



Scar of Association: Repercussions of the Great Depression and Xenophobic Nationalism on Indian Migrants in Burma

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Abstract

The Great Depression was a moment of rupture and dispossession in the history of the plantation economy and colonial Indian migration in the Bay of Bengal. The developments of this period provide important insights into the shifting patterns of Indian migration, labor regimes, (im)migrant-native relations, and the rise of xenophobic politics in the region. Given the historical importance of migration and the persistence of xenophobia in Burma, a study of migrant labor within the emerging nationalist politics of the interwar period is crucial. This period witnessed provocative but well-established questions concerning Indian migration: whether Indian migrants were supplementary or surplus, whether they were filling a void or generating local competition, whether colonial policies regarding Indian migration and their work and life in the colony were exclusionist or assimilatory, whether Indians shared a harmonious relationship of peaceful co-existence with the 'indigenous' community, and whether they were they 'well off' in Burma. This article focuses on the interwar interactions between empires, colonies, and capital in the Bay of Bengal rim and transatlantic economies, as well as the intersections between the reordering of the global economy, ethnocentric nationalism, migrants' changing lives and the patterns and system of Indian migration. The intersections between emerging nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments reflected in the many ethnic riots of this period provide historical precedents to the persisting alt-right politics, xenophobia, ethnic injustice, and racial-religious bigotry perpetrated against minorities and migrants in Burma - the Rohingyas being a major target of this xenophobic nationalism.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

၁၉၂၉/၃၀ ဝန်းကျင်တွင်စတင်ပေါ်ပေါက်လာခဲ့သော ကမ္ဘာ့စီးပွား ပျက်ကပ်ကြီးသည် ကိုလိုနီခေတ် ဗြိတိသျှလက်အောက်ခံအိန္ဒိယမှ ဘင်္ဂလားပင်လယ်အော်ရပ်ဝန်းဒေသ၏ စိုက်ပျိုးရေးအဓိကဖြစ်သော စီးပွားရေးကြီးတစ်ခုလုံးကို ဆိုးရွားစွာထိခိုက်ခဲ့ပြီး ထိုဒေသများရှိ လုပ်သားများစွာကို ရွှေ့ပြောင်းနေထိုင်အလုပ်အကိုင်ရှာဖွေမှုများ ဖြစ်စေခဲ့သည်။ ဤကာလအတွင်းတွင် ဗြိတိသျှကိုလိုနီပိုင်နက်တွင်းရှိ အခြားဒေသများသို့ အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွားများ ရွှေ့ပြောင်းနေထိုင်မှုကြောင့် ရွှေ့ပြောင်းနေထိုင်အလုပ်အကိုင် ရှာဖွေမှုပုံစံအသစ်များ၊ ထိုသူတို့ အတွက် အလုပ်အကိုင် စီမံအုပ်ချုပ်ခွဲဝေချထားပေးမှုများ၊ ရွှေ့ပြောင်း လုပ်သားနှင့် ဒေသခံလုပ်သားထုတို့အကြား ဆက်ဆံရေး ပုံစံသစ်တို့ ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့သည်။ ထို့အပြင် ဒေသခံလူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်း အတွင်း အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွား ရွှေ့ပြောင်းလုပ်သားအရေအတွက် မြင့်တက်လာခြင်း ကို တန်ပြန်သည့်အနေဖြင့် နိုင်ငံခြားသား ဆန့်ကျင်ရေးခံစားချက်ကို အခြေခံသည့် အစွန်းရောက်မျိုးချစ် စိတ်အစွဲများ ပေါ်ပေါက်လာ စေခဲ့ပါသည်။ ပထမကမ္ဘာစစ်အပြီးနှင့် ဒုတိယကမ္ဘာစစ် မစတင်မီစပ်ကြား မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသို့ အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွား ရွှေ့ပြောင်းလုပ် သားများ ဝင်ရောက်လာမှုကို လေ့လာခြင်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ နိုင်ငံခြားသားဆန့်ကျင်ရေးအခြေခံ မျိုးချစ် စိတ်ကြီးထွားလာခြင်း ဖြစ်စဉ်ကို နားလည်သဘောပေါက်ရန်အတွက် အလွန်အရေးကြီး ပါသည်။ ဤကာလအတွင်း အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွား အလုပ်သမား အရေ အတွက် လိုအပ်သည်ထက်ပိုလျှံလာခြင်း ရှိ/မရှိ နှင့် ယင်းလုပ်သား အင်အားများသည် အမှန်တကယ် လုပ်သား လိုအပ်မှုကိုဖြည့် ဆည်းပေးသလော၊ သို့တည်းမဟုတ် ဒေသခံ လုပ်သားထုထံမှ အလုပ်အကိုင်အခွင့်အလမ်းများကို လုယူသကဲ့သို့ ဖြစ်စေခဲ့သလော၊

အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွားအလုပ်သမားတို့နှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် ကိုလိုနီအစိုးရ၏မူဝါဒများနှင့် ၎င်းလုပ်သားများ၏ အလုပ်နှင့် ဘဝနေထိုင်မှုပုံစံတို့ကြောင့် ဒေသခံများက သူတို့ကို ဖယ်ထုတ်စေနိုင်ခြင်း သို့မဟုတ် ပေါင်းစည်းစေနိုင်ခြင်းကို ဖြစ်စေသလော၊ ထိုလူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းနှစ်ရပ်တို့ ငြိမ်းချမ်းစွာ အတူ ယှဉ်တွဲနေထိုင်နိုင်ခဲ့ကြသည့် အခြေအနေများ ရှိခဲ့သလော၊ အိန္ဒိယနွယ်ဖွားအလုပ်သမားများသည် ဗြိတိသျှလက်အောက်ခံမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် စီးပွားရေးအားဖြင့် အဆင်ပြေခဲ့သလော စသည်တို့မှာ ဤသုတေသနစာတမ်းအတွက် အရေးပါသောမေးခွန်းများဖြစ်ပါ သည်။ ဤသုတေသနစာတမ်းသည် ဘင်္ဂလားပင်လယ်အော်ရပ်ဝန်း ဒေသနှင့် နှင့် အတ္တလန္တိတ်သမုဒ္ဒရာရပ် ဝန်းဒေသများရှိ အင်ပါယာများ၊ ကိုလိုနီများနှင့် မြို့တော်များအကြား စီးပွားရေးအရ အပြန်အလှန် အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုများနှင့် လူမျိုးစုအခြေပြု အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒ ထွန်းကားလာခြင်းတို့ကို အဓိကလေ့လာထားခြင်းဖြစ်ပါသည်။ ဤကာလ နောက်ခံအခြေအနေ များတွင် ပေါ်ပေါက်ခဲ့သည့် အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒနှင့် ရွှေ့ပြောင်းအခြေချ သူတို့ကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် ခံစားချက်တို့ ပေါင်းဆုံရာမှဖြစ်ပေါ်လာသော လူမျိုးရေးအဓိကရုဏ်းများသည် မျက်မှောက်ကာလတွင် ဆက်လက်ဖြစ်ပွားနေသေးသည့် လက်ယာစွန်းအသစ်နိုင်ငံရေးအခင်း အကျင်းများ၊ နိုင်ငံခြားသားဆန့်ကျင်ရေး ခံစားချက်များ၊ လူမျိုးရေး၊ ဘာသာရေး လူနည်းစုများနှင့် ရွှေ့ပြောင်းအခြေချနေထိုင် သူများအပေါ် မမျှမတဆက်ဆံမှုများ အစရှိသည်တို့၏ အဓိကသမိုင်းကြောင်းဖော်ပြ ဖြစ်ပါသည်။ အထူးသဖြင့် ရိုဟင်ဂျာလူမျိုးစုများသည် ဤအစွန်း ရောက်မျိုးချစ်စိတ်၏ အဓိကသားကောင်ဖြစ်လာခဲ့ရပါသည်။

Introduction

The significance of Burma to the history of labor and migration lies in the fact that Burma accounted for nearly 50 percent of total Indian emigration (approximately 15 million recorded journeys) between the years 1850-1940. The study of the Indian migration to Burma under the maistry system is crucial as it shifts our focus from the overarching shadow of indentured sugar colonies in the Caribbean, Pacific and western Indian ocean, which have been the dominant regions of study of Indian migration, towards the British colonies in the Indian Ocean's Bay of Bengal rim which was the recipient of the bulk of colonial Indian migrations.¹ The study helps challenge the parameters which have conventionally defined the characteristics of Indian migration during the nineteenth and twentieth-century and complicates the Eurocentric narratives on non-European migration within the framework of global migration studies.²

It is important to note that Burma was turned into a province of the British Indian empire for more than a century, i.e., from the first Anglo-Burmese war which ended in 1826 until 1937 when Burma was finally separated from British India and granted a new constitution and self-government under the Government of India Act 1935.³ Burma was clubbed with British India for administrative, military, and economic convenience.⁴ But

¹ The total emigration from India from 1834 to 1937 has been estimated at 30 million, from which emigration to Burma, Ceylon and Malaya, which took place largely through Kangani and maistry systems, accounted for over 90 percent of the total (Davis, 1951). See Northrup for further discussion on volume of migrants (1995, p. 64).

² Jaiswal, 2018; McKeown, 2004; Mishra, 2018; Mohapatra, 2007, pp. 110-115.

³ From 1826-1862, Burma was administered by a commissioner for each of the annexed regions, i.e., Arakan, Tenasserim, and Pegu. The Chief Commissioner of 'British Burma', within British India, governed lower and upper Burma, after the third Anglo-Burmese war, until 1897. In 1897, Burma was made into a (major) province of British India governed by a Lieutenant-Governor (Hinners, 1951, pp. 7-13; Scott, 1934).

⁴ Harvey, 1946, pp. 30, 82; Report of the Joint Select Committee, 1919.

since Burma was carved into a province of British India, this stream of migration was devoid of legal regulations, unlike other streams of migration from India like the indenture system. Indian migration to Burma remained informally regulated by a network of 'kin-intermediary' recruiters and supervisors called the 'maistry' and was claimed to be "free migration".⁵ Although India and Burma had a long history of shared cultural-religious practices and inter-regional mobility, mass migrations of the scale and pattern that occurred during nineteenth and twentieth century British rule were distinct new phenomena.

Indians of different classes and professions coming predominantly from peninsular India formed the bulk of migrants to Burma during the British period. Most of them were Telugu, Tamil and Uriya laborers coming from Ganjam, Godavari, Vizag, Ramnad, and Tanjore regions of southern India.⁶ The majority of the Indian migrants belonged to the depressed and 'untouchable' castes and the agricultural class viz. Mala, Madiga, Pallar, Paraiyah. At the other end of the spectrum were the Chettiars, who were merchant-bankers and moneylenders. The Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee stated that Chettiars were the mainstay of agricultural finance and that without their support, the internal and external trade of the country would break down and the rice crop would not even be produced.⁷ Despite being numerically few, they had immense economic strength in Burma. For example, nearly 83 percent of the bankers and moneylenders in Rangoon in the early twentieth century

⁵ The term 'maistry' is derived from the Portuguese word *mestre* meaning master. Maistries were, supposedly, Indian men of higher or good castes who learnt to speak fluent Burmese and enjoyed an influential position in their native land as well as their place of work. Maistries exercised a multi-layered relationship with the migrant laborers, British employers, and colonial officials and Indian merchants at each step of migration viz. recruitment, shipment, and work and life in the colony. For a detailed analysis of the maistry system see Jaiswal (2018, pp. 41-80).

⁶ Emigration to Burma, 1882; Pillai & Sundaram, 1934; also see Part IV of Burma: Control of Immigration, 1935.

⁷ Grantham, 1930.

were Indians, predominantly Chettiars. Furthermore, the networks of this community were not only confined to Burma but spread out to Malaya, Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, Siam, Mauritius, and Cochinchina.⁸

Indian migration to Burma was distinct from other streams of colonial Indian migration. The Indian indentured labor migration to colonies in the Caribbean, Pacific and western Indian ocean was dominated by northern Indian Bhojpuri migrants while the *kangany* system of migration to Ceylon and Malaya was dominated by Tamils. Furthermore, though approximately 75 percent of the Indian migrants in Burma were laborers, mainly unskilled,⁹ unlike other destinations to which Indians migrated, Burma had fewer laborers engaged as plantation laborers or cultivating tenants in the thirteen major rice-producing districts in deltaic Burma. They were numerically insignificant relative to the Burmans in those areas, and also when compared to total annual migrations or settled migrants.¹⁰ In a confidential letter, the Department of Indian Overseas of the Government of India (GOI) asserted, “The bulk of labor in both those countries (Ceylon and Malaya) is estate labor, whereas estate labor in Burma constitutes but a fraction of the whole”.¹¹ Migrant Indian laborers largely transported the harvests, manned industry, dealt with transport development, cleared the streets and built the

⁸ There were about 700 Chettiar offices in Malaya, 450 in Ceylon and 105 in Cochinchina. However, the economic stake of the Chettiar in Burma far exceeded that in all other countries put together (Mahajani, 1960, pp. 17-22).

