Footnote to the Grand War: the Silenced Exiles of Burma

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the lives of Burmese Indians- Indian minorities that had migrated to and later settled in Colonial Burma under the policies of the British Colonial government and later repatriated or fled Burma starting late 1930s till 1960s. The stories of Burmese Indians who once formed a sizable minority in Burma is consciously absent from historical records of both India and Burma today. By excavating this lesser known history this paper illustrates how inadequate representation in historical writing, has relegated these stories to the recesses of folk memories and grandparent's tales of immigration. The paper is primarily based on analysis of secondary data which included researched works, autobiographical books, reports and government records of Indian minorities that were living or repatriated from Burma. Additionally it makes use of newspaper reports to support the data provided from books and documents of that time on the conditions of Indians in Burma and their stories of exile.*

This paper attempts to create multi-layered historical profiles of the Indian minorities in Burma- who they were, why had they migrated to Burma and the sectors that employed them. The paper draws the trajectory of the circumstances under which the mass migration of Indians began, up until the conditions which pushed them out of Burma. It will particularly engage with the mass exodus of Indians from Burma following the Japanese annexation of the state and how Second World War was but one of the factors alongside other like rising anti-India sentiments that propelled Indians to flee Burma.

Finally, this paper argues that the eclipsing of the stories of the Burmese Indians from both Indian and the Burmese memory-scape has created an anomalous situation wherein not only is the event of the Burmese Indians' exodus dis-embedded from Burma's larger historical trajectory but the contemporary ethnic violence that is being played out in Burma today especially against the Rohingya Muslims is also de-linked from any reference to the anti-India rhetoric of the past. This double eclipsing has created a façade wherein the Rohingya Muslims exodus is now perceived as a 'one-off' event rather than woven into and read as part of Burma's larger history of ethnic violence.

Keywords: *Burmese Indians, exodus, silenced histories, Burma, comparative politics*

1. Introduction

In the *Ambivalent Homecoming of the Homo Psychologicus* (2001) Ashis Nandy commenting on the 20th century writes, "There are many twentieth centuries. For one person's century may not be that of another. However …in another few decades, some of them will move closer to being more authoritative centuries than the others. While the chosen ones begin to coagulate as the official, hegemonic twentieth century, others have to survive as recessive strains- as myths, legends, folk memories, grandparent's tales or sometimes as nightmares about the century, meant only for

curious anthropologists or psychiatrists" (2001, p. 21). There is much to be noted in Nandy's insights, for in a century gripped by the excesses of the Second World War, events that were happening in the non-European world were relegated as footnotes to the hegemonic versions of that time or absorbed into the larger narrative of the War itself.

This paper attempts to discuss such an eclipsed history from the 20th century, the story of the exodus of the Indian minorities from Burma beginning late 1930s to 1960s and how its conspicuous absence from historical representation has relegated this history to the recesses of folk memories and grandparent's tales of immigration. The paper illustrates how the exodus of the community was not simply in response to the British retreat from Burma following Japanese annexation of the state, but instead was propelled by a host of complex factos chief amongst which was the rise in anti-India sentiments which acquired their most sinister form as Burmese nationalism subsequently grew.

This silencing of the exodus of the Indian minorities' has ensured that Indians who once made up a significant section of Burma's population and contributed to its cosmopolitanism and development have been virtually written out of its history even as the memories of Burma's colonial subjugation at the hands of the British and Indians (through association) are kept alive.

Finally this paper argues that the eclipsing of the stories of the Burmese Indians from both Indian and the Burmese memory-scapes has created an anomalous situation wherein not only is the event of the Burmese Indians' exodus dis-embedded from Burma's larger historical trajectory but the contemporary ethnic violence that is being played out in Burma today especially against the Rohingya Muslims is also de-linked from any reference to the anti-India rhetoric of the past. This double eclipsing has created a façade wherein not only is there a complete silencing of the Indian influence in Colonial Burma but also that the Rohingya Muslims exodus is now perceived as a singular 'one-off' event rather than woven into and read as part of Burma's larger history of ethnic violence.

2. Historical Trajectories

Burma's Forgotten People

Unless one was specifically looking nothing would warrant an interest in the lives of Burmese Indians. At the outset their stories can seem like ordinary tales of migrants immigrating to foreign lands in search of livelihoods and returning as the prospects dry up. Yet there are many stories of how these immigrants ended up making Rangoon a predominantly 'Indian' city in the late 1930s (Mahajani, 1960).

The exodus of the Indian community which once made a sizeable number in Burma roughly took place in three waves, first in the 1930s following the anti-India riots. At that moment, a few Chettiar and other South Indian families repatriated to India fearing future violence. The second

wave involved the highest number of Indians fleeing Burma, around 400,000-500,000[1] alongside Chinese and British Asiatics[2]. This followed as news of Japan's conquest of Burma spread and the British forces began their retreat triggering other minorities to flee as well. The third wave of movement happened in the 1960s during the military regime of Ne Win[3] which enforced harsh measures on non-Burmese, especially the Indian population leading to thousands repatriating to India.

Only a handful of books and articles discuss the lives of the Indian community in British Burma (Mahajani, 1960; Chakravarti, 1971; Tinker, 1975; Egreteau R. , 2011). There is even less scholarship available on their repatriation to India starting in the 1940s (Egreteau R. , 2011; 2013; Bhaumik, 2003). Most of the accounts are either a part of the larger South East Asian or Burmese history (Cady, 1958; Taylor, 1987; Tinker, 1961). Personal accounts are even rarer to find. Of those that exist most are by Europeans or British Asiatics (Brookes, 2000); accounts by Indians are conspicuous by their absence.

Of the most glaring omissions is the exodus of Burmese Indians in 1942 which witnessed thousands of refugees walking on foot over the treacherous mountain ranges of Burma border to enter India via Manipur. Over half a million fled Burma. The numbers of the dead are unclear to this day; the numbers range anywhere between 50,000-100,000[4]. It is indeed surprising that of the thousands who repatriated no personal account of this journey by Indians exist in published form. Hugh Tinker (1975) as a young man enlisted in the British Army in Burma, was a firsthand witness to the death and violence the refugees faced in the Burma-India trek. And he was also one of the first researchers to document the Burmese Indians exodus. Reflecting on the dearth of literature on the displacement, he writes,

> *"Because the thousands on the march included every section of the Indian community in Burma, one might have supposed that some among them — teachers, writers, social workers, perhaps — would have recorded their memories of the experience. Perhaps some did: but it has not been possible to trace any such personal account. For most, it was an experience that they wanted to forget: and who, anyway, was interested in reading their experiences? They were not heroes: either to other Indians or to the Burmese, or the British."* (1975, p. 2)

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[1] According to Tinker (1975) the figure of the returnees ranges between the above mentioned figures, for Chakravarti (1971) it is 500,000. For Egreteau (2013), Taylor (1987) it is down to 400,000.

