

Writing travel across the Bay of Bengal

Bengali accounts of Burma in the early 20th century

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Located across the Bay of Bengal, Burma and Bengal have a long history of religious, commercial and political inter-connections and migration. These connections were strengthened towards the end of the nineteenth century when Burma was annexed to the British Empire in India after its defeat in the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886. This essay traces some facets of the Bengali perception of Burma during the early twentieth century through an analysis of two travelogues written by Indumadhab Mallick and Saraladebi Chaudhurani. These Bengali travellers exhibited complex and multi-layered understandings of Asia in general, and of Burma in particular.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Calcutta, the intellectual and cultural capital of British India, became the focal point of attraction for Burmese students who flocked there for higher education. The Theravada Buddhist rebel monk U Ottama, for instance, studied in Calcutta for three years and it was largely through his efforts that Burmese and Bengali nationalists came to establish and maintain a close contact. Burmese Buddhist political leaders emphasized the centuries-old (economic, religious and cultural) ties that Burma had with Bengal. Anagarika Dharmapala, one of the founders of the Mahabodhi Society in 1891, drew attention to the shared Buddhist pasts of Bengal and Burma. This was reiterated by the famous Bengali professor of Indian linguistics, Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay,

who in his Presidential Address at the Burma Bengali Literary Conference in 1936 described India and Burma as “distant cousins” and “religion-brothers”, who had accepted the same spiritual ideology of Buddhist saints.¹

Burma, moreover, provided myriad opportunities for migrant labourers to earn a living, or for middle-class Bengalis in search of bureaucratic employment, as well as for businessmen in search of a fortune. Not only was it the ‘golden land’ of infinite possibilities, it was above all, as Devleena Ghosh points out, a space where it was possible to shatter and reinvent social norms by circumventing the constraints of caste and religion.² Furthermore, Burma became a political haven for Bengali revolutionaries, particularly those belonging to the Anushilan and Jugantar groups, fleeing the colonial police in Bengal. Simultaneously, it was a place of detention for Indian political prisoners who were deported and jailed in Burma. These varied experiences were

reflected in the literature of the time, for instance in the novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, as well as in a number of travelogues and memoirs published in literary journals.

By the early twentieth century, travel-writing had developed into an accepted genre of Bengali literature and had a ready market in the numerous literary journals of the time. Indumadhab and Saraladebi’s accounts of their experiences in Burma had a didactic purpose of informing and educating the reading public about the neighbouring land. However, in this endeavour they had to engage with a readership who were not entirely unacquainted with the country. Hence their accounts also served to reiterate or controvert commonly-held assumptions and beliefs. Their writings reveal a range of often-contradictory influences: Orientalist assumptions, together with concepts of anti-colonial universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism and the notion of ‘Greater India’, which stressed India’s civilizational influence and colonizing presence in other Asian lands in the ‘golden’ days of the past.

Indumadhab Mallick: Burma, India’s closest neighbour

A philosopher, physicist, botanist, lawyer, physician, inventor and social reformer, Indumadhab Mallick (1869-1917) travelled to China in 1904. Rangoon was the first port of call across the Bay of Bengal. He devotes two chapters to Burma – the first entitled ‘Rangoon’ and the second, ‘History and customs of Burma’ – in his travelogue *Chin Bhraman* [Voyage to China], published in 1911.

Burmese people, he asserts, were the “closest neighbours and relatives of India”.³ As the ship approached Rangoon he observed that all the sampans that gathered around the ship, were manned by Muslim lascars from Chittagong and that no Burmese could be seen among them. Neither were any Burmese to be found among the dock labourers who were all ‘Madrasis’ (i.e., South Indians). The coachmen were upcountry Muslims from India; the guards, Sikhs; traders and shopkeepers were Muslims from Surat, Chinese, Jews or Persians. While some of the shops seemed to be owned by Burmese women he was astonished by the general absence of Burmese men in any productive capacity. Most of the Burmese men whom he encountered seemed to be “feeble” and “lifeless”. His conclusion – which echoed British ethnographic descriptions – was that Burmese men were idle and averse to labour. They preferred to while away their time in pursuit of primitive entertainment and leisure. Being childlike, they had no concern for the future and were happy to live off the labour of their womenfolk. And, as a result, the women had an “excessively dominant” role in society.

In the following chapter, Indumadhab provides a detailed description of the history of Burma. The city of Rangoon, he states, had been established with five strands of the Buddha’s hair. But the history of Burma went further back. The royal family had been established a few centuries before the birth of the Buddha by a king belonging to the Sakya clan. The name Burma was, in fact, derived from Brahma from whom Buddhists and Hindus believed that the entire human race originated. The Burmese were all devout followers of the Buddha and Indumadhab discovered that ‘Hindustan’ was considered to be a sacred space and a site for pilgrimage.

