

**Forgettable Homecoming: Bengali Writings on Indian Exodus from Burma****Parthasarathi Bhaumik<sup>1</sup>****I**

As a literary motif, 'homecoming' constitutes a recurrent theme in literature across cultures, usually marking a much desired telos to a narrative of journey. In fact, in many respects, 'journey' is often implied as some sort of homecoming, its ultimate destination. The journey of Odysseus in *Odyssey* and the journey of Rāma in *Ramayana* ('Ramayana' literally means 'the journey of Rāma') converge on this motif that, notwithstanding their heroic exploits and frantic actions elsewhere, both these ancient epics, at the end, are about homecoming. In travelogues, fairy tales, romances, biographies the theme of 'home' and a subsequent urge to find it are inextricably woven, though their manifestation may not be always explicit. In most of the cases, it is regarded as an 'achievement', a befitting cause for celebration, a marker of the protagonist's 'success', though the idea of 'home' may remain ever elusive and very difficult to pin down. In Indian subcontinent, the idea of 'home' and the possibility or impossibility of finding it took a new meaning when in India was divided in 1947, and this partition initiated one of the largest forced displacements of people across border. According to rough estimation, 14 million people lost their home either in India or in newly formed Pakistan and became refugee overnight. For overwhelming majority of these people, there was no home waiting for them on the other side of the border for which they had made their journey wading through unprecedented violence and terrible communal riots. The displacement and concomitant human tragedy of the Partition of 1947 were represented in literature, numerous films, plays; academic, political, and historical analyses of this event are still relevant and imperative as the effect of the Partition on the lives of the people of the Indian subcontinent continues to be a defining factor almost in every respect and in substantial number of cultural sites. But the enormous displacement of Indians did not start with the Partition of 1947, it had started earlier in 1942, when over 4,00,000 Indians residing in Burma permanently, became homeless apparently because of the Japanese attack on the

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country, endured one of the most difficult journey through treacherous Burmese terrains to reach India.

Though the Indian immigration to Burma was an ancient phenomenon, but the colonial rule in Burma (1886-1948) saw an unprecedented rise in Indian population all over the country. In fact the colonial enterprises encouraged Indian migration for various economic and political reasons. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British realized the commercial potentiality of Burma as a rice producing country whose agricultural produce could be exported to Europe. It necessitated the increase of acreage of paddy field which could not be done only with Burmese labour. So the administration decided to import Indian labour and encouraged unabated Indian migration to Burma by taking different administrative measures including subsidy in ship fares, and financial incentives to labour contractors. This policy worked as it resulted into increase in the acreage of agricultural land mostly done by Indian labours from Bengal and southern provinces.<sup>2</sup>

This colonial strategy of bringing Indian labour to Burma soon had its manifestation in the changed demography of the country where Indians emerged as one of the major contributors to Burmese population. Not only for agrarian sectors, Indians were brought for administration and commercial sectors like oil and teak industries. The following statistics would reveal increasing influx of Indians to Burma:

(INDIAN POPULATION IN BURMA)

Census	Total Population	Indian Population	Indian Percentage
1872	2,747,148	1,36,504	4.9
1881	3,736,771	2,43,123	6.5
1891	8,098,014	4,20,830	5.1

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Interim Report of the Rice Enquiry Committee, Rangoon, 1938*, the quantum of paddy field in Burma in the years 1852-53 was 600,000 acres, but within fifty years it turned out to be 6,712,719 acres in 1902-03. The increase was unprecedented 1,019%. (Mahajani 5)

1901	10,490,624	5,68,263	5.4
1911	12,115,217	7,43,288	6.1
1921	13,212,192	8,87,077	6.7
1931	14,667,146	1,017,825	6.9

Source: *Report on Indian Immigration, 1941*

Bengalis who had knowledge in English and experience in working with colonial administration found it relatively easy to get employment in latter two sectors. Subsequently, the Bengali population in Burma also increased in following manner.