[2] The broad term Asiatics refers to Children born to parents, one of whom is of British descent while the other is of Asian heritage (from China, Burma, Thailand etc.) or children born in British-Asian mixed descent families.

[3] He was the Prime Minister of Burma from 1958-1960 and in 1962-1974 as well as the head of the state and military till 1988. He founded the Burma Socialist Programme Party that seized political power following a military coup.

[4] While Chakravarti (1971) sees the figure as being closer to 100,000 Tinker (1975) identifies 50,000 as the most likely figure.

The events happening in Burma were hardly centre-stage for the Indian population which was occupied by its own Independence struggle as well as the outpouring of refugees from Partition (India-Pakistan). As for the colonial government, Burma was but a small chapter in their larger colonial enterprise which was crashing brick by brick alongside the Second World War. The stories of the Burmese Indians therefore devoid of heroes and their heroics, paled in comparison to the outrageous brutalities of the Nazis and the Japanese in the Second World War.

All the events that happened around the Holocaust, whether before or after, were eclipsed by its monumental stature; that atrocities of such magnitude could be committed continues to alarm scholars even today. The literature and the memory archive that the Holocaust has generated is testimony to this sense of impossibility that surrounds it. History which relies on chronological time often colludes in silencing those parallel events which take place simultaneously in time but are disconnected to its grander narratives. In a century gripped by the excesses of the Second World War, events that were happening in non-European world like the displacement of the Burmese Indians were relegated as footnotes to the larger narrative of the Second World War itself.

Migration of Indians to Burma

The movement of Indians to and from Burma was taking place well before the Colonial occupation. Mahajani (1960) mentions that the Indian trading community enjoyed a position of privilege even during the reign of the Burmese kings[5]. However, other than this, the account of the presence of Indians in Burma prior to the British occupation was scant. The large scale immigration of Indians to Burma is intertwined with its long history of colonization. As the British annexed parts of lower Burma, they brought with them the first batches of Indian workers who would be employed as dockworkers, coolies, clerks and agricultural labour. These migrants came from Tamil, Telugu, Bengal and Hindi/Urdu speaking areas. Further The Anglo-Burmese wars drew more Indians into Burma as they were brought in to occupy the subordinate and administrative positions due to their familiarization with British systems of governance.

In 1939 the colonial government appointed a commission of inquiry headed by James Baxter[6] to examine the growing immigration of Indians to Burma. Published in its full form two years later the Baxter Committee Report (1941) is perhaps the only official documentation dealing specifically with the lives of Indians in colonial Burma. The Report becomes all the more important as the post-independence Burmese government discontinued the decadal census set up by the British and it was only in 1973 that the exercise was resumed once again. Therefore, there is no official record available of the changes in Burmese population from 1941 (last national census undertaken by the colonial government) till 1973; consequently, the changes in Indian population in Burma between these years are at best approximations.

[5] It was under the reign of the King of Arakan who exercised sovereignty over certain parts of Bengal as well that a large population of Indians settled in Arakan (Mahajani, 1960).
[6] A Financial adviser to the Government of Burma at that time, Baxter was appointed the Commissioner for this inquiry.

Even though Indians were trading in Burma prior to British colonial rule, their presence remained negligible. As we can see from the table 1 below, the presence of Indians steadily grew in Burma from 4.9% in 1872 to 6.9% in 1931. A large part of this was facilitated by the colonial government's annexation of the fertile Irrawaddy Delta in 1852 and the subsequent opening of Suez Canal in 1869 which allowed for a large scale industrial production of rice for export to Europe. Although not stated in this table, the Indian population in Burma saw a decline in 1941, falling to 5.4% as per the Census Report (Government of Burma, 1943) . There are no figures available for the immigration and emmigration of Indians from 1942 onwards, apart from some reports maintained by the shipping companies and port health officials. However most of their data is highly discrepant such that drawing any conclusions becomes difficult (Chakravarti, 1971, p. 14).

Census	**Total Population**	**Indian Population**	**Indian Percentage**
1871	2,747,149	136,504	4.9
1891	8,098,014	420,830	5.1
1901	10,490,624	568,263	5.4
1911	12,115,217	743,288	6.1
1921	13,212,192	887,077	6.7
1931	14,667,146	1,017,825	6.9

Table 1: Indian Population in Burma (Baxter, 1941, p. 5)

A large portion of the Indian population was based in Lower Burma which witnessed an increase in its population from 5% in 1881 to 11% by 1931. Around 83.4% of the population was to be found in Lower Burma with the highest concentration in Rangoon (Baxter, 1941, p. 9). Another aspect worth noting is the severely disproportionate age and sex differentiation of the Indian population in Burma. The Baxter Report states that 64.4% of the Indian male population in Burma was between the ages of 15 to 40 years of age as compared to 40.2% of indigenous males. The disequilibrium was even more pronounced in Rangoon where the figure was as high as 71.4%. Similarly, the Indian sex ratio was acutely disproportionate as men comprised the majority of the immigrant population. Table 2 illustrates the sex ratio of different groups in Rangoon in 1931; we can clearly see that the ratio is almost equal for indigenous population. Even amongst other racial groups like the Chinese and the Europeans there was one female to every two males, as was the case of Indians among whom the sex ratio was abysmally low.

Racial classes	**Population**			**Females per 100 males**
	Total	**Males**	**Females**	
Burmese	121,998	61,003	60,935	100
Karens	3,226	1,612	1,614	100
Other indigenous races	2,358	1,309	1,049	80
Total indigenous races	127,582	63,984	63,598	99
Indians	212,929	171,714	41,215	24
Chinese	30,626	19,919	10,707	54
Indo-Burman	12,560	6,125	6,435	105
Europeans	4,426	2,695	1,531	53

Anglo-Indians	9,977	5,071	4,906	97
Other races	2,315	1,355	960	71
Total all races	400,415	271,063	129,352	48

Table 2. The population and sex ratio of different racial classes in Rangoon at the 1931 census. (Baxter, 1941, p. 21)

In towns with more than 10,000 people the ratio was as low as 25 Indian females for 100 Indian males. The ratio of Indian females to males in Rangoon was as low as one female to four Indian males (Baxter, 1941, p. 21). It is also interesting to note that two-thirds of the Indian population in Burma at the time of 1931 census was made up of Indian born immigrants. Therefore, despite the presence of the Indian community in Burma for over a century, a majority of the Indian population comprised of first generation immigrants.