Indumadhab also discussed at length the incidents that led to the Anglo-Burmese wars and which culminated in the annexation of the country to British India. Although critical of the British role in Burma, he did not question the British arguments of the oppressions of the Burmese king towards the English traders. In his view the Burmese defeat was ultimately due to the palace conspiracies and intrigues, which he stated were inevitable in all “uncivilized countries”. Yet, Burma scored above India at least in one respect – it had never been conquered by Muslims. Hence there had been no need for the *pardah*, which accounted for the free public movement of Burmese women. Like other educated Bengalis of the time, Indumadhab accepted uncritically the tripartite periodization of Indian history introduced by James Mills, which saw the ‘Muslim period’ as constituting the Dark Ages between the classical past and British modernity.

Saraladebi Chaudhurani: Burma and ‘Greater India’

A prominent political activist and campaigner for women’s rights, Rabindranath Tagore’s niece Saraladebi Chaudhurani’s (1872-1945) trip took place nearly thirty years later. Unlike Indumadhab, her intended destination was Rangoon itself, where she had been invited to the provincial Hindu Conference in Burma in 1931.⁴ The account of her experiences was later published in a serialised form in the prestigious Bengali journal *Bharatvarsha*, between 1931 and 1932.

In her role as the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha she hoped to spread ‘the dream’ of ‘Greater India’. While her days were taken up by the conference, she arranged to meet a wide range of Burmese political leaders in the evenings. Among them were pro-Indian nationalists who opposed the separation of Burma from India – a topic that was at that time hotly debated in Burma. Other leaders were opposed to Indian presence in Burma. In fact, in the previous year in 1930, anti-Indian riots had taken place in Rangoon – a major change from the years when Indumadhab had visited the city. Saraladebi considered the anti-Indian sentiment to be a betrayal of the cultural dues that the Burmese owed to India. Believing that the Burmese were indebted to India for their religion and civilization, Saraladebi was deeply disturbed to hear the popular Burmese argument that Buddhism came to Burma from Sri Lanka, rather than from India, and that the Burmese people were Aryans from Tibet. Saraladebi subscribed to the ‘Greater India’ concept that had become popular among a section of the Bengali intelligentsia of the time. Buddhism, she argued, played a civilizational role in Burma and had turned the Burmese into a peaceful people.

Nonetheless, contemporary India, Saraladebi opined, had a lot to learn from Burma. Once converted, the Burmese people stayed true to their new faith, unlike Hindus in India who never valued their own religion and readily took to the ways of the others. Conversion to Islam, she noted, had only been possible because Hindus lacked any firm conviction in their own beliefs. In fact, she declared, ‘Indian religion’ in its original form was today to be found in existence outside India, in Burma. This had been possible because of Burma’s traditional form of education, which required the novice to reside in the house of a Buddhist guru. As a result, even the poorest peasants were literate.

Concluding remarks

The perceptions of Indumadhab and Saraladebi were determined by their specific educational background and social and political interests. Their response to Burma was shaped as much by Orientalist assumptions, as it was by the current nationalist rhetoric and pan-Asian philosophies. Despite their anti-British stance, they had internalized much of the racial and civilizational categorizations of the British colonial rulers and expressed their implicit belief in the ‘primitiveness’ and backward propensities of Burma.

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Notes

- 1 Chattopadhyay, S.K. (1936) 2010. ‘Presidential Address’, in Nayak, J.K. & Bhaumik, P. (eds) *Memories, images, imagination: An anthology of Bangla and Oriya writings on colonial Burma*. Calcutta: Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, p.34.
- 2 Ghosh, D. 2016. ‘Burma-Bengal Crossings: Intercolonial Connections in Pre-Independence India’, *Asian Studies Review* 40(2):156-172.
- 3 Indumadhab, M. (1906) 2010. ‘Cheen Bhraman’ [Voyage to China], in Sen, S. (ed.) *Indumadhab Chin Bhraman, Sarojinini Japane Banga Nari* [Indumadhab’s Voyage to China, Sarojinini’s A Bengali Women in Japan]. Kolkata: Chhatim Books.
- 4 Chaudhurani, S. (1931) 1999. ‘Burma Jatra’ [Trip to Burma], in Sen, A. & Roy, U. (eds) *Pather Katha: Shatabdir Shandhikshone Bangamahilar Bhraman* [Tales of the Road: Travels by Bengali Women at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century]. Kolkata: Stree.