Indians and citizenship was denied to people who came to Burma before 1823 (Mehrotra and Basistha, 2011). Till 1962, Indians in Burma also did not have any identity cards. The All Burma Indian Congress which was a body of Indians in Burma issued a certificate for every Indian in Burma. During the repatriation period, the Indian embassy at Rangoon had issued emergency certificates for every Indian who wished to return from Burma. This emergency certificate was used as a travelling document as well as availing all Government opportunities in India(Mehrotra and Basistha, 2011).

The repatriate Burmese Indians were relocated to different camps around India, especially in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Growth of Burma Colonies in India and Contemporary Status

The Burma Colonies in India had mainly formed after 1964 to accommodate the Burmese Repatriates who had returned to India after the 'Nationalization policy' of the Burmese government in 1963. The Burma colonies in India are located in several parts of India, mainly concentrated on West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, alongside the other parts of India like Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, as well as in the western suburbs of New Delhi. Minor rural settlements were also established in Bihar (near Patna), Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal and Betul districts) and northern Uttar Pradesh near Rudrapur and Hastinapur (Egretau, 2013). The Burma colonies of Chennai were set up at 1969, for the Indians who had faced expulsion from Myanmar. These people have held their distinctive identity and are mainly known to retain the Burmese roots by selling Burmese cuisines in this Burma Bazar (Eswari, 2016). The contemporary status of residents of Burma colonies in West Bengal is collected through the field visit and by conducting interview and study the present situation of the residents stayed in these colonies.

The Burma colonies in West Bengal are located in several parts in and around Kolkata; the colonies are located in Barasat (Kazipara and Sangmura) Subhasgram, Liluah, Kamarhati, Kidderpore along with several other places near Kolkata. In recent years although most of the people are assimilated or shifted from the colonies to other parts of India and abroad, the colonies with inhabited are still dwelling in these colonies. The other Burma colonies in India are located in few pockets of Tamil Nadu, known as Burma Bazaar. The data collected from field research are a combination of both negative and positive reviews.

Information collected from Field trip to Barasat Burma Colony (Suvarnapatnam)-

The Burma colony in Barasat is now the residents of the Burmese Indians from Bengal, including Bangladesh, whose families had migrated to Myanmar during the colonial period in search of better livelihood, many of whose parents were used to serve under British colonial rule. The Suvarnapatnam is probably the largest settlement of Burmese Indians in West Bengal. The open ended interview had given different insights to study of their contemporary socio economic status. Most of the families in Burma Colonies in Suvarnapatnam had migrated to India around 1964, holds special affinity to Burma, most of the senior residents here can speak in fluent

Burmese other than Bengali. Many of the senior residents here had studied in Indian educational institutions like Tagore College or Bengal Academy of erstwhile Rangoon (Myanmar). The expatriate here had allotted houses as Burma Displaced Persons' Cooperative, with property composed of 1800 sq feet of land with 320 covered space and sanitary latrine along with tube well to each families along with INR 4600 as loan repayable in 20 years (data collected from field trip). Although most of the families had been displaced there are still hundreds of them remaining there.

Information collected from Field trip to Barasat Burma Colony (Sangmura)- Sangmura is located around few kilometers from Suvarnapatnam and is the home of Burmese Migrants or displaced people of Myanmar. These are mostly occupied by Burmese Indians from Northern state of India, like Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. Most of them had returned in India during 1960's after the Nationalization policy. Unlike people of Suvarnapatnam, these people had not allotted houses and had stayed in camps after they had migrated to India. Most of them had not attended school in Myanmar and had engaged in family business from early childhood; also most of them have been living on a basic livelihood. The Sangmura areas of Barasat are well off than the Burmese Indian residing in Suvarnapatnam, which is just located nearby.

Information collected from Field trip to Kamarhati Burma Repatriate Society- Unlike other Burma colonies, this camp in Kamarhati are one of the most impoverished condition due to lack of proper housing and not very well sanitization system. The Burmese Indians living here had also returned in 1960's due to the Nationalization policy. The people here also consisted of Hindu Bengalis mainly from undivided Bengal and had they had been allotted this camp in 1970, which is now in much dilapidated condition and people dwelling here by risking their life. Although the present political leaders have promised to relocate them to a Bon Hoogly area of West Bengal but still the promises are not fulfilled.