In the light of the above mentioned figures illustrating the birth, age and sex distribution of the Indian population we can reach some probable conclusions. First, a large portion of the Indian population which immigrated to Burma had primarily moved there for work. This population predominantly consisted of men between the ages of 15 to 40 years and was present in its most disproportionate ratio in towns, especially Rangoon. Second, it would not be unreasonable to assume that a large section of the Indian population despite the permanent nature of their work did not intend to permanently settle in Burma. As most of them were first generation male immigrants who left their families behind, perhaps the intention was of spending their active working years accumulating money in Burma and then returning to their natal homes in India to finally retire.

Occupation of Indians in Burma

Very broadly three classes of Indians migrated to Burma, the merchants or trading class, the intellectual classes and the laboring classes. The Parsi and the Chettiar traders formed a small yet influential group in the Burmese economic landscape. In the intellectual sphere, lawyers, teachers, doctors and engineers were urgently needed and apart from Europeans who largely dominated these posts a small portion of the Indian population also provided their services here. The largest chunk of Indian population was engaged as skilled and unskilled labourers in agricultural, transport and manufacturing industries. The Baxter Committee Report (1941) categorized the Indian population as ‘earners’ and ‘working dependents’ and classified them into the occupations listed below.

Occupation	**Number**	**Percentage**
Unskilled and semi-skilled	206,555	38.90
Agriculture, fishing and hunting	140,523	26.40
Traders, shop assistants	82,549	15.54
Craftsmen	48,305	9.09
Clerical	20,000	3.76
Others	32,942	6.20
Total	**530,874**	

Table 4. Occupation of Indian ‘earners and ‘working dependents’ (Baxter, 1941, p. 106)

It is clear that the highest percentage of the population was employed as unskilled and semi-skilled labour in industry and transport sectors (38.90%). This was followed by the agricultural and

fishing sector which employed a high percentage of Indians as seasonal wage workers (26.40%). Similarly, even though a significant portion of the Indian population was employed in trade, yet apart from a few who owned big businesses, the majority comprised of small shop owners and street vendors (15.54%). Interestingly, from the 'other' category, some of the highest numbers of Indians were employed as scavengers and sweepers as there were no takers for these jobs amongst the indigenous population. Despite the presence of diverse Indian immigrants in varied occupations, it was the presence of the Indian labour class and the traders, especially the Chettiars which would go on to create serious fissures with the indigenous Burmese population and therefore both these groups deserve a separate analysis.

Indian Labour in Burma

Both Chakravarti (1971) and Mahajani (1960) begin their works with a reflection of how the story of Indian emigration to various parts of the world needs to be read as a shameful history of indentured labour under which people from poorer parts of India were sent off to work in derogatory conditions for dismal wages.

In Burma it was the *Maistry system* under which a large population of Indian labourers, dock workers and coolies were brought in to work. These *maistrys* operated in conjunction with shipping agents and had middlemen who routinely visited some of the poorest villages in India and advertised the benefits of emigration for work. The *maistrys* arranged for the food, transport and lodging of the laborers and provided small remittances for the family against loans which were to be recovered from their daily wages. However the high interest on the repayment of the loans ensured that the workers were never able to repay their debts and remained contractually bound to the *maistrys*.

The agricultural sector was one of the first to absorb a large portion of the Indian working class. Rice cultivation in Burma was carried out by Burmese agriculturalists up until the opening of the Suez Canal which heralded a linking of Burma to the rest of the world. Consequently, the British government launched a move to spread and intensify the scale of paddy production and rice to supply to Europe; however Burma was heavily underpopulated to meet such demands. Mahajani (1960) discussing the role of Indian labourers writes,

> *"The British therefore began to import cheap labour from the nearest and easiest sources, viz. India. The first batches of Indian agriculturalists to settle on the land were a class of Zamindars from Bihar who were given land grants in 1874. From then on a continuous immigration of Indian agriculturalists and labourers was the order of the day. In 1876 a recruiting agent was appointed at Madras under the Burma Labour Act. Subsidies were offered to shipping companies to bring in Indian immigrants. The cultivation of rice for export gave rise to shipping industry for which an adequate supply of dockyard labour was indispensable"* (1960, p. 5)

Soon enough Indians also started to occupy other subordinate and menial jobs which the Burmese were reluctant to carry out. Indians provided sweepers, rickshaw pullers, gardeners, butlers and pullers in various places. The timber and mining industry were also two significant

sectors that absorbed a large part of the Indian labor. A large portion of the railways were built by Indian labor; they were also present as labour in oil fields, mines, construction sites and rice mills.

Even as Burma's thriving job market was acting as a magnet for poor Indians looking for work, it is essential to inquire into the conditions in which this labour class existed and the reasons that propelled their immigration. Various authors (Mahajani, 1960; Chakravarti, 1971; Bhaumik, 2003) have wondered why such large swathes of Indian labourers moved to Burma despite the dire working conditions and the low wages. The opportunities provided in their villages in India were so few that the promise of regular funds home alongside the attractive work offers made by maistrys contributed to this large movement of labour to Burma. We should not forget that the British Government actively promoted poorer populations' immigration to foreign lands as low wage labourers. Kaur (2006) writing on the lives of Indian labour in Burma and Malaya, identifies three main reasons which made the Indian population an attractive workforce in meeting Burma's growing manufacturing and production needs. She states,

> *"First, they were seen as a 'fluid' labour supply; they were cheaper to hire and manage compared to Burmese workers; and their accommodation costs were also cheaper since they could be housed in sub-standard tenement housing. Second, the Burmese were primarily agriculturalists and were not prepared to work the long hours in the mills with very few rest days and holidays. Third, the European firms in particular preferred to deal with head maistries to hire and manage the workers, rather than hire Burmese workers on individual contracts. Moreover, there were no Burmese head maistries with capital who were in a position to make contracts with European firms or finance their own labour gangs."* (Kaur, 2006, p. 13)

Kaur's analysis of the Indian labour as being viewed as a 'fluid' and cheaper workforce definitely rings true as even others corroborates the same. The Indian labour then working for meagre wages and subsisting in humiliating conditions not only comprised of a group which was looked down upon by the Burmese, but they began to be identified alongside rising cases of criminality as well. Chakravarty (1971) reflecting on the condition of Indian labor in Burma writes,

> *"The apathy of the general public, the negligence of his Government, the indifference of his employer, and the cruelty of his Maistry made him a beast of burden. His only pleasure or recreations were crude opium, unrefined country liquors and other harmful cheap drugs in which he indulged to find some solace for his soul and to snatch some rest for his tired frame. His was a drab existence in a foreign country, far away from his near and dear ones".* (Chakravarti, pp. 49-50)

When we reflect on the dearth of personal accounts of Burmese Indians' displacement stories it becomes essential to also remind ourselves of the ways in which power and privilege is hugely implicated in the writing and narrating of history. And how the stories of those not powerful enough to do so often get silenced under the burden of others.