(BENGALI POPULATION IN BURMA)<sup>3</sup>

YEAR OF CENSUS	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	TOTAL POPULATION OF BURMA	PERCENTAGE OF BENGALI POPULATION
1901	N/A	N/A	2,04,973	10,490,624	1.95
1911	2,48,310	2,04,973	4,53,283	12,115,217	3.74
1921	1,95,941	1,05,098	3,01,039	13,212,192	2.27
1931	2,42,415	1,34,579	3,76,994	14,667,146	2.57

Source: Census of India, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931

The Indians began to have a substantial share in national income, and that was often achieved at the cost of Burmese economic opportunities. It aggravated Burmese discontent and bred anti-Indian feelings among the Burmese. With the rise of Burmese nationalism in

<sup>3</sup> Bengali population is assumed from the number of people who returned 'Bengali' as their language. The corresponding census reports do not mention such equation.

the second decade of the twentieth century, the Burmese people began to protest against the artificially manipulated merging of Burma into India after the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1886. Gradually there grew a consensus among the Burmese people to separate Burma from India as they realized that they were subjugated not only to a British colonial authority but also to India and both these countries had different cultures and history. Though, there is no denying the fact Burma had an ancient cultural relation with India through Buddhism and especially with Bengal as Buddhism and Pali language went to Burma from Bengal. The Burmese nationalist leaders like Aung San drew inspiration from the nationalist movements in India. But the separation of Burma from India was inevitable. Desai in his book *India and Burma: A Study*, puts it rhetorically: “Although the British have drunk deeply of Hellenic and Roman culture, Britons are neither Greeks nor Romans. So likewise, though the Burmese people have India as their great source of inspiration, Burmese nationalism has always stood distinct from Indian nationalism. Burmese are not Indians. The artificial union of Burma with India did not alter this historical fact” (Desai 53-54). That separation came in 1937 when Burma was declared officially a separate country, and its administration would henceforth no longer be monitored from India. But the growing discontent among the Burmese people against the immigrant Indians culminated into a worst riot during this time and many hapless poor Indian labours were killed. This riot started exodus of Indians from Burma, and it marked the beginning of the end of Indian life in Burma.

The last decade of Indian life in Burma was marked by the World War II which spread over entire Burma, and subsequent Japanese occupation of the country brought forth a complete change in socio-political and cultural conditions that were too difficult for the Indians to negotiate. The Indian life in Burma had been becoming increasingly difficult since 1930s, and it reached its culmination during the World War II. The defeat of the Allied army at different locations of East and South-East Asia like Singapore, Malay, Siam, and Burma exposed the vulnerability of the erstwhile invincible British Empire. The British colonial systems which had so far been sustaining the Indian settlements in Burma began to crumble down. Burma was attacked on January 12, 1942, when Japanese troops struck from south-eastern Thailand and seized the Burmese seaport Tavoy, and Japan began airstrike on different cities and towns, many of which were the places of Indian habitations. The Japanese attack on Burma was sudden and beyond speculation. Both the colonial administration and

Indian civilians never anticipated that Burma might be attacked by the Japanese. Till the mid-December, 1941, Burma was held to be a safe place amidst the violence all over the world during the World War II. An old music hall song, popular among the Europeans in Burma, caught this mood of complacency:

Where was I when the war was on? I can hear a faint voice murmur

Where was I when the war was on? In the safest place-in Burma. (Leigh 7)

This 'safest' place started to turn into a volatile one once Japanese Lieutenant General Shojiro Iida's XV Army crossed the Thai frontier into Burma. The Japanese war planes began to attack targets in Lower Burma from the end of December 1941, and by February 1942 the British air defence succumbed completely to the Japanese attacks. On 23 and 25 December 1941 Rangoon was heavily bombarded, and the air raids on this important city continued day after day for weeks. The effect was devastating; it not only destroyed the city but also demoralized the civilians and the government officials. Rangoon, incidentally, was the most favourite place for the Bengalis to live. Japanese bombing spread panic among the people of the city, and they started to leave the city to survive. With the Japanese at heel, the people started to move northwards as the Japanese were progressing from south. Two northern cities, Mandalay and Maymyo, were still then untouched by the Japanese bombers. A significant number of Bengalis also were living in these two cities. The evacuees from the south began to gather in these cities for safety. But the last bastions also fell on 3 April 1942 when Japanese planes bombed Mandalay, and then Maymyo. Even other small cities were not spared from Japanese air raids. The British High Command on 25 April 1942 decided to leave Burma and ordered full scale military retreat. It prompted the scared Indians to leave Burma in a desperate attempt to save themselves from Japanese bombing. The Indian exodus from Burma began, and the painful accounts of such difficult journeys became a part of Bengali memory. A number of Bangla narratives were composed by the Bengali 'Evacuees' who braved the most difficult terrains to reach home.

