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Tamils of Burma and the Second World War

S. NAGARAJAN

These two papers were included in this special issue at the last stage of editing. The papers were read at the meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Osaka University of Foreign Studies on Nov. 4th, 1993.

Dr. S. Nagarajan is the Professor of South East Asian History, and is now the Head of the Department of Tamil Studies in Foreign Countries and also the Dean of Faculty of Development Tamil, Tamil University, India.

In the discussion on the papers, Dr. Nagarajan made a comparative remark of the Tamils in Burma and Malaysia. In Burma the Tamil occupied the important positions in many fields of economic activities including commerce, while in Malaysia the majority of the Tamils were engaged in plantation labour. In addition to this factor, in Burma the 'Burmanisation' started since the 1920s, while in Malaysia which is a 'plural society', some of Tamil arts and culture have become a part of Malaysian culture.

However, in the discussion different views were expressed regarding Dr. Nagarajan's interpretation of Japanese military policy during the Second World War. Dr. Nagarajan explained that, though there were mixed

feelings towards the Japanese attitudes, the idea of 'India's independence with the assistance of the Japanese' whatever the Japanese motive was, prevailed in the Tamils of South East Asia with the advent of Subhas Chandra Bose in this area in 1943.

The biggest contribution of Dr. Nagarajan's papers is that he explored the Tamil sources. Now the details of the exodus of the Indians from Burma to India in 1942 are known to us through the pen of V. Swaminatha Sharma, a Tamil journalist and the editor of Tamil monthly, *Jothi* in Rangoon during the war.

Sho Kuwajima

In 1930s Indians formed 8 percent of the total work force in Burma. A majority of these Indians were Tamils. According to 1931 census in Rangoon, out of a total population of 400,415, Indians constituted 212,919. Indians of Burma were associated with key occupations. The percentage of Indians in key occupations in 1941 were as follows: Railways 70 percent, Port workers 70 percent, Water transport 51 percent, Armed Forces 41 percent, Police 46 percent, Medical doctors 58 percent, Business and Banking 58 percent, Public administration 30 percent, Rice Mills 26 percent, Air fields etc. 50 percent. However the great majority of the Indians were engaged in work of an unskilled and even menial nature, work which until the onset of world depression the Burmese despised and rejected. However the Nattukkottai Chettiyars' Association (NCA) had about 1500 member banks in Burma in the 1920s, though after the depression the number fell about 1300. Nattukkottai Chettiyars are the well known business community from Tamil Nadu and who were engaged with trading activities in Southeast Asia since the ancient period,

especially since the Christian era.

During the Second World War Burma was under the British colonial rule. V.Swaminatha Sharma, a Tamil journalist, editor of Tamil monthly 'Jothi' in Rangoon during the war period had written a book in Tamil titled *Enadu Burma Vazhi Nadai Payanam* (My journey from Burma), which describes his 145 days journey from Burma to India, when he used all kinds of transports including walking journey. Most of the following facts are taken from his book.

During the second week of December 1941 Japanese planes circled Rangoon, but there was no bombing. Japanese Radio warned that Army fields, petrol stations would be the target of attack and hence advised people living in these areas to vacate. On December 25, 1941 it even announced a Christmas gift would be given.

To the Indians in Burma 23 December 1941 was a memorable day. It was a clear Tuesday morning and the sun was shining bright over the golden Shwedagon Pagoda. The early morning radio had announced the presence of some Japanese soldiers on the Thailand-Burma borders and people began to fear. In the morning around 10.45 AM there was siren call in Rangoon. Within minutes more than 80 Japanese aircraft came out of the blue and there was a burst of bomb, bullets and shells all over the crowded down town centre and the port area, mostly inhabited by the Indians (nearly 90 percent). Indian streets were soaked in blood. Some big buildings caught fire. On the same day around 2 o'clock in the afternoon siren call informed that the danger was over. After this bombing brotherhood feelings among Indians, especially among Tamils, increased with vigour in Rangoon.