The most visible of Burmese Indians: The Nattukottai Chettiars

Unlike the case of the Indian labourers in Burma, the operations of the Chettiars are well documented through official records and annual growth reports, alongside the data collected by the Nattukottai Chettiar's Association. In addition, a handful of studies have also retrospectively analyzed this data to unearth the depth of the Chettiar hold in Pre-independence Burma (Adas, 1974; Mahadevan, 1976). Chettiars belonged to the Vaishya (trading) caste from Chettinad in Tamil Nadu and had been maritime traders since centuries. Starting from the nineteenth century onwards they began establishing successful banking businesses in various parts of South East Asia like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Mauritius and Indonesia (Chakravarti, 1971, p. 56)

Mahajani (1960) identifies 1850 as the year when the first Chettiars settled in Moulmein in Burma. However their business was still limited to Tenasserim delta only up until the British government brought changes to the unstructured agricultural system of Burma (termed *dama-u-gya*[7]*)* and made it similar to the *ryotwari system*[8] dominant in India in 1852. This move allowed for two changes, first the revenues were fixed in cash and second the agriculturalists could mortgage their land as security against loans for money from money-lenders. Both these changes were central to the massive alienation that the Burmese would experience later as more and more agriculturalists mortgaged their lands to the Chettiar banks in exchange for cash (Adas, 1974). Between 1880-1886[9] Chettiars opened firms in different parts of Lower Burma and moved to parts of Upper Burma as the British annexed it opening the scope for Chettiars further upwards.

[7] The literal translation standing for "first (to) wield the machete, designates the right of the first person clearing a piece of land to put under cultivation / a term applied to land which has become the property of the owner, by right of his having been the first to clear it of jungle, or by right of his having cleared it of jungle after its owner had deserted it." (The Judson Burmese-English dictionary, 1921, p. 518)

[8] Ryotwari system was dominant system of agricultural operation introduced by the British in Colonial India. As part of the system the government directly collected revenues from the cultivators for their agricultural production. According to Adas (2011) this system was given preference over others in Burma because "there was not a well-established landed group in Lower Burma, it appeared possible to develop a rural economy in which the small proprietor received the profits of his labors and the rent surplus went to the state rather than to intermediaries" (Adas, 2011, p. 32)

[9] Both Mahajani (1960) and Adas (1974)provide dates between 1880-1881 and 1886 as

significant years in the expansion of Chettiar operations.

The Banking Inquiry Committee[10] (1931) states that the Chettiar firms multiplied manifold from 350 in 1910 to 1650 and more by 1930. For the year 1929 the estimated the Chettiar capital was approximately 800 million rupees (p. 202).

Both Mahajani (1960) and Charavarti (1971) saw the role of the Chettiars as essential to the growth and expansion of the Burmese agricultural sector, Adas (1974) states that such claims are at variance with historical growth records. The Burmese continued to own the majority of the land until the end of nineteenth century. It was only when paddy agriculture began reaping profits due to increasing export to Europe that more and more agriculturalists began to also lend money for it (Adas, 1974).

Mahajani (1960) states that the Chettiars initially only controlled a small percentage of the land holdings, about 6% in 1930 however it grew to an astounding 25% in 1938. Adas (1974) claims that the Chettiars or other Burmese money-lenders didn't coerce or force the agriculturalists into borrowing for agriculture; instead there are indications that the Burmese cultivators willingly took part in the rice-economy as they judged it to be profitable and therefore worth the extra loans. The problems for the Burmese cultivators arose during the depression years 1931-1934, as the fall in Western markets also brought the paddy prices down drastically and the cultivators found themselves unable to re-pay the loans. It was during this time when the Chettiar land holdings also subsequently doubled.

The accompanying alienation experienced by the Burmese cultivators during the depression years set the ground for the marked dislike that Chettiar community would go on to invite in Burma. Added to this were the cultural practices of the Chettiars that set them up as distinct from the rest of the people in Burma. The Chettiars despite living far from their native South Indian cities maintained their religious practices and close ties with relatives back home. They sent their children to Tamil schools and invited priests to Burma to observe the religious festivities. While the Burmese disaffection for the Chettiars as usurpers and conniving 'hard hearted swindlers' grew, it is important to neither overestimate or underplay their role in the growth of Burma's economy.

Anti-India Riots, Burmese Nationalism & Burmese Indians' Exodus

It was in the 1920s that anti-Indian and to some extent anti-Chinese feelings started to emerge amongst the Burmese population (Mahajani, 1960; Chakravarti, 1971; Egreteau R. , 2011). A number of interacting factors, a few of which were briefly discussed in the sections above led to the series of events which eventually culminated in the Indian population's emigration from Burma.

Even as the Burmans viewed the Indians immigrants as usurpers of their job opportunities and agricultural lands, the resentment that they harbored towards this community went far deeper, all

[10] This was a part of the special inquiries setup by the Colonial Government between 1929-30 to examine the growth of agrarian and market conditions in Burma. The reports by Nattukkottai Chettiar Association were also maintained as part of the Banking Inquiry. (Adas, 1974, p. 386)

the way to the Anglo-Burman wars (1824-1885)[11]. Although the wars had been waged by the British, the battles were fought from the Indian soil and the British Imperial army was largely made up of Indian soldiers. The loss and destruction of their kingdom was an indelibly wounding experience for the Burmese and the resentment that they felt against the British was extended to the Indians by virtue of their association. In the eyes of the Burmese, the colonization of their lands wasn't just a British enterprise but an Indo-British maneuver. These feelings of hurt and distrust were further exacerbated by the massive influx of Indian labour which the British brought in to meet their agricultural and manufacturing needs. Most importantly, the recognition of Burma as a colony of the British Indian Empire remained a cause of deep frustration amongst the Burmese.