## II

Along with British military debacles in this region, thousands of refugees began to leave Burma for India. Initially they took sea routes to Calcutta or Chittagong from the Port of

Rangoon. But the Port was declared closed at the end of February 1942. It forced many evacuees to take the hazardous land route via the Taungup Pass to Akyab then on to India by sea. But this route was also closed by the beginning of March 1942. There was another route to follow either by train or by riverboat up the Irrawady to Myitkyina. But when train and boats became unavailable, the evacuees took a treacherous route along the Chindwin Valley to Imphal and onto Dimapur (Leigh 9-10).

The majority of these evacuees were Indians, though the exact number is hard to know. Census reports might have been a great help, but unfortunately all the data for the 1941 Burma Census was destroyed completely in Japanese bombing. From different other sources, Leigh 'guesstimates' that about 3,66,000 civilian evacuees left Burma in 1942 and of these about 3,50,000 (96%) were Indians (Leigh 53). It is now impossible to get any number about Bengali evacuees from any sources. The *Register of Evacuees from Burma* has a record of only 25,559 Indian evacuees. Bengali names spill over across its pages, and one may come across a number of Bhattacharji, Chakravarty, Chandra, Chaudhury, Das, Dutt, Ganguly, Ghosh, Nath (Leigh 54). There were also Muslim names, and one can assume that many of them were from Bengal. Had there been the census report of 1941 available, there might have been some idea about the number of Bengali evacuees. Similarly how many evacuees died on their way to India remains unanswered as there is no authentic document available. But it is not hard to guess that all those who were forced to take land route through north Burma had to endure very hostile conditions including dangerous hill terrains and very ill-managed or non-existing evacuation plan of the administration. In 1942, the administration claimed that about a half-a-million evacuees had escaped to India in that year, and about 80,000 died on the way. But these figures are unreliable and 'had been plucked out of the air for propaganda purpose' (Leigh 23). The purpose of these figures were to prove that out of such a large movement only a small percentage died on the way, which, in a way, would prove efficiency of the administration. Though 80,000, by no means, a small number, but the actual number of death on the way probably much surpassed that figure.

Behind all these debates about number and elusive statistics lied an unfathomable human misery of people who were forced to leave everything they had earned over years of hard labour, and endured an inhuman journey along one of the most dangerous terrains of Asia. Between January and May 1942 Indian evacuees started to leave Burma in large groups



by road, rail, sea, and very few fortunate on air. They crowded the road and became constant irritants to the army officials as they found it difficult to make military movements through roads congested with Indian evacuees trudging along with their belongings. Leigh described Indian evacuees: 'They slogged along congested roads, struggled with hunger, thirst and disease and slept in filthy camps. Their memories were of congestion, crowds, noise, laden ox carts, lorries and pedestrians moving slowly along in the same direction...nobody directed the Indians to depart, no organization assisted them on the way, and when they arrived at their destination, nobody wanted them to stay' (Leigh 53). Their account of plight is still unknown, and the world knows that those who had survived this ordeal chose to remain silent. There is a significant body of writing about the mass exodus during the Partition of 1947, and this is regarded as one of the most shameful tragedies that has ever enacted in this subcontinent. But the Indian exodus from Burma remains a silent chapter in history. This has intrigued many scholars including Leigh:

Here is the mystery. Lower-class coolies, sweepers, peons and dhobis can be excused. They were illiterate and ill equipped to write or speak about their experiences. They kept no diaries, wrote no letters and left no memoirs over which historians and journalists could pore. However, this does not explain why well-educated Indian evacuees - and there were many of them - chose not to write about their experiences. Yet even today Indian survivors and their descendants are reluctant to speak about the events of 1947. Perhaps trauma begets amnesia. (Leigh 54)

Leigh's references to wilful 'amnesia' and reluctance to talk about a traumatic past in relation to Indian evacuees of Burma are comparable to 'silences' of the Partition. Urvashi Butalia, a Partition scholar who worked with oral narratives and memories of the people who witnessed the horrific events of the Partition experienced the same difficulty: to break their silences:

One of the commonest responses I encountered when I began work was people's (initial) reluctance to speak. What, they asked me, is the use of remembering, of excavating memories we have put behind us? Every time I was faced with this question, I came up with a question of my own: why, I wondered, were people so reluctant to remember this time? Surely this reluctance in itself pointed to

something? Was it only to do with the horrific nature of events-- sanitized into numbers and statistics in the pages of history books-- or was it to do, at least in some instances, with people's own complicity in this history? (Butalia 10-11)

The Indian exodus from Burma and the subsequent trauma are not much visible in history in the way Partition is, so the issue of the 'complicity in history' does not bear much credence here. The Partition was more spectacular in a way that lots of photographs and documents are available, historians, scholars, researchers, poets, novelists, writers, film-makers represented this event from all possible perspectives and in all possible means. It proved to be a source of great creative excitement. In comparison, the 'partition' of Burma from India in 1937 and the trauma of Indian exodus from Burma in 1942 did not attract much critical and creative attention. There might be several socio-political reasons for its under-representation, but one thing is certain that the trauma of exodus of 1942 has been overshadowed by all-pervasive tragedy of the Partition in 1947.