On December 25, 1941 around 1 AM nearly 80 Japanese planes bombed 'Allam', a part of Rangoon. There was counter attack by British and American aircraft. The few British aircraft which responded to the

Japanese attack made little impression on the Indians and other local people. People realised that how much they were exposed to bombing. The fate of the wounded and the disposal of the dead were shocking surprises. One of the two hospitals of Rangoon was blasted by the bombing and the facilities of the other was most inadequate. The position was made more difficult by the flight of Indian menials and lower grade employees who were reluctant to return to duty and expose themselves for further attacks. In fact soon after the bombing the threads of communication, business and Government were torn to pieces. And a regular march or stampede of the population from the city to places of safety outside started. Except Indian merchants and Government servants, other Indians began to travel to India, their mother country.

But it was not easy to go back to India. There was uncertain sea traffic. There was no definite schedule for ships' departure to India, and it was very difficult to get tickets. Only the influential Indians managed their tickets. From December 27, 1941 ships which went to India were overloaded. Those Indians who decided to stay longer in Burma migrated from Rangoon to Northern Burma towns and cities either by train or boat. And both were overcrowded. The Indian coolies, workers in the Railways, harbours and their brethren Ricksaw pullers began to travel by foot from Rangoon from December 23, 1941. They numbered more than 100,000 and were not having any travel plans or ideas about routes to be trekked. Their only desire was to get out of Rangoon.

For another ten days there were no more aerial bombs, may be the Japanese were sympathetic to Indian evacuation from Rangoon. However, on January 4, 1942 on Sunday Japanese began to bomb Rangoon again. From that day daily bombing was a routine affair. Usually ten to fifteen aircrafts would come and bomb. Some days even 100 planes came and bombed. Generally there was no fixed or special time for bombing. But

during nights, especially during moon lit nights these aerial bombings increased. On certain days during day time this bombing continued after every half an hour or after every one hour. Usually the attacks were concentrated on Public utility buildings. Thus from 23 December 1941 to 22nd February 1942 within around two months Japanese planes bombed Rangoon 85 times.

From February 19, 1942 the position in Rangoon became much more serious. On the same day people were advised to vacate Rangoon before 4 PM. The remaining Indians also began to move out of Rangoon.

After vacating Rangoon, people began to flock at Mandalay. Because Government offices, commercial establishments, Banks and other public organisations were transferred from Rangoon to Mandalay. Hence along with them their employees too came to Mandalay. It appeared around this time the whole South Indian residents of Rangoon had migrated to Mandalay. There was South Indian crowd everywhere. Hotels were over crowded. It was difficult to get rental apartments. In the streets we met everywhere South Indian crowds who discussed about war. Some were worried about the fate of their property which they left at Rangoon. Some were worried about their future because after having lived a comfortable life in Rangoon they were now facing an uncertain future as refugees. Some were happy that they thoughtfully sent their wives and children (i.e.their families) in advance to India but they were at the same time worried about their dependance on others in India and their fate. Some were worried that in case their offices were permanently shifted to India whether they would get the same salary, increment, promotion and pension. Some were worried after going back to India they may not be able to lead the same kind of life as they were leading in Burma.

There was a chain reaction to Indian migration to Mandalay. The Burmese from Mandalay began to migrate to villages. This increased the

fear of the Indians at Mandalay, because they feared that if the Burmese begin to hate Indian crowds, then the position of Indians would become more critical. Especially till now in northern Burma there was no racial hatred. Both the Indians and the Burmese lived with mutual respect for each other. Only in the southern Burma there was hatred for Indians. Hence the southern hatred, they feared, should not spread to northern Burma. Many Indians, who lived in Burma, had no links with India. Many of them were not even aware of their native places. Among these Indians more than 90 percent were Tamils. These Indians were employed in agriculture and petty trading activities. These Indians considered India as a stranger land and hence were not interested in returning to India. Instead they decided to stay in Burma, their new motherland and face any consequences. Hence many of them travelled through forests and mountains to Burmese villages and sought asylum among local Burmese of these areas.

Others wanted to go back to India. They believed that Burma may have given them refuge, property and prosperity but had not given them mental peace. They believed they will get this peace only in their motherland even among discomfort and disenchantment. So these Indians were going back to India even from Mandalay, especially after the Japanese bombing of Mandalay.

Temporary resident Indians living at Mandalay began to travel to India from the second week of March 1942. The rich travelled by plane. Usually only the Europeans and Anglo-Indians were given this privilege. Middle class Indians travelled to India via Monywa, Katha, Mekong, Myitkyina. Many had to walk. Some died on the way while walking. Generally only ordinary people who worked hard, living on daily wages were the ones who suffered a lot this way. During walking journey no one was allowed to carry more than 60 pounds weight.