During the 1920s even as Indian politics was taking a decisive turn and making demands on the ruling colonizers, the Burmese nationalism also grew, taking inspiration from the Indian movements although very conscious of its own identity as separate from India. The *Thakin*[12] movement set up in 1930 was chiefly responsible for this new Burmese political consciousness. It was formed by a group of intellectuals and students from the Rangoon University combining Buddhist traditional teachings with nationalist ideals. The rhetoric of '*Do-bama'* (our Burma) and '*thudo-Bama'* (their Burma) became central to their political ideology and tapped into the general dismay of the Burmese at the hands of the British and foreign immigrants.

Another important contributor to anti-India rhetoric was the Burmese Press which routinely published inflammatory editorials, columns and cartoon strips poking fun at the Indian communities and employing the derogatory term *'kala'* to refer to them. Popular Burmese newspapers like *The Sun, The New Age* were at the forefront of such vitriolic campaigns and the Chettiars became the easiest targets, typified as a 'dark, pot-bellied, banker swindling the poor Burmese'. Harvey (1946) commenting on this, writes,

> *"Aliens in appearance and habits, the chettyar was the butt of Burmese cartoonist, he was depicted as Public Enemy No. 1, and the violence of the mob was deliberately directed against him, a canalization, a projection of the people's own faults and failings on to a convenient victim."* (1946, p. 55)

The image in figure 2 is reproduced from Jonathan Saha's blog, a theorist of colonial Burma and South East Asian history. He shared this image, originally from the Burmese newspaper '*The Sun'* from its April, 1920 issue. Town Gossip was a weekly gossip column that featured a mouse, overhearing conversations between the local Burmese in the town, the humour emerging from the

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[11] The Anglo-Burmese wars were a series of battles that took place between the British East India Company and the ancient Burmese Kingdoms. The first Anglo-Burmese war was waged in the years 1824-26; it resulted in the annexation of Tennasserim and Arakan regions. The second Anglo-Burmese war took place in 1852 and led to the annexation of Pegu division and other parts of Lower Burma. The third war was waged in 1885 and led to the downfall of the Burmese Kingdom and the annexation of the whole of Burma by the British.

[12] The group was also referred to as *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burman Association) and used the term *Thakin* (literally translated to 'master', used as an honorific to refer to the British) subversively to refer to each other.

whimsical nature of these conversations. This cartoon strip is distinctive because unlike the usual case, the conversation being overheard happens to be between two cows. The cows are discussing the misfortunes suffered by animals who have to drag cartloads of weight. The second cow reminds the first of the far worse fate cows face at the hands of 'coringee kala'[13] who slaughter them. The cows' immediate fear is regarding the upcoming Burmese New Year Festivities where after being troubled by children spraying water on them and twisting their tales, they believe that they will be slaughtered in kala slaughterhouses. The cows eventually plan to make an escape to Buddhist monastery for protection (Saha, 2017).

Figure 2. From Thuriya (The Sun) reproduced from the blog 'Colonizing Animals' (Saha, 2017)

The piece seemingly innocent in its portrayal of the cows' gossip is illustrative of the ways in which racist anti-Indian sentiments were subtly invoked by the Burmese Press during the 1920s-30s to actively feed into the alienation of the indigenous Burmese. Saha (2017) analyzing this gossip column writes,

[13] A derogatory term for South Indian coolies and labouring classes in colonial Burma.

"The readers, implicitly defined as Burmese Buddhists, were invited to save the animals this Thingyan from the threats facing them of ill-treatment and eventual death; the latter a threat that was ultimately embodied in the Indian. Nation, race and religion were interwoven in this exhortation to Burmese Buddhists to treat animals humanely...there was a subtle invocation of the Burmese nation as Buddhist achieved, in part, through characterizing the foreigner, the "kalar"/Indian, as a threat. (Saha, 2017)

Figure 3. Shwe-ta-lay's cartoon published in 1930s, taken from Lewis (Cities in Motion, 2016)

Figure 3 depicting an illustration by the Burmese cartoonist Shwe-Te-Lay published in Lewis's book (Cities in Motion, 2016) is another example of the subtle ways in which anti-India sentiments were being propagated by the Burmese Press. At a time when Indians, especially the more affluent were despised by the Burmese for denying them their rightful economic opportunities, this cartoon shows the subservience of a poorer Indian to an affluent Burmese, set apart by his western jacket,

sunglasses and the cigarette he smokes. The Burmese man sitting on a chair seems to be getting his toe-nails clipped by the Manipuri manicurist. Commenting on this Lewis (2016) writes,

> *"Burmese resentment towards Indians was not only towards upper-class Gujaratis and Chettiars, but also towards dock-workers, lower caste 'coolies', and street-sweepers who took on jobs that Burmese refused to take. It was these groups who were responsible for making the city run, and also those who lived in the most abject poverty in crowded, unsanitary conditions.* (Lewis, 2016, p. 56)

There were multiple conflicts that erupted between the Indians and the Burmans starting from the latter half of 1920s. One of the first clashes erupted between Telugu dockworkers and the Burmese in 1930s.[14]. A few Indian dock workers were killed in the rioting while 25,000 took refuge in Indian schools and churches (Mahajani, 1960, p. 73).

Similarly in the 1930s an agrarian rebellion also emerged in Burma headed by a monk called Saya San. The Burmese cultivators distressed with the falling paddy prices and the increasing debts were instigated by Saya San to rebel against the British and restore the old Burmese kingdom. These uprisings termed as Saya San rebellion not only attacked the British but the Indian agriculturalists settled in rural areas became its inevitable target as well.

Egreteau (2013) states that the ancient kings of Burma were able to resist foreign occupation in part by the xenophobic attitudes they held against their neighbours. With the Saya San rebellion and the *Thakin* movement's rhetoric of *'Do-Bama'* these latent feelings resurfaced once again. Combined with colonial trauma, these feelings soon gave way to a strong indophobia[15] wherein the Chettiar money-lender and the Indian labour class became the 'other' which the Burmese had to get rid of alongside the British to establish their Burmese nation.