⁹ Tinker showed that 66 percent were unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, and 10 percent skilled labor of all kinds. The remaining 24 percent comprised of traders and shop assistants, clerks in public offices, professional men and landlords with high income (Tinker, 1977, p. 142).

¹⁰ The Place of Indian Labor in Burma, 1933, pp. 15, 26, 32, 35. Baxter showed that the combined percentage of Indians (excluding Arakan) involved as non-cultivating owners, cultivating owners, tenant cultivators and agricultural laborers was 2.7 percent of the total agricultural population (Baxter, 1941, p. 26). Less than 60,000 of the total Indian population of 680,000, as per 1921 census figures (excluding Arakan), or less than 1/10th, was the sum of those involved as agricultural laborers and cultivating tenants (Andrew, 1933, pp. 25-26).

¹¹ FO 643/36/14, 1943.

sewage systems in the cities of Burma. Indian laborers worked as unskilled and semi-skilled laborers in urban industrial establishments like paddy processing industries, mineral oil refineries, sawmills and timber yards, ports and harbors, railways, rickshaw (*Lanachas*) pulling, sweeping and scavenging.¹² Thus, the demand in Burma was not mainly for agricultural/plantation labor but urban labor, not for raising a crop, but for its disposal and the large commercial and industrial needs of the town.

Though the Indian laborers were not involved in huge numbers in the development of plantation agriculture, Burma owed the contemporaneous rice plantation development to Indian enterprise and capital leased out to agricultural Burmans by the Indian money lenders and financiers—the Chettiars. The Chettiars' contribution in upholding the rice economy of Burma, through their financing and money-lending activities, played a crucial role in defining Burma's global image as a leading producer and supplier of rice. Chettiar capitalists and entrepreneurs not only added an immense value of indigenous/non-European commercial and agricultural capital to the colonies where they migrated but also played a crucial role in financing the functioning of the maistry recruiters thereby stimulating the flow of laborers to Burma.¹³

Another important feature of Indian migration to Burma is highlighted through a quantitative analysis of the annual migrations and settlement ratio. Between 1900-1938, a total of 11.5 million Indians migrated to Burma.¹⁴ Overall, between the years 1840-1940 approximately 15 million journeys were recorded from India to Burma, but the 1941 census showed merely 674,000

¹² See the unofficial note in FNo 43/39-Os (1940); Harvey (1946, p. 15). Tinker also stated that Indians were the backbone of the labor force in the rice mills (1974, p. 35).

¹³ Andrew stated (emphasis added): “generally the contractors did not ask for or accept advances (from the employers) as they were able to finance the undertaking themselves having acquired capital during their past operations, or they experienced little difficulty in getting it from their friends or Chettyar”, (1933, p. 37).

¹⁴ The figure is compiled from Part III of Burma: Control of Immigration (1938, pp. 144-298).

Indians settled in Burma (excluding Arakan).¹⁵ The total migrations include double-counting as most classes of laborers oscillated back and forth usually after three to five years of work in Burma.¹⁶ Irrespective of the circulatory nature, the migration-to-settlement ratio of Indian migrants remained significantly low. Thus, the Indian migration to Burma was ephemeral and fluid in pattern, the migrants were circulating and unsettled, and the nature of work was seasonal, precarious and temporary. An explanation for this pattern, which shows us yet another pertinent characteristic of Indian emigration to Burma, was the desire of many laborers to “earn and return”.¹⁷ This desire was shaped not only by the prevalent labor regime, nature and type of work in Burma, the functioning and nature of the maistry system, and the dynamics of separation from family and women.

Most of the Indian migrants were young males aged between 15-40 years old and migrant women never formed more than 10 percent of the annual migrants to Burma, leading to an imbalanced gender ratio.¹⁸ The ratio for Indians born outside of Burma was 19 women to every 100 men (19F:100M) overall, with the most extreme case being Oriyas (2F:100M) and Chittagonians (9F:100M), and the most balanced, the Tamils (43F:100M). The reasons for the imbalance lay not only in the living and working conditions in Burma and the societal, religious, moral and patriarchal conventions in India but also employers’ ‘concerns’ over family wages and maistry recruiters’ desires for a non-reproductive, unsettled immigrant labor force that would ensure greater profits. Moreover, unlike the indentured colonies where Indians migrated to, Burma did not have legislation requiring an annual migration quota of 40 percent females.

¹⁵ Census of Burma, 1941.

¹⁶ Amrith notes the statistics are notoriously imprecise but in the century between 1840-1940 about 2-15 million Indians migrated to Burma of which a varying but large proportion, well over half, returned to India within three to five years (2013, p. 104).

¹⁷ Memorandum of Information (1882).

¹⁸ Baxter (1941).

The imbalanced sex ratio coincided with increased instances of conjugal relationships between Burmans and Indian migrants, though ties between Indian men (predominantly Muslims) and Burmese women were despised by the Burmese. One of the main reasons was that the offspring adopted their father's religion, losing 'their religion' which induced a sense of religious and cultural loss among the Burmese. This emerged as one of the major issues of contention and provided fertile grounds for racial-religious tensions and the anti-Indian riots during the Great Depression decade.

Chettians and the Burman and Indian Agriculturalists: Repercussions of the Depression on Commodity Production and Circulation

The 1930s Great Depression had a major impact on the price of rice, which went down by more than 50 percent between 1926-1934, while cash wages were reduced by 25-30 percent by 1933. However, the volume of exports increased from an average of 2,841 to 3,165 thousand metric tons of cleaned rice between the periods 1926-30 and 1931-35.¹⁹ The increase in rice exports was not the result of the expansion of the cultivated area and increase in production or productivity in the delta region. In fact, between 1926-36 rice productivity as well as production both declined while the population rose by 10.8 percent.²⁰

Burma also witnessed a reduction in per capita rice consumption. The annual average per capita utilization of rice in Burma fell from 149 kilograms between 1926-30 to 115 kilograms between 1931-35. The rice export to production ratio was 50 percent between 1921-25, 58 percent in 1926-30, and 65 percent in 1930-35. The lowest five-year average of per capita domestic rice utilization corresponded with the highest ratio of exports to production between 1931-35.²¹

¹⁹ Wickizer & Bennett, 1941, pp. 320-321.