However, Leigh's complaint about the absolute dearth of cultural materials, texts; both written and spoken is not all true, as there exists some memoirs, stories and other writings. Leigh could not find them because they are all in Indian languages like Bangla, and they have not yet been translated in any European language. Though compared to the quantum of accounts of the European exodus, Bangla writings are less in number, but the latter represented tales of inhuman efforts for survival of faceless unprivileged mass who far exceeded the Europeans not only in number but also in the intensity of their suffering.

### III

Unlike the Indian evacuees, European and Anglo-Indian evacuees were given special privileges for evacuation. For instance, while the ratio of Indians and Europeans in Burma in 1941 was probably 130:1 (Leigh 18), but the latter, for colonial reasons, were more important than the others. So they were given privileges in evacuation by air. From airport documents, we come to know that exactly 3,863 Europeans, 2,869 Anglo-Indians, 548 Anglo-Burmans (altogether 7280), 4,801 Indians and 126 Burmans were flown to India (Leigh 25). On the road too, it was alleged that comparatively less difficult paths were exclusively reserved for European and Anglo-Indian evacuees, though the colonial authority never admitted officially



this discrimination but many Bengali evacuees mentioned that they did face such discrimination.

It is clear from different documents that there was well-charted plan for European and Anglo-Indians leaving Burma for India, a privilege the other evacuees were deprived of. Though, there was no official declaration that such privileges were exclusively for certain communities, but the very nature of instructions made it clear that other common men, namely the Indian labourers, coolies were not the target of such instructions. For instance, a Government Order entitled, 'Information & Instructions for Evacuation under the Government Civil Scheme' released by the Civil Evacuation Office, Maymyo on 25 February 1942, among many other instructions, made it specifically clear that 'acquit yourself of... your servants', and there would be provisions for 'rest camps', and 'medical comforts'. Evacuees were also instructed 'to pack sandwiches', and the 'journeys will be made at Govt. expense to final destination in India' ('Information & Instructions'). Not a single narrative of any Bengali evacuee mentioned that such privileges were ever extended to Indians.

The Europeans, who lived in Burma and left it on emergency during 1941-42, were chiefly administrators and military officials. During the World War II, Americans also came to fight for the Allied Front against the Japanese. So there are accounts of American soldiers as well. The reason for their retreat was that during this time the British army faced major setback against the Japanese army, and under tremendous Japanese air and land strikes from the south, they retreated towards North Burma, and then finally to India.

The European evacuees, in numerous narratives, were portrayed often with tinge of romance and heroics. Their tragedy became a great feat of achievement and a proof of their undaunted spirit. In comparison, Indian evacuees were portrayed, according to Leigh, as 'faceless, anonymous numbers of amorphous crowds. They rarely emerge as individuals with personalities. One newspaperman at the time described them as "unending streams of human war waste, sandwiched between armies of friends and foe."' (Leigh 54). The European narratives of exodus were heroic as there was some destination waiting for them at its end. There was also a sense of honour and national acclamation even in defeat. But for the Indians, it was a 'home'- coming as one 'defeated', and in many of the cases, there was no 'home' either.

To understand this ‘representations’ of the European evacuees, let us take a diary of one Ralph Tanner, a Second Lieutenant of the Second Battalion of the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, who was commissioned in Burma on August 1941, and after series of disasters on the warfront came to India at the end of May 1942. Tanner wrote his diary within twelve months after his arrival in India. His diary was published as a book entitled *Burma 1942: Memories of Retreat*. This book has an ‘Overview’ containing two sections: ‘The British political and military position in Burma 1941’ and ‘A military biography of Capt. R.E.S. Tanner’. Its ‘Chapter 1’ (‘The Past is a Foreign Country’) is also a de-facto long introduction which not only delayed the reader’s arrival at the diary, but also creates an ambience for the reception of the diary. Such elaborate preliminaries seem to be imperative as it would set conditions for reading this account of European evacuation. In addition, there are five appendices containing ‘documents’ like the map that Tanner kept with himself during the war etcetera. Incorporating such ‘documents’ was intended to give historical credence to the narrative.