If there were reports of multiple clashes breaking out between the Indians labour and Burmese, at the macro level the representatives for a separate Burma were clashing with Indian delegates as well. The Burma Round Table Conference was held on November 1931- January 1932 in London on the question of Burma's separation from India. The Burmese representatives strongly pushed for a dominion status, while the Europeans and the Indians seemed to have joined their forces to safeguard their own business interests. The Burmese delegates complained that cheap Indian labour was responsible for edging out Burmese labour, a contention which was challenged by the Indian

[14] The Telugu dockworkers had called for a strike against low wages; on hearing this, the stevedores employed substitute Burmese labour in their place. However, as a somewhat agreeable deal was struck between the shipping companies and the workers, the Indians employees returned to work. Since the stevedores did not inform the Burmese about the new settlement, both the groups turned up for work leading to an eruption of violent clashes (Mahajani, 1960, p. 73).

[15] Egreteau (2011) employs this term to refer to the spread of anti-India feelings amongst the Burmese. He states, "expressions of 'indophobia' range from the spread of popular anti-Indian racist stereotypes within a society, prejudiced beliefs and derogatory terms insulting the Indian people targeted, to daily social segregation, racial state sponsored policies, riots and pogroms or even ethno-religious cleansing." (p. 34)

delegates (Mahajani, 1960, p. 76). By 1935 the Separation of Burma Act[16] was passed, however it took almost two years for the changes to come into effect, between this time a number of anti-India clashes erupted many times also involving the Chinese.

The worst sets of clashes were reported between July and September 1938. However unlike the instance of the past these clashes had overt anti-Muslim bias. Mahajani (1960) writes that a Burmese Muslim had written an imaginary dialogue between a Muslim and a Buddhist which included derogatory remarks towards Buddhism. As the Burmese press picked it up, meetings were convened amongst the *Pongyis* (Buddhist monks) and soon riots broke out between the Buddhists and the Muslims. As a number of Muslims also happened to be Indian immigrants, the attacks soon became a mass attack on Indians across religious lines. Chakravarti (1971) commenting on the riots writes,

> *"The total loss of lives and property were never exactly evaluated. July 26 to mid-September 1938 was a long period of horror for Indians all over Burma; thousands of violent crimes were committed for which no proper account could be maintained. The verified casualties included about 200 killed about 1000 injured but the unofficial figures of killed and wounded ran into several thousands. The loss of property ran into millions of rupees."* (1971, p. 158)[17]

As Burma became separate from India, a series of 'Burmanisation' measures were undertaken by the Government. One of the first measures was the restriction on immigration of Indians. It became mandatory to carry a passport or visa to enter the country, directly affecting a large proportion of the poor Indian labour employed. Similarly the government could impose a literacy test on them for certain kinds of permits. Cohabitation with a Burmese woman without prior approval could also be reason for cancellation of one's visa.

Furthermore, the Burma Tenancy Bill, 1939[18] and the Land Purchase Act, 1940[19] were particularly aimed at limited the hold of Chettiars over the agriculture and banking sector (Egreteau R. , 2011, p. 39). As restrictions on Indians' movement in Burma increased alongside the growing Burmese nationalism which often targeted Indian minorities, more and more Indians started to

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[16] Under the Separation of Burma Act of 1935, Burma was granted the status of a colony and was no longer classified as a province of British India. The act granted the Burmese the right to a fully elected nine member assembly. The act came into force in 1937, with Ba Maw serving as the first Prime Minister of the state.

[17] Egreteau (2011) quoting from other sources reports 204 dead, 1000 wounded and around 18 million loss of property. (p. 38)

[18] This bill sought to provide security to the tenants and a system of fair rent by giving priority to clearing off tenant's wages and crop loans prior to rent payments to the landlords. (Brown, 2013, p. 74)

[19] "*The Burma Land Purchase Bill*, empowered the government to buy out compulsorily from non-agricultural absentee landlords and distribute the land thus acquired among tillers of the soil." (Grover, 2000, p. 202)

emigrate from Burma and return to their natal villages. Egreteau (2011) states that the number of Burmese Indians between the 1940s and 1950s decreased to 700,000-800,000 (p. 40).

While many returned post the Second World War, the restrictions in the country made it difficult for them to stay. The post-independence governments of Burma all capitalized on the existing xenophobic rhetoric perhaps none more than the General Ne Win's dictatorial regime in the 1960s. Ne Win's launched a series of measures or what he termed as the 'Burmese way to Socialism' which involved a host of policy changes that openly targeted non-Burman minorities. Rent on land was abolished, Burmese peasants' rights over land were strengthened, both of which inevitably worked against the Chettiars. The government denied minority status to the Indian community and required a 'Burmese' citizenship for those who wished to stay. In the face of such hardships 300,000 foreigners left the country between 1962 till 1965, three quarter of these were Indians (Egreteau R. , 2011).[20] The only Indians who remained in Burma were the ones with no property or relations to return to.

Representation of Burmese Indians' Displacement in Indian Press

It is astounding to think that a community which once made up a significant part of the Burmese life, especially its economic system could in a span of a few decades be reduced to a meagre existence. As life in post-independence Burma became harsh for Indian minorities it became clear that repatriation was inevitable. Even though mass exodus of the Indian community began in the 1940s a number of Indians, wary of the charged communal climate repatriated in the 1930s.

One of the first families that emigrated out of Burma were a group of Chettiars following the riots of 1930s. *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* carried snippets of news about Indians who had repatriated to India following the indophobic riots. One of the pieces published immediately after the riots reported that 184 refugees with children had sailed for Madras. The news column further noted that "the refugees have been provided with the passage money only and the Chamber (Southern Indian Chamber of Commerce) has been requested to do all they could to help the refugees on arrival here" (Burma Refugees, 1938, p. 7) .

However, it is the lives of the Indian working class, especially those employed in subordinate and menial jobs like the 'Madrassi' coolies, Telugu dockworkers that is conspicuous by its absence. The question that remains then is - How did they subsist in the communally charged atmosphere and were they able to secure a safe passage for themselves back to India?

The story of the Burmese Indians' exodus is in itself silenced by the weight of other stories which ran parallel to it in time. A search through *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* scouting for news pieces related to anti-India rioting and the mass repatriation that followed confirmed this. For instance, reportage of the Burmese Indians population or Burma specific news in the 1938-39 papers was mostly relegated to a distant third, the prime position going to the international reportage of the

[20]Egreteau (2011) quotes the above figures so does Smith (1991); however Taylor (1987) identifies the figures as ranging between 125,000-300,000.