²⁰ Wickizer & Bennett, 1941, pp. 314-319.

²¹ Brown, 2005, pp. 72-73; Wickizer & Bennett, 1941, pp. 191, 217-18, 328.

Thus, the redirection of output away from domestic consumption with the background of falling rice prices played an important role in sustaining and increasing exports. Brown asserts that rice cultivators consumed less in order to sell more and protect their money income. The cultivators' determination to "protect his money income" also involved multiple other strategies ranging from surreptitious evasion to repudiation and resistance against the claims made by the landowner, money-lender or tax collector.²² Brown extensively discusses the 'flexibility' of colonial administrators on the tax demands during the Depression and his work broadly attempts to challenge Scott's idea that the Depression of 1930 led to a collapse of the rural cash economy, a subsistence crisis and consequent rebellions.²³

However, the actions and agency of the Burman agriculturalist in the form of resistance and repudiation of landlords' demands as well as the 'generous response' of the landlords and state agents in the form of remission, reduction and postponement of impending debts cannot be generalized as a Burma-wide phenomenon. Brown acknowledged this when he pointed out that "there may have been marked variation in the administration's flexibility district by district and in the cultivator's resistance by class".²⁴ Moreover, factors like the rising power of the landlords, exhaustion of cultivable land frontiers, enforcement of the property right by the state through courts and/or militias, and the increased land revenue to be paid in cash by the landlords to the state need to be accounted for while discussing the agency and actions of the agriculturalists and landlords in Burma.²⁵

²² The *Hanthawaddy Settlement Reports* showed surreptitious selling of paddy by tenants across the settlement area in an attempt to evade the high rent demands of the landlords. By this, the cultivators managed to mislead the landlord into thinking that the crop was much smaller than it was and paid what he could afford or said he could afford while the unpaid balance was written off as bad debt (Brown, 2005, pp. 4-5, 72-73, 75).

²³ Scott, 1976.

²⁴ Brown, 2005, pp. 4-5, 75.

²⁵ Scott, 1976, pp. 94, 118, 120.

Wickizer and Bennett, whose data Brown borrows from, asserted that the redirection of output away from domestic consumption was largely a result of the increased burden on the producers to meet their financial obligations and for sustenance.²⁶ The economic recession and falling rice prices ‘pushed’ the delta agriculturalists to consume less and sell more, therefore, more than a strategy to maintain or “protect his money income”, it was the agriculturalists’ struggle to meet their exigent obligations. A top to bottom pressure was generated on various social actors of the Burmese agricultural economy in the process of the exaction of rents and revenues. The inability to fulfill these financial obligations and the consequent frustration and pressure often provoked “surreptitious evasion”, fight, and flight. For example, violent confrontations between the Chettiar landlords and moneylenders and the Burman agriculturalists and the flight of Burmese tenants and agricultural laborers to urban areas in search of alternative unskilled ‘lowly’ work is noticeable throughout the 1930s.

Several inter and intraregional developments and transformations during the 1920s and 1930s also played a crucial role in defining the Burmese rice price and its global demand and circulation.²⁷ For example, in August 1927, the Japanese government imposed a duty on the import of foreign rice, and then a complete ban from March 1928-December 1932 on the import of foreign rice not only in Japan but also in their colonies of Korea and Formosa (now Taiwan). In between 1914-28, the area under rice cultivation increased by 49 percent in Siam, 45 percent in French Indochina, and merely 16 percent in Burma. Given its higher price, Burma’s rice also faced competition from Siam and French Indochina, especially for exports into the markets of Straits settlements and the Federated Malaya States. In 1933, the

²⁶ They assert, “when prices fall and remain low, growers and dealers feel pressure to market larger lots, in hope of maintaining incomes at levels sufficient to meet inescapable financial obligations and to purchase commodities regarded as indispensable” (Wickizer & Bennett, 1941, p. 216).

²⁷ This section is developed using the *Report on Maritime trade in Burma, 1930s* as cited in Brown (2005).

import of foreign (Burmese) rice into Java was restricted and then prohibited by the Dutch East Indies administration. They also banned foreign rice imports to the Outer Provinces by arranging the supply of rice from Java and Bali.²⁸

On the other hand, various developments propped up the demand and circulation of Burmese rice in other markets. In between 1929-32, despite the fall in prices, the volume of Burmese rice exports held steady owing to the floods and famine in various parts of China. Strong demand from Shanghai boosted rice exports from Burma to China by almost three times, i.e., 350,000 tons of rice as compared to 125,000 tons (the annual average between 1927/28-1929/30). At the same time, the export of Burma's rice to India soared from 1.046 million tons in 1932 to 1.789 tons in 1933/34. This was the result of several factors: first, reduced prices, which was due to the economic recession and intense competition from neighboring rice-producing countries, namely, Siam, French Indochina as well as Japan;²⁹ second, In 1935, crops were damaged due to extensive flooding and an earthquake in Bihar which created a shortfall of supply of food grains; third, India's rapidly rising population; and fourth, since Burma was a province of British India it had the advantage of no foreign duty unlike the rice imported from French or Dutch colonies.

These factors were compounded by the intense promotion of "Empire products" in Britain through pamphlets, advertisements and commissioned paintings. For example, one of the posters by Artist Dora Batty promoting rice from British India read: "When you buy Indian goods, you help India and increase employment here...Empire buyers are Empire builders".³⁰ Thus, the global market and the geopolitics of the 1920-30s marked by the economic recession, impositions of custom duty and bans,

²⁸ Furnivall, 1944, p. 439.

²⁹ In 1933, Rangoon merchants accused the Japanese of seeking to offload a substantial volume of rice, half of which was bought from Burma, onto the Indian market at prices below the existing level which pushed the prices of rice further down.