The long introduction endeavours to present this retreat of a European as an act of great heroism, a personal achievement which would survive in personal memory though may be forgotten in grand discourses of history. For instance, the incident of losing two of his comrades, whose names have gone into oblivion, has been described with Shakespearian expression: “Shakespeare makes the point in *Henry V*, in the famous speech before Agincourt: ‘Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, but he’ll remember with advantages what feats he did that day.’” (Tanner, Chapter 1). Leigh argues, “Through the prism of history, European evacuees have thus portrayed as idiosyncratic, tragic, sad, noble, defeated, strong, pathetic, romantic and dashing, depending on one’s point of view. On the other hand, Indian evacuees are portrayed as faceless, anonymous members of amorphous crowds. They rarely emerge as individuals with personalities... Perhaps, Indians were victims of media presentation rather than Japanese aggression” (Leigh 54). Leigh’s argument in such comparative statement represents the western perception of the event, and by ‘media’ he, in all probability, meant the western media. From existing Bangla discourses on the evacuation and the personal memoirs, it is obvious that the Indian evacuees were not always ‘faceless, anonymous members of amorphous crowds’, and they failed to ‘emerge as individuals with personalities’, on the contrary, Bengali men, and more importantly, Bengali women wrote

accounts of their personal experiences of evacuation. Their narratives put forth amply their personal perspectives with strong individual opinion. Unlike the accounts of the European evacuees, Bengali narratives did not bear the obligation to be merged into grand nationalist discourse; they remain as small narratives of personalised experiences with individual and familial weal and woe.

The Anglo-Burmese Library dedicated a page in their official website which contains, among archival documents of the Evacuation of 1942, some narratives of Europeans or Europe-origins who left Burma in that year, and the page, published in 2009, is named 'Trek Out of Burma 1942'.<sup>4</sup> In one of such personal memoirs of one Phyllis Lattimer, it seems clear that the European evacuation was comparatively a matter of lesser struggle than their Indian counterparts, and they could afford to look back at it with amusement while writing a memoir. He writes:

Now, we are able to look back on, laugh at, and enjoy many of the incidents of that hurried flight over the Burma border to India and safety. But at that time it was indeed no laughing matter. But our experiences were mild in comparison with those poor unfortunates, many of them through no fault of their own, were left to walk, as best they could, into India. For the most part of their story is a tragedy which will never be told and could certainly never be a matter for reflective laughter or enjoyment, and we have learnt to be thankful for the comparative comfort in which we travelled and to realise how lucky we were.  
(Lattimer)

When the personal memoir becomes a collective memoir it is bound to take the shape that could be comprehended and accepted collectively. The use of 'we' in Lattimer's narrative puts forth certain collective perspectives. In fact, any memory when reproduced or represented through certain tangible and aesthetic forms like literature (biography, memoir etc.) incorporates certain ideology, common ideas of interest. Susan Sontag commented, 'All memory is individual, unreproducible -- it dies with each person. What is called collective

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<sup>4</sup> *Trek Out of Burma*. The Anglo-Burmese Library, 2009. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.  
<<http://www.angloburmeselibrary.com/trek-out-of-burma-1942.html>>

memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened' (Sontag 85-86) Every community has its own 'stipulation' and 'selection' of significance, and on this issue the Bengali narratives of evacuation differed from those of Europeans.

The majority of Bengali narratives of evacuation, though written later, were about the events of 1942 because the largest migration/ evacuation of the Indian population from Burma took place in this year. The Indians left Burma through different routes: for example, Rangoon- Calcutta sea-route, Rangoon- Chittagong sea-route, overland route via Taungup Pass to Akiyab then on to India by sea. But when the war got intensified and Japanese forces began to take control of the situations and places, sea routes were closed and Indian refugees were being funnelled to Myitkyina, Chindwin valley to Imphal. The most difficult journey was a fifty kilometres stretch from Tamu to India where the refugees had to cross on foot the mountains which loomed high and the forest stretch which was unbroken. It was the last route, the most perilous one, which feature in most of the Bangla narratives.