World War II and the second to India's independence movement. The opening pages and the accompanying pictures reflected the most dominant political event of that time with news of Hitler, Churchill and Stalin's political maneuvers outweighing everything else. The indophobic riots that took place from July-Aug 1938 were reported in their details only in the second week of August (G.S Bajpayee's Statement on Burma Riots, 1938) prior to which minor report of 'hooliganism and stray assault' were published.

Similarly, the exodus of Indians from Burma was only belatedly covered as the theater of war shifted to South East Asia with Japan's conquest of Malaya, Singapore and finally Burma in 1942. Even in the reportage, Burma and other European colonies formed the ground on which this dramatic tug of war between the Allies and Axis was being fought. The fact that millions of South Asian immigrant population was displaced and their houses bombed, was simply accepted as the unfortunate collateral damage of the World War.

Worst still was the racial discrimination which was meted out to the indigenous population as the imperial powers waged their wars. There were multiple reports of British officers, closing routes and securing ships for the passage of the British soldiers and their families for retreat from Burma. In figure 4 the news item illustrates how passes for leave weren't issued to Indian men in the name of women and children's safe evacuation even as there was numerous reports of senior British officials using their transport privileges to carry away their 'dinner sets' and 'pianos' (Ghosh, 2011, p. 2).

INDIANS IN BURMA

No Passes To Be Issued To Leave For India

RANGOON, Jan. 6.

A notice issued by the Agent to the Government of India in Burma states: "Until further notice no passes for Indians to leave for India will be issued."

Explaining his statement that until further notice no passes for Indians to leave Burma will be issued, Mr. Hutchings, Agent to the Government of India in Burma, says: "The Government of Burma recently instructed all shipping companies to suspend temporarily issue of deck passages tickets to male Indians in order to assist Government and shipping companies to make necessary exceptions in case of men travelling with parties of women, children and aged and infirm. I undertook to certify as many as possible of such persons for exemption. This led to my office being besieged by hundreds of persons of all classes demanding deck tickets for India. In order to terminate an undesirable and, in the circumstances, potentially dangerous situation I have now had with great regret to inform the Government of Burma that it is no longer possible for me to discharge my undertaking."

Enquiries made in New Delhi show that the restriction upon the sale of deck passages to male Indians other than those infirm or accompanying women and children is a temporary measure and that the Agent's inability to recommend all the exemptions sought does not imply that no Indian wishing to leave Burma will be able to do so. It is presumed that the potentially dangerous situation mentioned by the Agent refers to the assembly of large numbers of people in a vulnerable area of Rangoon.—(A.P.)

Minister to Iran, is suggested as the N. E. I. nominee.—(Reuter).

EVACUEES FROM RANGOON

ANOTHER BATCH OF 1,150 ARRIVE IN CHITTAGONG

CHITTAGONG, Jan. 6.

About 1,150 persons, including over 500 women, have arrived here from Burma by a ship which left Rangoon on December 30. The passengers from Rangoon are mostly women and children. Some people, who were walking to India from Burma are reported to have boarded the ship, on the way, at Kyankpu and Akyab.

The District Magistrate arranged with the Bengal and Assam Railway for a special train, which carried the passengers on embarkation at the outskirts of the town, free of charge, to Chittagong station, thus greatly facilitating their arrival at the town proper.—(A. P.)

Figure 4. From Amrita Bazaar Patrika (Indians in Burma, 1942)

The exploits of the warring armies didn't just acutely affect the foreign immigrant population in Burma but devastated Burmese lands and left its indigenous population internally displaced. As the British retreated from Burma they set fire to its oil refinery in a bid to stall the Japanese army; newspaper reports the British army observer as proudly stating, that "nothing of value to the Japanese was left in Rangoon by RAF[21]" (Rangoon Looked Like Dunkirk, 1942). In the same piece reproduced in figure 5 below, a British officer retreating from a blazing Burma has been quoted as comparing the destruction of Rangoon to Dunkirk.

[21] RAF refers to the Royal Air Force, the elite British air force.

A

RANGOON LOOKED LIKE DUNKIRK

BLAZED FURIOUSLY

How Scorched Earth Plan Was Carried Out

EAR-SPLITTING EXPLOSIONS

R. A. F. Attacks On Japanese Positions In Moulmein

MANDALAY, Mar. 12.

THE flames of Rangoon after the scorched earth plan had been carried out were visible forty miles away according to details which have now been received here.

BLAZED FURIOUSLY

The city blazed furiously and one officer said "it looked like Dunkirk." The elaborate scorched earth plan was put into effect by the military authorities after they had decided that the city, threatened by land and sea, was untenable.

EAR-SPLITTING EXPLOSIONS

Fuses were fired on Saturday afternoon by the demolition squads who had been held in readiness for the purpose. Ear-splitting explosions were heard and fires followed.

CIVIL INSTALLATIONS DESTROYED

Civil installations were destroyed including docks, ware houses, telephone, telegraph and wireless systems as well as power and light equipment.

The plan for the destruction of the big oil refinery at Syriam across the river from Rangoon was worked out by a man who saw the demolition work of the Russians in South Russia last year.

There has been no Army Headquarters communique from Burma to-day.

JAPANESE POSITIONS ATTACKED

A communique from the Royal Air Force Headquarters says that for the second day in succession British bombers yesterday heavily attacked enemy positions in Moulmein.

The Civil Defence communique, covering operations upto 6.00 A.M. to-day reports that there were a number of air raid warnings in several areas yesterday. No bombs were dropped by the raiders and no incident of any kind was reported.

NOTHING OF VALUE TO JAPANESE LEFT

Who Represent 45 Million Muslims?

MOMINS' CLAIM

Mr. Amery's Queer Reply In The Commons

LONDON, Mar. 12.

In the Commons to-day (Thursday), Mr. Sorensen (Labour) asked Mr. Amery whether he has considered the declaration of the All India Momin Conference at Delhi, its President and Vice-President, claiming to represent forty-five million Muslims, supporting the demand for immediate recognition of India's freedom and repudiating any claim by Mr. Jinnah and the Muslim League to possess the sole right to speak on behalf of Indian Mussalmans; whether he is aware that Mr. Fazlul Huq, the Premier of Bengal, and Mr. Allah Bux the Premier of Sind, have made similar declarations and whether he has any statement to make in view of this expression of Muslim conviction.