³⁰ Dora Batty, 1926-39.

price competitions and changing cultivation patterns in different regions of the world all impacted the demand and circulation patterns of Burmese rice so as to prevent either a sharp contraction or expansion.

With that said, rice production, price and circulation in the aftermath of the Depression cannot be fully understood without analyzing the structure of the agrarian economy and the role of the Chettiar moneylenders and financiers. Chettiars largely came from the Chettinad region in Madras and had long served as money lenders and financiers in the southern parts of India. In the nineteenth century, they spread their networks and activities widely across the Indian Ocean colonies of the British and other European empires. With the colonization of Burma and increased opportunities there, a wave of Chettiar migration to Burma took place. Besides banking and money-lending, the Chettiars in Burma also owned shops, factories, sawmills, paddy mills, and more industrial facilities. Until the 1870s, they were largely concentrated in Moulmein and Rangoon and financed the trade between India and Burma.

With increased immigration, rising population, and competition for paddy land in Burma there was a rise in the prices of land, wholesale paddy, as well as agrarian goods and services. There was an increase in demand for capital and agricultural credit which the Chettiars fulfilled by expanding their operation from Rangoon and other urban centers into the rural districts.³¹ In 1923, the Nattukottai Chettiar firm was formed with 1498 members. In 1930, about 1,655 Chettiars firms were functioning in Burma with a working capital of 750 million (50 million pounds).³² Initially, Chettiars provided indirect loans to the Burmese money lenders, paddy brokers and big landlords who in turn loaned money to Burmese agriculturalists. By the late nineteenth century, Chettiars were lending money to the Burmese agriculturalist both directly and indirectly, long and short-term.

³¹ Adas, 1974b. There were a dozen offices in the excluded areas but 7/8th of them were in the delta where there was one Chettiar office to every 5,000 people (Harvey 1946, p. 55).

³² Mahajani, 1960, p. 17; U Tun Wai, 1962.

They provided long-term loans to the Burman agriculturalists for bringing new lands under cultivation and the purchase of work animals and agricultural tools. Short-term loans were to cover the costs of cultivation and the daily expenses for the cultivator and his family. Repair of dikes and embankments, purchase of bullocks, deficiencies in rainfall, floods, cattle diseases and other emergencies were some of the prime reasons for borrowings by the tenant-cultivator. The Report of Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry estimated that by the end of the 1920s, Chettiar moneylenders provided more than half of the total value of crop loans in lower Burma directly.³³ If direct and indirect Chettiar loans are combined, they composed two-thirds of the total crop loans in lower Burma. The direct loans were much higher in certain districts like Hanthawaddy and Tharrawaddy.

Besides agricultural financing, the Chettiers also provided interest-based finances to the up-country mills which had appeared by the early twentieth century. The rice mills in Burma were almost exclusively owned by the Europeans until the end of the nineteenth century (41 of 49 mills in 1881), with just a few mills owned by Chinese, Indians and Burmans. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, many small up-country rice mills appeared, most of which were owned by Burmans.³⁴ In between 1930-39, the mills rose from a total of 622 to 692, of which Europeans owned 27, Chinese 164, Indians 190, and Burmans 311. Several mills had to close with the onset of the Depression, but this did not prevent the erection of new mills over the 1930s. In 1936, the average number of employees in Burman-owned mills were about 38, while in the European mills it was 496. Over 80 percent of the mills were small and had less than 100 workers. In the smaller mills about one-third of workers were Burmese while in the larger European-owned mills the proportion of Burman workers was negligible. These up-country smaller mills were often unable to secure their financial needs at reasonable rates from the European banks or local moneylenders and were largely dependent on loans from

³³ Grantham, 1930.

³⁴ The number of small mills in the interior rose from 27 in 1900 to 151 in 1914, then 260 in 1920 and 528 in 1930 (Furnivall, 1948, pp. 189-190).

the Chettiers. Chettiers interest rates were generally modest when compared to other loaning agencies in Burma.³⁵ While little of their capital came from the European banks, the rates at which they borrowed capital from the foreign banks—like Lloyds, The Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, and The National City Bank of New York, among others—compared well with the rates at which they loaned to Burmese cultivators. This enabled them to make huge profits.³⁶

Regarding Chettiar loan payments and retrievals, the Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry noted that: first, the loans were generally advanced by the Chettiers on the security of land or promissory note plus land security or valuables. About 70-75 percent of their loans were against valuable property (Table 1). Valuable collateral as security for loans passed the risks in the operation largely on the borrower; second, the payment of interest on the loans and repayment of the principal amount was only accepted in cash; and third, though the Chettiers had the legal rights to the repayment of loans on demand, the general practice was that for short-term or annual crop loans the date for full settlement of loans was generally fixed after the harvest, and the long-term loans continued for several years as long as the borrower kept paying the interest on time and in full.³⁷ An important point here is that the land administration in Burma did not restrict the alienation of agricultural land or land being owned by non-Burmese or non-agriculturalists.³⁸ With the onset of the Depression and the sharp fall in rice prices, this setup had lethal consequences for the agricultural economy of Burma.

³⁵ Harvey, 1946, pp. 54-55. *Sa-ba-bi* loans to the cultivator-tenants or to small landowners, which were short-term loans advances by local landlords or shopkeepers, charged exorbitant interest rates of up to 250 percent (Furnivall, 1931, pp. 130-147); Jacoby, 1949, p. 88.

³⁶ Relations with these banks were so good that many times they received loans at rates of 10-12 percent merely on promissory notes without collateral (Siegelman, 1962, pp. 236-237); Grantham, 1930, pp. 216-17.

³⁷ Grantham, 1930, pp. 76, 89, 174, 212, 238.

³⁸ Brown, 2005, pp. 17-19.