Hugh Tinker called this Indian evacuation 'a forgotten long march' as it was hushed up in history and went unnoticed under much flaunted military history. Moreover, the struggle and death of Indian evacuees, on the hilly tract have gone into oblivion from collective memory and ignored in official documents. This last stretch, which could be called death tract, did claim lives, the number of which was never properly counted. All government promises were proved hollow as Indian evacuees arrived at this tract. They knew that from there they needed to make 'a supreme effort' to struggle through to safety. The situation worsened for the evacuees once the British troops arrived in this place on their retreating journey to India. They 'pushed the refugees aside, laying hands on all supplies, and utilizing all available military transport' (Tinker, 10). Hapless and wearied Indian refugees, without any medical aid, suffered heavily during their journey as epidemic diseases began to take toll on them. Use of contaminated water from common sources, and poor sanitation conditions at different camps along with anopheles mosquitos infested jungles quickly spread cholera and malaria which resulted into a substantial number of deaths. In the narratives of Bengali evacuees, there are descriptions of how they waded through the treacherous hilly tract strewn with fresh and decomposed dead bodies of their fellow compatriots. The personal struggle

became a part of greater communitarian ordeal where the line between personal and communitarian often got blurred.

Becoming refugee was always a sudden process, and there had been hardly any time for acclimatization with such violent rupture. One became refugee overnight and had to leave his/her familiar life for an uncertain one and that too through great ordeal. Writing about that ordeal long after the event, in a relatively more secured situation, would invite the memory not only of the ordeal but also of the life before the catastrophe. In most of the cases, it happened to be a life of blissful happiness, which would create a sharp contrast with the pain and uncertainty of evacuee life. Tragedy seemed unbearable when the erstwhile life made a sharper contrast with the pathetic agony of the present time. So the Bengali narratives of evacuation often put forth pre-war happy serene Bengali life in Burma.

*Ujān Srote* (Sailing Upstream) is a memoir of Nilima Dutta who was born in Rangoon in 1929. She spent her childhood in Memyo, the summer capital of the British administration in Burma. She had to leave Memyo, a place of extraordinary scenic beauty coupled with peaceful serene life, in 1942, when she was only 13. She recalled her life in Memyo before the War as one blessed with happiness, peace, and love:

Our childhood in Memyo was much like its uncontrollable stream on Chichang Hill, which was called Laughing Water. Our days flowed on with much ease and happiness. We were being brought up with lot of affection of our parents in the lap of a beautiful nature. ... Our father used to take us to the lake for a walk. We, two sisters, went with him wearing colourful fur coats which had fur-made squirrels in place of collars. The faces of the squirrels were nicely made of china-clay. The lake was surrounded by rows of pine, oak, beleric, and many unknown giant trees. There were small hedges at the feet of all these big trees glowing with yellow blossoms. The lake water rippled when the gentle evening wind touched it. (*Ujān Srote*, 18)

The Bengali life in this small hill station of Memyo went on unperturbed with its 'Bengali Vernacular School', Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja and other Bengali festivities. All Bengali families had enjoyed *bonhomie* among them, and participated every Bengali occasion happily. But this happiness soon ended, 'When our childhood days were sailing by

unburdened like autumn clouds with unblemished happiness, there came the World War, and it pounced on us like a ferocious monster'. (*Ujān Srote*, 23)

Beauty and serenity of nature in Burma, which made childhood days of Nilima Dutta a blissful experience to be contrasted with imminent ordeal of sudden evacuation, also appear in the evacuation narrative of another Bengali woman writer Manasi Mukhopadhyay in her book *Bidāy Burma* (Farewell to Burma). Unlike Nilima Dutta, Manasi left Burma much at an advance age when she was the mother of two daughters. Accompanied by her husband and daughters, Manasi took the most difficult mountainous route of Tamu which claimed lives of thousands of evacuees. Amidst the horror of the journey and constant mortal fear, Manasi was mesmerized by the beauty of this lonesome part of Burma. Her book is as much about the ugly ordeal of human crisis as it is about the beautiful Burmese nature en route. Annadashankar Ray, in the 'Introduction' of *Bidāy Burma* commented, 'The beauty of nature could make one forget his ordeal only for a day or two. But she [Manasi] remained engrossed into nature days after days, nights after nights. It had sustained her though her health was failing and the journey was a perilous one. ... That nature helps man to survive is a certain truth. This book makes us forget the ugliness of life's drudgery, and we take a dip into the beauty of nature to purge ourselves of all the blemishes of life' (*Bidāy Burm*, 2). It is interesting to note that what could have been a book full of sordid details of a refugee family's perilous journey, turns out, ultimately, to be a nature book.