Thus evacuation became the policy and Indians were on the move by all available means of transport, but generally on foot. The sea was not safe and only a few ships were available during December 1941 and January 1942. The departure of Indians from Rangoon increased rapidly in January 1942. The Indian owned Scindia Steam Navigation Company stopped its service to Burma, while the British owned British India Steam Navigation Company was said to be giving priority to Europeans. The evacuation had to be improvised in requisited ships. Hutchings tried to organise the issue of tickets through his office but "for three days the office was besieged by a disorderly mob" and it was intended to get all intending evacuees together on the race course, when an Indian committee directed departures. Altogether 67,000 were evacuated by sea.

Until about 2nd week of March 1942 only one route from Tamu on the Burma frontier to Pallel in the Manipur State provided almost the only outlet from Burma to India. This route mainly owing to the paucity of water supplies could never accomodate more then a small number of foot passengers daily and the influx of large number of refugees soon rendered it, inspite of the best effort of the authorities available, a source rather of danger than of safety. Sanitation was ignored, cholera spread and the whole route became contaminated. It was the restrictive use of this route which had given rise to a serious apprehension that racial discrimination was taking place.

An alternative route differing but slightly in length with sufficient water facilities was thrown open. Only 1500 were permitted to use this route daily. Five camps were established between Tamu and Pallel at each of which there was not less than one doctor. Each camp had an adequate supply of water, sanitary arrangements, medical assistance and food supplies for 3000 people, and was in charge of a commandant. Inspite of this arrangement it was stated that supplies for food for Indian travellers

were lacking and no supplies for Europeans had been stocked in the alternative route.

In the meantime it was decided that subject to overriding consideration that the route should be kept immune from cholera infection Europeans and Anglo-Indians whose numbers never hitherto exceeded 50 a day should be allowed along the original route where the stocks of food otherwise be wasted.

Most of the estimated 9 lakhs (900,000) Indians living in Burma attempted to walk over to India either through the Prome-Taung-up-Arakan route to Bengal or else through the Chindwin Valley to Manipur or through the Huka Valley in the north of Assam -all extremely difficult land routes to India through hills, mountains and jungles. After months of hardship nearly 5 lakhs reached India. Nobody knows how many died on the way. Estimate of the dead vary from 10,000 to one lakh.

Amery told the House of Commons on 16 June 1942 that 400,000 had arrived in India as refugees. However it was estimated that the refugees total was as high as 450,000 to 500,000.

The trek out of Burma was an epic of patient endurance in which the great majority of the refugees were saved by their own heroic tenacity rather than by any official efforts on their behalf. In fact those who arrived safe were in acute distress, a senior medical officer Brigadier Short reported. Complete exhaustion, physical and mental, with a disease superimposed was the usual picture. They suffered from bad nightmares and their delirium was a babble of rivers and crossings, of mud and corpses. Emancipation and loss of weight were universal, 4 stone was the usual weight of a well built man.

Under the present arrangement no refugee need pay anything from the moment he reaches Tamu on the border till he arrives at rail head in India. Food, shelter, water, coolies, lorries were all supplied free. On the

railways too those who were not able to pay were carried free to their destinations in India.

Inspite of all these announced arrangements Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru expressed concern. For example Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru mentioned about utter lack of suitable evacuation arrangements and practice of racial discrimination. He also advised people not to run away except under very special circumstances and in special cases.

The first important charge of discrimination between Europeans and Indians appeared in the News Chronicle of 9 April. On 18 April 1942 a member of the Council of State, Syed Muhammad Hussein accused Hutchings of having whipped thirty or forty Indians off a ship at Rangoon to give places to Anglo-Indians. Hutchings denied this but agreed he had given priority in allotting places for airflights to Anglo-Indians because he felt that Japanese would treat them with special severity and he argued that their patriotic contribution merited special treatment.

Another major complaint was that British European refugees were receiving a huge rate of maintenance grant in the relief camps than the Indian refugees. This also was happening, though it was explained that the Europeans were being supported by the United Kingdom Government while the Indians were paid by the Government of India. Eventually there was substituted a system under which the evacuees receiving grants linked to their former salaries, which in effect created a distinction between the Europeans and all the Indians except the superior types.

