

**Review Essay****By Ritika Batabyal**

***Memory, Images, Imagination: An Anthology of Bangla and Oriya Writings on Colonial Burma (1886-1948)*. Eds. Jatindra Kumar Nayak and Parthasarathi Bhaumik. Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2010. Print.**

This book provides an enriching experience to the student of Comparative Literature especially to those who are interested to trace and understand a situation of contact between two cultures. The book is a collection of sixteen essays— nine from Bangla and seven from Oriya— which have been translated in to English. All the essays are on Burma (present day Myanmar) covering the period from 1886-1948. The essays date back to the colonial period and they offer an interesting picture of the land, customs and tradition of Burma and in the process it tries to “recreate” history drawing largely upon literary writings and personal letters. In this respect the book raises the question of whether to reckon literary pieces as ‘valid’ sources of history or not— a tantalizing question which is of primary interest to the scholars of Comparative Literature. It needs to be remembered that India especially the eastern part of the country like Bengal and Orissa and to some extent Tamil Nadu shared a long and strong relation with Burma and by translating the Bangla and Oriya writings the book makes a conscious effort to ‘reemphasize’ and ‘remind’ the readers of that relation between India and Burma. In short the book makes a sincere endeavour to map the historical relation that existed between India and Burma and the various ramifications within the colonial states by focusing on the Bengal-Burma and Orissa-Burma relations.

The relation between Bengal and Burma is a long one and during the colonial period this relation was given a 'new' dimension. The book provides an important glimpse of the society, customs, tradition, religion and the socio political engagement of Burma during the late 19th and early 20th century and how the colonial occupation in the Indian subcontinent had constructed a 'new' image of Burma— the land of gold and riches— the El Dorado where the people from Bengal and Orissa went in search of jobs and a better living.

The first essay originally written in Bangla, called "Burma" talks about the lifestyle and customs of the Salon 'tribe' who inhabit the islands in the coastal region of Mergui district. This essay is important in the sense that it tells us about the Salon people about whom probably much is not known by us. The second essay by Kumudnath Lahiri also draws our attention to the ways in which New Year Festival is celebrated in Burma. This essay gives the readers an insight into the custom of the "poye" or festivals among the Burmese. Both these essays are important from their informational values. In the lecture delivered by Sri Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, which has been translated here, Sri Chattopadhyay exhorts about the necessity to preserve the 'Bengaliness' within the culture of Burma since the etymology of various place-names in Burma show a deep-rooted connection with India in general and Bengal in particular. He ends by saying that the time has come to make a conscious effort to keep the Bengal-Burma alive within the culture of Burma. Another essay which would obviously draw the attention of the readers is called "The Burmese Women". It talks about the high level of education among the Burmese women and highlights their independence and love for work. The writer is of the view that Burmese women stands in a much better position than the women in India, Turkey and Persia. Another important article which the book has anthologized is that of Subhash Chandra Bose's letter to Dilip Kumar Roy written in 1925. The letter written by Bose in the Mandalay Jail not only provides us with the socio-political

condition of the country but it also talks of the rich heritage of folk music and dance of Burma. The selection from the essay of Ramnath Biswas delineates an interesting point when the writer says leaving the Chinese of Margui-Tevoi the town looked like an Indian one due to the presence of many Indians. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani's essay "A Voyage to Burma" would surely draw the attention of the readers. Here, Sarala Devi makes an important observation about the fact that the Burmese people have been successful in keeping alive their 'native' Burmese culture amidst the presence of many heterogeneous cultures. She points out that indigenous Bengaliness cannot be found within the cosmopolitan culture of Bengal. She also makes an important statement in the essay about the dwindling relationship between Indian and Burma. She says that due to the political and economic conflicts Burma is becoming oblivious of their civilizational indebtedness to India. "In the Land of the Pagodas" by Swami Tyagiswarananda gives us a meaningful picture of the land, food habits, customs and festivals of Brahmadesh and its population. The writer in the beginning of this travel narrative criticizes our age-old prejudice about Burma as a land of anarchy and he clarifies that he did not witness anything of the likes.

The essays translated from Oriya to English also give us the socio-political picture of Burma and many of the articles show how the Oriyas were mistreated in Burma, how their hopes of finding a better home was shattered once they found themselves face to face with the 'new' reality of Burma. Here the essay written by Kalandi Charan Panigrahi can be mentioned. This essay delineates the experience of Sujan Das in Burma. It talks about the ways in which Sujan Das was treated in this land. It also brings home the point that how people from Orissa went to Burma in search of making money. The article by Mayadhar Singh is a memoir of a soldier during the Second World War. It also evinces the way in which the Oriyas were humiliated and abused in Burma. We thus see that the book tries to unfold the relation that existed between India and Burma and the point of contact was primarily through the two eastern

provinces, Bengal and Orissa. In this process the book has also tapped into the relation between Bengal and Orissa as the travel route from Orissa to Burma was through Bengal. This meant that the Oriyas travelling to Burma had to come in contact with Bengal.

The book as already stated is a translation of writings from Bangla and Oriya to English. It needs to be stated that the translations are lucid and they try to give an essence of the writings in original. Often the words of the source language have been kept to give the flavour of the original language. In conclusion it needs to be said that the book has been able to unveil an interest in mapping the relation between India and Burma. The book is important from the comparative literary perspective as it makes an honest attempt to understand our engagement with history and trace the relation between India and Burma. It tries to map cultures in contact but this mapping has been a one-sided affair. As the editors have said the dialogue between the two countries will be successful only when we get to know about the Burmese perspective on the Indians.

### **About the Reviewers**

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