Climbing up a stiff mountain path was one of the most difficult parts of the journey, and for Manasi it was almost an impossible task as she was ill. But once she got an opportunity to take a little bit rest under the shade of a bamboo grove she noticed:

At our back there was a high mountain surrounded by bamboo groves, and in front of us there was a riot of green stretching towards the horizon. It seemed as if a green carpet covered the entire world. The sun was now at the mid-sky, and its bright rays falling over the mountains like a stream. The blue of the sky was so deep it often appeared dark. Nestled on this deep azure, the white clouds seemed like bouquet of flowers... We had lost everything, and we could only blame our fate for that, but we were fortunate too. Would we ever come to this place, as we did today, to see the



beauty and serenity of nature here? It was our great attainment in life though we were suffering enormously'. (*Bidāy Burma*, 126-127)

Evacuation march gave Bengali women an opportunity to undertake an 'adventurous' journey otherwise impossible to them. A sense of freedom, and a close physical proximity with untamed wild Burmese nature often compensated their loss of erstwhile happy and secured life at home. On an uncertain and dangerous boat journey upstream against sharp currents of Chindwin River, Nilima Dutta saw from her small *dinghy* the dark night in the wilderness:

With a great wonder I began to observe that the feeble light of our *dinghy* was trembling on the dark water of the river. I saw the jungle closing on us, and often a hint of light from some human habitat far away. The sky above us was dark studded with twinkling stars. At that moment I did not feel any fear or anxiety. Even the uncertainty of reaching a home, and our peacefully secured life that we had left behind for this uncertain journey could not sadden me. Only a sense of overwhelming awe and a silent rupture stood out to send all my fear to repose. (*Ujān Srote*, 26)<sup>5</sup>

The abundance of Burmese nature and its calming effect on departing desperate Bengali evacuees is one of the major features of Bangla evacuation narratives, and this feature is particularly conspicuous in women's narratives. In comparison, Bengali men's narratives are prosaic, more inclined to describing the difficulty of the journey and contemporary political situations.

One of the earliest written Bangla narratives of evacuation, written within two years of the event, was a memoir *Bomār Bhoje Burma Tyāg* (Leaving Burma in Fear of Bomb) by Manoranjan Chakraborty. This book is illustrated mostly with hand-drawn illustrations depicting scenes of action and violence along with a family photograph of the author. The illustrations give the book an appearance that of many contemporary Bangla thrillers, which might be a marketing strategy of the publisher/ seller (though the name of the publisher and publishing detail could not be retrieved). Nevertheless, it is a personal memoir of one who

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mention here that Nilima Dutta became refugee twice in her life. She had to leave her home, for the second time in 1946 when Hindu-Muslim riot forced her to be a refugee, once again, from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and came to Calcutta. She had to leave many years of her life in a refugee colony near Calcutta.

tried to save his family of nine members including a child who was only fifteen days old. The anxiety of a husband to bring his wife and children safely to his native home at Faridpur is the theme of the book which is apparent from the dedicatory verse of the author. The verse was dedicated to his wife 'Renu', it recalled their struggle through all adverse situations to keep their children away from violence<sup>6</sup>.

This verse was, perhaps, true for all Bengali men who wanted to take their families safely to India from war-ridden Burma.

The book, notwithstanding its sentimental dedicatory verse, was illustrated, as mentioned earlier, to make it appear more as a thriller than a personal memoir. The narrative, too, was manipulated with the same objective in mind, often broken with sensational subtitles given in bold letters with glyphs (what we nowadays understand as 'Bullets'). Besides, it has often diary-like entries with exact date of the event. For instance, the very first chapter entitled 'Siren' starts with bold and 'bulleted' subtitle '23 December (1941)' which would describe a sudden blow of siren alerting people of Rangoon about a possible Japanese air raid. Along with the matter-of-factness of such 'diary entries', catchy and sensational subtitles, like 'With the dead' (মৃতের পাশে), 'Death-Run' (মরণ-দৌড়), 'Roar of the Bomb'

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<sup>6</sup> 'মনে পড়ে দিনগুলি দুঃস্বপ্নের মত  
সভয়ে শিহরি উঠি কণ্টকিত চিত।  
সম্মুখে গর্জছে শত্রু-কাঁপে জল-স্থল,  
পশ্চাতে লুপ্তন আশে লম্পটের দল।  
আমরা কম্পিত দোঁহে-নীড়ে যথা পাখী  
গুটিপাঁচ শাবকেরে পক্ষপুটে ঢাকি।  
বৃক্ষ বাহি ওঠে সর্প, আগাইয়া আসে,  
মাথার উপরে বাজ উড়িছে আকাশে।  
ছুটিতাম উর্দ্ধশ্বাসে হাতে হাত ধরি  
বক্ষে চাপি শিশুকটি-বাঁচি কিম্বা মরি।  
অবশেষে নাহি জানি কোন্ পুণ্যফলে  
পার হনু দীর্ঘপথ কোন্ মনোবলে।  
অতিক্রম নদ-নদী আর গিরি-বন,  
মিলিল আশ্রয় পুনঃ আপনার জন।

(বোমার গর্জন), ‘Bombing Again! Near Home’ (আবার বোমা! ঘরের কাছে), ‘Strangers of Night’ (নিশিথের আগন্তুক) are abundantly strewn all over the narrative.