Table 1: Conditions of Advances by Chettiers (1935-42)³⁹

Type of Security	Interest per annum	Percentage of market value lent	Relative importance of loans
1) On-demand Promissory Note (short-term loans of up to one year)	18-24%	--	25-30%
2) On-demand Promissory Note plus collateral security, i.e., Title deeds of houses, etc. (loans for one to five years)	12-15%	50-75%	--
3) Valuables/jewelry (short-term loans of up to one year)	12-15%	70-90% of the melted down value	10-15%
4) Immovable Property e.g., mortgages of land under registered deeds (long-term loans of more than 10 years)	9-15%	60-75%	60%

Proprietors were generally unable to pay back their loans after a succession of bad seasons and poor harvests—following such

³⁹ The type 1 loans security covers both trade and agricultural loans while type 4 loans were exclusively for agricultural purposes and varied from small loans to loans up to 300,000 rupees (U Tun Wai, 1962, p. 48).

conditions, they lost their lands to the Chettiers. However, it was the crisis of the Great Depression and the sharp fall in rice prices which led to the fall of the mutual understanding on loans and rise in demands for immediate settlement. Cases of non-retrieval of loans led to the transfer of land ownership rights to the Chettiar money lenders leading to large-scale land alienation in Burma. In Minbu District, Chettiers had an outstanding advance of 2,500,000 rupees of which they could retrieve only 400,000. Large-scale foreclosures, which followed the inability to repay the agricultural loans, led to the transfer of agricultural land from the Burmese peasant proprietor to non-residents and non-agriculturalists. In between 1930-38, while the Chettiar population remained almost constant, their agricultural land ownership increased from 570,000 acres to 2,468,000 acres, which was about 25 percent of total agricultural land in the thirteen major rice-producing districts of Burma, and 50 percent of the total land held by non-agriculturalists in these thirteen districts.⁴⁰

However, the defaulting on loans by the Burmese agriculturalist and subsequent land alienation was a continuous process persisting since the pre-Depression period. In the early 1900s, almost 1/5th of the total occupied land in the thirteen major rice-growing districts of lower Burma was owned by non-resident non-agriculturalists. In 1910, about 23 percent of the occupied area in thirteen principal rice-growing districts was owned by non-agriculturalists. Moreover, the area occupied by Burmese agriculturalists increased by merely 5 percent between 1914/15 and 1924/25, while that of non-agriculturalists, mainly the Chettiers, by 35 percent in the same period.⁴¹ Lands changed hands freely both among tenants and landlords. Referring to the pre-Depression period Furnivall wrote:

Much of the land registered as held by agriculturalists is cultivated by men who are heavily indebted to the money-lender from whom they have bought the land and to who

⁴⁰ Adas, 1974a, p. 186; Baxter, 1941, pp. 26-27; Mahajani, 1960, p. 20.

⁴¹ Andrew, 1933, p. 32; Cheng, 2012, p. 270; Couper, 1924, pp. 4, 10, 27.

they have to surrender it. The effective owner of such land is the money-lender and the nominal owner differs little from a tenant, except that he pays interest on his loans instead of rent. Thus, the area of land held by non-agriculturalist is much larger than the statistics indicate.⁴²

Thus, a large amount of land was held by absentee landlords since the pre-Depression period. However, what was different in the 1930s was the shortage of new/eager buyers of defaulted land. The money lender found it impossible to sell land at rates approximating to the value of loans and the land registers began highlighting the actual proportion of the problem.⁴³ Thus, we notice a shift from *sub-rosa* to de facto land alienation, and consequently, the Chettiars turned into absentee landlords. Generally, Chettiars were unbothered what the landowner spent the borrowed money on. For the Chettiar, the larger the debt—assuming the presence of sound security—the more profitable the transaction. More loans meant more foreclosures, more resale of the land, more mortgages, and still more loans. However, the ready availability of the Chettiars' loans and the over-extension of cultivators' meagre resources were themselves important factors in making land alienation inevitable with the economic crisis of the 1930s.⁴⁴

The Depression also marked a dent on the credit system of the Chettiars for several reasons: inability to pay back short-term loans taken from European banks pushed some Chettiar firms into bankruptcy and many into serious losses; new advances were further handed to landowners for loan retrieval in the next agricultural season; increased responsibility of land revenue collection with the possession of land; and reduced interest rates. Though long-term loans would have been profitable

⁴² Furnivall, 1931, pp. 62, 80-81.

⁴³ It appeared that practically half of the land in lower Burma was owned by absentees and alien landlords, and in the chief rice-producing districts from two-thirds to nearly three-quarters (Furnivall, 1948, p. 87).

⁴⁴ Harvey, 1946, p. 55

for all - the Chettiar, the cultivators and the economic system of Burma - they were rarely granted.

With the increased transfer of land ownership to the Chettiers there was a change in the socioeconomic composition of the producers as well as the urban laborers of Burma. In the rural economy, we notice a steady rise of Indian tenants who replaced the Burmese agriculturalists. Since the pre-Depression period, several Indian migrants were involved as seasonal agricultural labor for planting and harvesting and then moved to mills or other sectors of employment for the next period. A. J. M Lander, Deputy Commissioner, Maubin conveyed that in between the prosperous years of 1924-29 more Burmans reached the tenant class and were inclined to employ the Indians to do the hard manual labor. Moreover, since the early twentieth century, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Indian tenants in Burma. The Season and Crop Report, 1914 stated the Burmese landlords preferred Indian tenants as “[...] they pay larger rents and do not give the landlords such an anxious time when the grain is on the threshing floor”.

After the Depression, however, Burman agriculturalists preferred Burmans for agricultural works. The reasons for this shift included the reduced cost of cultivation, acceptance of payment in kind by Burmans, delayed payment, etc. The Burman family emerged as a crucial labor unit for reaping to reduce costs of production in certain regions like Pyapon, where the Deputy Commissioner conveyed:

In Pyapon district it is possible to do without Indian labor as was proved in 1932 when a large number of women and even grown-up boys and girls took part in the reaping, threshing and winnowing processes, thus reducing the cost of cultivation as coolies had not to be engaged and the work was done by members of the household.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ General Department Letter No. 2297/3A-2, 1933, pp. 39-40.

The Township Officer at Pantanaw pointed out that the low market price of paddy encouraged the employment of Burmans and Karens for reaping, unlike before, for which they were paid not in cash but in kind.⁴⁶ The Deputy Commissioner of Maungmya conveyed that Burmans were content to wait for payment in cash or kind until the harvest was completed, provided they received small advances to cover current expenses. Indians wanted ready cash and did not accept payment in kind, as they wanted to move on.⁴⁷ Therefore, the number of Indians employed on Burman land as tenants and agricultural laborers decreased as the Burmans took up the available work.