A similar question was put by Mr. Silverman and in reply Mr. Amery said: "I have received a telegram from the President of the All India Momin Conference in the sense stated. The Conference claims to speak on behalf of Momins, a Moslem community consisting chiefly of weavers and agricultural labourers and numbering from four to five millions and not 45 millions. Many Momins belong to the Muslim League. I have also seen a report of the resolutions passed at the end of February by the Board of the All India Azad Muslim Conference under the presidency of Mr. Allah Bux. Mr. Fazlul Huq is reported to have been present. This conference which has not previously met since 1940 is mostly supported by Muslims associated with the Congress. I am aware that Mr. Jinnah's leadership is not accepted by all Muslims but I have no reason to doubt that the Muslim League remains the principal organisation voicing Moslem political opinion".

Mr. Sorensen asked whether Mr. Amery would enquire into the alleged discrepancy as to the number. He said he had telegrams asserting that 45 million was correct figure and in view of that Mr. Sorensen asked whether Mr Amery would recognise that a large body of Muslims were by no means identified with Mr. Jinnah's policy. Mr. Amery replied that there was no discrepancy. Telegrams may have been mistaken.

FUTURE OF BURMA

Replying to Mr. Sorensen (Labour) who asked whether in any constitutional proposals relative to India he would announce similar proposals respecting Burma Mr. Amery replying

Figure 5. From Amrita Bazaar Patrika (Rangoon Looked Like Dunkirk, 1942)

After years of exploitation of indigenous resources, the racial subjugation that the indigenous communities faced by colonial powers reached its peak as their armies retreated from the lands, burning everything to the ground remorselessly as they had annexed these states. In fact the British pinned the blame for their defeat on the Burmese for not having supplied enough men to the army. Lt Col Hayworth of the British Army published a column in which he wrote, "The Burmese are to thank themselves for part of their misfortunes. From a population of seventeen million they supplied six battalions only for they do not take readily to military discipline" (Situation in Burma, 1942). He went on to call them a 'pleasure loving race', which was now bearing the brunt of their 'idleness'.

Even as the British government was trying to shift the blame on everyone else but themselves, it was the lives led at the lowest rung that were the most affected. Following the British destruction

upon retreat a large number of the indigenous population was internally displaced. Worse still was the fate of the indentured labour that had been shipped off to Burma, Malaya and other corners of the world, who were now left with no recourse. As the colonialists quietly made their exits from the warring lands, it was the same immigrant labour population that was rendered as mere statistics (and sometimes not even that) in the ravages of the war.

3. Silenced Events and their Spectres of Violence

The stories of Burmese Indians today may find even fewer sympathetic ears than some decades back however retelling and remembering their lives becomes all the more imperative as we see the state of modern Burmese politico-cultural landscape as well as the state of minority communities and refugees all over the world today. The Burmese Indians may have been forgotten by everyone, yet their spectre persists in contemporary times especially as we witness modern Burma's ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims and the government's aggressive Buddhist historiographic agenda. Burma's independence was not only from the British Colonial government but equally a 'de-Indianisation' of the state as well. Elaborating on this process Keck (2016) writes,

> *This process resulted not only in the expulsion of the vast majority of Indians from the country, but also put into place dynamics that almost certainly left distrust and antipathy in Myanmar towards many things that might be connected with India- especially British India. Separation from India required legal, political, social, cultural, economic and educational transformation. It would also produce a determined historiographic agenda to support many of these changes."* (Keck, 2016, p. 40)

Consequently the Indian Muslims who had earlier prospered under the British now began to witness a downfall; the Panthays, a Chinese Muslim community settled in Burma on the other hand continued to flourish, steadily getting assimilated into the fold of Burmese culture. In this complicated trajectory, it is the Rohingyas today who despite their rightful claim to a Rakhine heritage are denied any claim to citizenship due to the racial and ethnic similarity they share with Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims.

The Burmese have since long used the derogatory term *'kalas'* to refer to the Indian populations. Theorists have argued that the Burmese term *'kala'* which comes from *Pali* originally stood for anyone coming from outside by sea, *'ku'* representing crossing over sea and *'la'* meaning to arrive (Desai, 1952, pp. 37-38). Perhaps because of the parallel meaning of the term *'kala'* in Sanskrit that denoted 'black' and was used by Indians themselves that eventually *'kala'* with its racist, negative connotations became the pejorative term for Indians. The Chettiars, derogatorily called as *'chetty-kalas'* were caricatured the most in the Burmese political cartoons; even more despised however were '*Zerbadis*' who were children of Buddhist mothers and Indian (mostly Muslim) fathers.

By tracing the usage of the term *'kalas'* Egreteau (2011) illustrates how indophobic attitudes of the colonial and post-colonial era now seem to be making way for strong islamophobic attitudes, the term '*kala*' is now used for Muslims in general while the derogatory term *'kaw taw kala'* or 'too black' is reserved for Rohingya Muslims in particular in modern Burma today. The response

of the Burmese to the Rohingya minority is in fact reminiscent of the virulent xenophobia against the Indians.

Even as Indians were successfully ejected from the Burmese memory-scape, the Rohingyas it seems have come to represent the haunting spectre of Burma's silenced past. While the effects of global 'Islamophobia' have also been felt in Burma as well, yet it is particularly the Islam of the Rohingyas that seems to be a cause of vexation to the Buddhists Burmese rather than that of the other Muslim minorities in Burma like the Zerbadees (Burmese Muslims with mixed Buddhist and Muslim heritage) or the Panthays. The presence of Rohingyas becomes all the more eerie as they have always resisted the Burmese states' attempt at a singular national historiography and lay claim to their centuries old Arakense heritage. Keck (2016) succinctly capturing this writes,

> *"the Rohingyas are associated in the minds of many in Myanmar with Bengal (and more generally British India)…the fear of 'Islamization' represents something of a hangover from the battle that many Burmese felt compelled to fight not only against British colonial institutions, but the Indian influences which had accompanied it".* (Keck, 2016, p. 66)

I would like to conclude by saying that for us to truly comprehend the contemporary events of our time it is essential to also excavate histories that may seem as side-notes and dis-connected chapters in time for they challenge our ideas of 'crises' and its relationship to temporality. As we reflect on the inheritances of loss and the unsung tales of lives lost, it bears repeating that silenced histories rarely die out, instead like festering wounds they engender spectres of cyclical violence something we see happening in contemporary Burma today. If the Burmese Indians' exodus from Burma has been doubly eclipsed, the Rohingya Muslims' exodus from Burma is also doubly revealing. On the one hand, it reveals the hitherto silenced chapter of the Indians' exodus, on the other, it renders Burma's official historical narrativisation as defunct, a version promoted by the state in service of its mythical uniformly Buddhist past.

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