It is not difficult to recognize that in spite of all ‘thriller-like’ appearance, *Bomār Bhoṃe Burma Tyāg* is a personal memoir, but it shows that an evacuation experience could also be a potential theme for a Bangla thriller. A Bengali hero making his way through dense forest, high mountains, treacherous terrains, un-navigable rivers, wild animals, vengeful, tribals, and Japanese enemies at his heel would offer an ideal motif for a thriller or adventure fiction. Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, who was a popular writer of Bangla thrillers, wrote *Burmāy Jakhān Bomā Pare* [When Burma was Bombed] based on adventure of three Bengali friends on their way to India leaving Rangoon. They also fled from Rangoon, but unlike other Indian evacuees, they took an uncharted route and moved alone on their launch along Ho and Brahmaputra rivers. Their journey was exciting with far too many incidents including confronting some uncivilized and hostile tribals. They escaped the hideous plot of those uncivilized people to kill them with the help of a tribal girl who eventually had fallen in love with one of the members of their group. Towards the end of their journey through dense forest they chanced upon a forest dweller who was a European but embraced an alienated forest life away from civilization. He with his long traces of locks, beard, and nails appeared like a ‘gorilla’, and the narrator immediately compared him with ‘*Kāpālik* of Bankimbabu’s novel *Kapālkundalā*’ though ‘the English can never be a *Kāpālik*’. (*Burmāy Jakhān Bomā Pare*, 68)

Bengali fictional narratives written on evacuation were not necessarily about adventure only; the human relationships in strenuous situations during the evacuation became a subject for some narratives. It was a worst time for human crisis, where an overwhelming urge to move ahead for one’s own life with very little or no resources made all human and familial relationships redundant. A short story ‘*Palātak*’ (The Fugitive) by Narayan Gangopadhyay, published in *Shanibārer Cithi*, told the story of this crisis during the time when Indians were still evacuating Burma and arriving in India as refugees. It started with ‘They were coming back. They were coming back from Rangoon to Prome, from Prome to Podang, and from there to Chittagong on foot walking 120 kilometers of perilous hill tracts’. (‘*Palātak*’ 189) The story describes how a disabled member of a group was pushed into a

deep canyon intentionally to expedite the journey of others. This evacuation and concomitant crises, according to the story, was a continuation and repetition of history which started much earlier with the story of treachery, sibling rivalry, secret assassination, and bloodshed. 'This was the very route that the Nawab of Bengal Shah Suja took to save his life. Now these people had taken the same for their lives. Would history only go on repeating himself? Wouldn't it ever try to find a new course?' ('Palātak' 304). The story ends when one of the women in the group gave birth to a child on her way, possibly symbolizing a new time, a new history to begin.

The Bengali retreat from Burma during the time of the World War II marked finally the end of a very important phase of Bengali relationships with Burmese culture and history. This retreat failed to attract much sympathy and interest as it was held to be some sort of 'home coming' though the journey was one of the most disastrous one. Moreover, the Partition of India in 1947 and its concomitant violence and displacement which were to happen within five years of the Evacuation overshadowed the Burmese tragedy of the Indians. It is interesting to trace the trajectory of change in Bengali perception of Burma: from a place of desire and exoticism to an ominous place of death and destitution. The latter perception would become apparent in numerous Bangla thrillers and detective fictions where Burma was represented as an ominous place for crime and criminals. Besides, there was a sense of loss and defeat along with a sense of guilt. Deserting a country at the time of its crisis, particularly one which had been providing them shelter and food for so many years was morally considered nothing but an act of opportunism and cowardice. Some Bangla narratives implicitly admit blatant 'opportunism' of Indians in their attempts to flee this country during the time of the World War. (*Irābatī*, 193) In this sense, for Indians leaving Burma during the World War was a shameful exodus, and they could never claim that honour to be a national tragedy. But when have individual suffering and displacement ever cared for or demanded the epithet 'national'? For these have more often than not remained confined to the individual sphere and resisted sweeping generalization.

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