However, in the 1930s, with the increasing transfer of land ownership to the hands of non-agriculturalist non-residents, mainly the Chettiars, there emerged an increased preference for Indians as agricultural laborers and tenants. For example, in the southern parts of the Maubin District—which had large holdings under the control of Chettiars—the Coringhis, Uriyas and Tamils were mostly employed as reapers. Chettiars' preference for Indian tenants and laborers was supposedly based on their docility, cheapness, better efficiency, and willingness to pay higher rents given the comparatively lower standards of living. For example, the Labor Commissioner stated “[...]in order to finish the reaping of an area within the specified time, more Burmans are required than Indians...Indians are better reapers as they do not lose so much grain”.⁴⁸ W. L. Barretto, Deputy Commissioner of Pyapon, pointed out in 1933 that a Burman takes about three days to reap an acre while an Indian takes two days.⁴⁹ The remuneration for reaping was not in tune with the proclaimed efficiency of the workers of different races. The Deputy Commissioner of Pyapon pointed out that for an acre of land Burman reapers obtained Rs. 4.80/- before the economic Depression came.⁵⁰ In

⁴⁶ General Department Letter No. 134/2M, 1933, p. 21.

⁴⁷ General Department Letter No. 2762/3A, 1933, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Extract from the weekly notes of the Labor Commissioner, Burma (Burma Gazette, 1935-6).

⁴⁹ General Department Letter No. 2297/3A-2, 1933, p. 40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

1933, Burmans were paid Rs. 3.80 per acre while the Indians worked for Rs. 2.80 per acre. Nevertheless, by the Depression, Indians were mostly employed as reapers in large gangs in extensive areas owned by non-agriculturalists. Smaller gangs working on smaller plots of land generally owned by Burmans consisted of family labor.

Simultaneously, the 1930s recession brought a change in the socioeconomic composition of Burma's urban space. Citing various reasons official reports and administrators asserted that the Burmans generally took up those urban works where the profile and the working conditions suited them, while the migrant Indian laborers were "the toiler and the drudge" and were found in all those occupations labeled "disrespectful" and forsaken by the local Burmans.⁵¹ While Burmans, who were considered more proficient in intricate work, were more interested in the better paid skilled artisans' positions in the urban sphere than to take up the 'lowly' unskilled works. Until the twentieth century, the migrant Indian labor was, therefore, largely supplementary rather than an alternative to Burmese labor. Indians merely filled up the economic spaces the Burmans generally rejected or for which they were insufficiently available.

However, there was increased movement of agricultural Burmese from the delta hinterland to Rangoon, since the 1910s and 1920s, for various kinds of unskilled works which had for long been dominated by Indian migrants.⁵² This shift accelerated with the 1930s Depression. Discussing the Rangoon Labor Housing Bill in 1931, E.P Pillay mentioned "...there has been during the past year a very large influx of Burmese labor into Rangoon, so much so that a fifty-fifty basis has been introduced between Indian and Burmese labor".⁵³ *The Hindu* newspaper pointed out:

⁵¹ Baxter, 1941, pp. 85-87; Dorman-Smith, 1943, p. 31; Rao, 1933, pp. 61-62. Some colonial reports pointed that since the Indian laborers' standard of living was low, they could afford to do hard work on low wages (Report of the Joint Select Committee, 1919, pp. 433, 473). Also see Andrew, 1933, p. 31; Bennison, 1928.

⁵² Adas, 1974a.

⁵³ Burmese came in direct competition with Indian laborers for work as well as housing, especially in Rangoon (Extract from the Proceeding, 1931).

When it is a question of competition between Burmans and Indians as unskilled laborers, the inescapable facts are: both the Indians and the Burmans accept the same low wages for this type of work; that at this wage an apparently unlimited supply of Indian labor is forthcoming year after year, whereas only a small, varying, and irregular number of Burmans are prepared to undertake such labor; that this low wage is sufficiently attractive to a large number of Indians to induce them to leave their villages and families, whereas the equivalent wage is only accepted by Burman as a last resort and induces in them a feeling of rebellious discontent at times issuing in riotous action.⁵⁴

Thus, the 1930s Depression accelerated the blurring of the existing racial segregation of workspace and the class of work. By the 1930s, an increased number of Indians were employed as tenants and laborers especially with the Chettiar taking up the role of absentee landlords, and simultaneously, an increasing number of Burmese agriculturalists were now available for unskilled work in urban spaces. This reshuffling in the socioeconomic composition of the rural and urban landscape of Burma created a sphere of intense economic rivalry, competition and conflict which was fueled by the press, politics, and propaganda, and affected the existing plural society of Burma.

Press, Politics and Propaganda: Repercussions of the Depression on Indian Migrants

Since the British occupation of Burma, Indians were often stigmatized by Burmans as associates and allies of the colonial government as Indians were employed in various spheres of life, from rickshaw pullers and laborers to doctors, lawyers, police, administrative officials and engineers. Over the years, anti-In-

⁵⁴ As cited in *Employment*, 1942, p. 198.

dian immigrant sentiment took root in various forms: the religious tensions between Buddhist Burman and Indian Muslims, mostly Chittagonian, especially on questions of intercommunal marriages; the economic competition and hostility against Indian laborer's desperation to toil on low wages which reduced the bargaining positions of the Burmans; antagonism against the increasing intrusion of Indians in administration, police, army, military, etc., and their image of being 'colonial collaborators' (as Indians helped in the annexation and colonization of Burma, suppression of rebellions, 'restoration' of law and order, and imposition of the Indo-British system of administration).

The long-brewing anti-Indian and anti-immigrant sentiment exacerbated the economic effects of the Great Depression. The consequent economic competition borne out of the reshuffling of the rural-urban labor division was accompanied by the rise of politically constructed antagonisms spread through generations of ambitious young nationalist politicians. The popular antagonism and reactions against the conditions created by the Depression and the ubiquitous and unrestrained mobility of Indians became a crucial element for the crystallization of Burmese nationalism. The Burmese politicians not only used but fueled the prevalent anti-Indian and anti-migrant sentiments using the press and propaganda. It was on this foundation that the Burmese politicians rested their anti-colonial movement as well as larger political goals of separation from British India and self-government.

Burmans used the press in multifarious ways to flare anti-Indian sentiments. One was to construct a fear of the 'Indianization of Burma', of Burma being swamped by a wave of Indian immigrants given the continued unrestrained Indian mobility.⁵⁵ Press propagandized the image of Indians not only as colonial collaborators and economic competitors but also as overcrowding infiltrators. A public opinion was created that the economic distress created by the rising number of unemployed Burmans could be relieved only by restricting Indian immigration.⁵⁶ In

⁵⁵ Burma: Control of Immigration (1938, pp. 486a, 537, 643).