Another significant effect of the Indian exodus from Burma was that the Indian population in Burma decreased. According to 1931 census there were 1,017,825 Indians in Burma. After the 1941-42 exodus the Indian population decreased 50 percent.

And the Indians who left Burma left behind them their property in Burma and took with them only bare minimum. It was estimated that the

wealth of India in Burma was around between 150 and 370 million pounds. Tamil Chettiyars alone had about 60 million pounds. Compared this the United Kingdom investment in Burma was around 250 million pounds. Most of these Indian assets in Burma, which were left behind by the fleeing Indians, were not recovered and were lost.

Japanese bombing alone was not solely responsible for the flight of the Indians from Burma. Other factors too favoured Indian flight from Burma. The parting of the Indians from Burma had started in the early 1920s when Burmanisation of Burma emerged. Generally there was hatred for the Indians especially in Southern Burma. This was mainly because both the Burmese and the Indians lived separately in their own worlds and in fact till 1920 Burmese language was not taught as a compulsory language to Indian students, who preferred studying in their own national schools. Even a separate legal system such as Hindu law, Muslim and Burmese Buddhist law existed. Since 1882 the Indians were also given separate representation in the Rangoon Corporation. The separation of Burma from India in 1937 accelerated the process. In addition there were anti-Indian riots in July 1938 and April 1940 when 26 Indians were killed. Further the economic and agrarian reforms in Burma served as sufficient notices of the termination of Indian interests in Burma. This was the unpromising background to the negotiation of an immigration agreement between India and Burma when the transitional arrangements after the separation of 1937 expired. The Burmese Ministers insisted on restricting new entries and imposed conditions upon existing Indian residents including the power to deport any one cohabiting with a Burmese woman, who then deserted her. A satisfactory compromise was then effected. But when the agreement was published in India there was a storm of protest especially against the cohabitation clause. Gandhiji lent his authority to the protest and the Government of India decided to cancel the agreement. It was just

at this moment in December 1941, Japanese bombed and invaded Burma which led to a chain of consequences as described already.

In fact around the time of Japanese bombing the memory of anti-Indian massacres and none too helpful police attitudes were not forgotten. Indians go home was still the slogan of the day and above all Indian leadership was poor. In fact the rich and the affluent Indians took to their heels first and the British Government had no means for providing safety and security against external aggression or what was worse against internal discrimination. Once out of the shelters of the city, and most of the Indians were city dwellers, Indians had no place to stay. Hence evacuation became the policy. Even though the Japanese bombing led to lot of difficulties for the Tamils and other Indians, still it must be stated that during the War the Japanese were not anti-Indian but were only anti-British Government.

Not all the Indians in Burma evacuated. In fact rains made the escape routes impassable from April 1942 and forced many to stay in Burma. More than half of them stayed, these included people with property or other assets which they could not transfer to India and people who through long residence had dropped their ties with home (i.e.India) or who had married Burmese women and regarded Burma as home. There were also thousands, who in the end had no choice but to stay.

Further, Ba Maw, who took the reins of Government under Japanese patronage recognised the Independence League and all Burma Indians were ordered to join from January 1943. The League acted as a welfare organisation representing the local Indians in their requests to the Ba Maw Government. To some extent the League acted as the custodian of Indian property, including the lands left behind by the Tamil Chettiyars. Unlike Malay, the Indian, mainly Chettiyar investment in Burma was the most important foreign holding estimated of 750 million in value as well

as at least one quarter of the best cultivated land. Most of this property was taken over by Burmese tenants and managers though some of the Chettiyars' land went out of production. Further, Tamil estate labourers joined the Indian Independence League. And the Indian Independence League raised gifts and loans on behalf of the Indian community for the Japanese war efforts. The response of the Burmese Indians, however, was only less than lukewarm to these appeals made by the Indian Independence League.

The general effect of Japanese occupation of Burma was it strengthened the foundations of both Burmese and Indian nationalism. It not only contributed to the ending of pre-war interests of Indians in Burma but also paved the way, as a result of the exodus of Indians from Burma, for the emergence of post-war legislations of Burma, which eliminated Indian interests. However all these are a continuous development of the Burmanisation process of 1920s. Had the Indians learnt Burmese language and attempted integration with Burmese culture earlier, the story of 1940s probably would have been different.

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