Information collected from Field trip to Kidderpore- Another most neglected and impoverished settlements of Burmese Indians located in Kidderpore area. This is not exactly a Burma colony but few Burmese Indians have settled here. Although this numbers are very less than other settlements, most of them have been living in slum areas under impoverished

condition and are also struggling with basic necessities of life. It is also interesting to note that many of the Burmese Indians living here are not from West Bengal or of Bangladesh but some of them have originally belongs to Andhra Pradesh. The Burmese Indians living here are less researched on and thus they had remained unknown like other colonies.

Information collected from Field trip to Subhasgram Burma Repatriate Society – Although most of the Burmese repatriates have shifted to different location there are few people remains in this area known as ‘Burmese Indians’. The Indians migrants have given lands in this area as Burma Housing Cooperative Society of India under Bengal Cooperative Societies Act XXI of 1940. These people also hold a unique identity of themselves and they preferred to be referred as ‘Burmese Indians’, also the seniors in this colony used to speak in fluent Burmese language.

Conclusions

The Burmese Indians in India or of West Bengal are the minority group of Indian repatriates from Myanmar whom were less studied or are little known. There are also few research studies related to them, but their population have also holds an important part in India. Although these people have maintained their distinctive identity as ‘Burmese Indians’, but are also striving to maintain their distinct identity as they are quickly disappearing due to resettlement, relocation and other condition. The Burmese Indians people have also their distinctive cooking skills, handicraft skills and culture which is a mix of Burmese and Indians. Many of them still followed the mix culture and used to wear Burmese traditional dress called longyi. Most of the elderly people who had migrated during 1960’s are well versed in Burmese language along with local language, irrespective of their educational qualification or background. There are also noticeable disparity between the ‘Burmese Indias’ living in West Bengal. While some of the Burmese Indians are very well off in economic and societal status while the others are still struggling for basic necessities of life like proper housing, proper livelihood and proper economic and social status etc, especially the people living in Kamarhati camp, who are waiting for relocation, or the people of Kidderpore who were hardly known. There is also a need arise to protect the rights of these Burmese Indians living in different parts of Bengal and protect the distinct identity and culture, as most of them want to retain their ‘Burmese Indians’ status. There were also need to organize all ‘Burmese Indians’ colony in West Bengal which were hardly noticed.

References:-

- 1) Velazquez, F.C. (2000). Approaches to the Study of International Migration. *Estudios Fronterizos*, vol. 1, núm. 1, 138-139
- 2) Suvarnabhumi. (n.d). Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopedias6.com/encyclopedia-of-southeast-asia-from-angkor-wat-to-/4523-suvarnabhumi-land-of-gold.html>
- 3) SarDesai, D.R. (2013). *South East Asia: Past and Present*. New York, Roulledge
- 4) History of Burma. (n.d). Retrieved from <http://www.cfob.org/HistoryofBurma/historyOfBurma.shtml>
- 5) Bhattacharya, S. (2003). *Indian Diaspora in Myanmar*. Singh, S.D and Singh M (Ed.). *Indians Abroad*. Kolkata: Hope India Publicaion
- 6) Baxter, J (1940). *Report on Indian Immigration*. Rangoon. Government of Burma
- 7) Bayley, C and Harper, T. (2005). *Forgotten Armies: The fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press
- 8) Egrateau, R and Jagan, L. (2013). *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding The Foreign Relations Of The Burmese Praetorian State*, Singapore: NUS Press
- 9) Jha, G. (2008). *Indian Diaspora in Myanmar*. *Diaspora Sudies*, vol 1, num 2, 53-70
- 10) Mehrotra, M and Basistha, N. (2011). *Collective Memories of Repariate of Burma: A case study of West Bengal (Report III)*, *Refugee Watch*, 37
- 11) Egreteau, R. (2013). Retrieved from <https://journals.openedition.org/moussons/2312>
- 12) Eswari, C.S.S. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/Food/a-walk-to-remember-street-food-in-burma-bazaar/article7429768.ece>
- 13) Primary sources and information are collected during field visit