⁵⁶ The Place of Indian Labor in Burma, 1933, p. 11.

the construction of the fear of the Indianization of Burma, Rangoon played a very important role as it was there that the Indian population was double the size of the Burmese population by 1931. It was the major port of Indian entry and exit, and soon even became a hostile ground for open confrontation. Rangoon in the 1930s accounted for 40 percent of the total Indian population in Burma and this was used by the Burmese nationalist to justify 'congestion' caused by Indian 'intrusion' in Burma. The Royal Commission of Labor 1931 pointed out that:

In Rangoon factories, 95 percent of the unskilled and 70 percent of the skilled labor were reported to be Indians in 1928, and that position does not appear to have changed since then. Until 1930, the port of Rangoon was worked entirely by Indian labor, and although events in that year brought about some modifications of that position, it is still true in the main. India also supplies the bulk of tramway workers and of the *sampanwallas*, all the rickshaw pullers and hand-card pullers, and nearly all the general labor of other kinds. In fact, the economic life of Rangoon and the Industrial activity of Burma are generally dependent on the labor of Indians.⁵⁷

However, the census figures clearly showed that the total population of settled Indians in Burma never exceeded six percent of the total population. The Agent of the GOI in Burma conveyed that the volume of immigration was decreasing, the surplus was decreasing and so was the total Indian population; and there was no fear of Burma being swamped with Indians.⁵⁸ Thus, the idea of Indians over-populating Burma was a misleading political construct. Burmese nationalists used it not only to highlight the gravity and roots of the social and economic concerns generated by the Great Depression but amplify the persisting popular re-

⁵⁷ Report of the Royal Commission, 1931.

⁵⁸ Burma: Control of Immigration (1938, p. 240).

sentments against unrestrained Indian migration and settlement and create a mass base for the anti-colonial movement in Burma.

Burmese politicians and press also played an important role in the construction of fear and flaring of hatred against migrant Indians over the question of intermarriage between the Buddhist Burmese women and the Indian men, especially Muslims. Racial, religious, cultural and national concerns and debates were raised over this issue by the 1930s. The union between Burmese women, who were constructed into a symbol of the nation, and the lower class 'racially inferior' Indian migrant laborer came to be highly polarized by the 1920-30s. This union was seen to induce a sense of cultural degeneration, religious loss, dilution of racial purity and *kabya pyetthana* (half-caste problem).⁵⁹ While the Indians were referred to as *kala* which is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit word *Kula*, the caste man or *kala* or black man; and the children of mixed marriages were called *zerbadi* or Child of Gold.⁶⁰ The *zerbadis*, however, preferred to call themselves *Burman-Muslims* to distinguish themselves from the Burmese in religion but identify with them otherwise.⁶¹ Slogans were raised against such marriages ("Do not take Foreigners, Oh Ye Burmese Women!") and formed fertile grounds for racial-religious tensions. Moreover, since the marriage was not legally recognized, the women and children had no property rights in case of divorce or death of the partner.⁶²

During the 1930s, Burmese nationalists extensively used the press to propagate their animosity against interracial mar-

⁵⁹ Mazumder, 2013, p. 205.

⁶⁰ The term *Zerbadis* is believed to be derived from the word *Zar* (Gold) and *Baft* (Brocade). Indians in Burma were often objects of derision and even referred to as *Kwe-Kala* (*kwe* meaning dog in Burmese) (Chakravarti, 1971, pp. 11, 125-126; Ferrars & Ferrars, 1901, pp. 159-162; Yegar, 1972, pp. 29-36).

⁶¹ Mahajani, 1960, p. 23.

⁶² The Buddhist Marriage and Divorce Bill failed to pass in 1927 and it was only after the separation of Burma in 1937 that it was reintroduced with amendments and drafted into law in 1939 (Buddhist Women Special Marriage, 1937).

riages. For example, the Journal *Seq-Than* blamed Burmese-Muslim marriage for “ruining Burma’s race and religion”.⁶³ Moreover, Burmese women also faced public wrath for their tendency to choose Indian (or European) men. During the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of a contemptible Burmese woman was popularized in plays like *The Burmese Wife* by James Ormerod and Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya’s novel *Srikanta*. It propagated the nationalist critique of Burmese women as ones who sold themselves, and concurrently the nation, to foreigners—Europeans and Indians. The idea of degradation of Burmese women was further reinforced by several abolitionist organizations working in Rangoon against trafficking in women and for a complete prohibition on prostitution.⁶⁴ With the British occupation of Burma, several Burmese women ended up as concubines to the Europeans who later discarded them and returned home without making any provisions. Prostitution flourished and several women, both Burmese and Indians, ended up in that situation both as professionals and through trafficking, because the Burmese population had been swamped by a vast influx of males from India and other neighboring countries.⁶⁵

Magazines and newspapers in the 1920s and early 1930s popularized the qualities of an ‘ideal Burmese women’ to morally educate them. ‘Digression’ of the modern Burmese women was widely criticized, and they were labeled as ambitious, avaricious and of loose morals at one end, and naive and ignorant at the other. Ironically, at the same time the image of modern Burmese women as Western-educated and liberal was also popularized by nationalists and newspapers to contrast against the “backward and oppressive” Muslim culture and religion, and to avert intermarriage.⁶⁶

⁶³ As cited in Mazumder (2013, p. 205).

⁶⁴ As cited in Mazumder (2013, pp. 192-193).

⁶⁵ Traffic in Girls for immoral purposes, 1884; Illegal traffic in young girls, 1889.

⁶⁶ The article criticized female Muslim customs like the purdah, their lack of ability to read religious texts, newspapers or anything written in English or to enter a mosque (as cited in Mazumder, 2013, pp. 205-206).

Several inciting articles, speeches and propaganda were used to generate animosity against the Indian migrants. Indian migrants in Burma were accused in the press of “seducing Buddhist women to become their wives and cause dissension”. This has parallels in India where Hindus targeted Muslims with a similar communal discourse which generated polarized narratives and debates on the issues of gender, religion, race, morality, “selective purdah”, the communal division of everyday life and space, and the politics of numbers.⁶⁷ In Burma, Mujahed-i-Burma claimed such narratives “as false propaganda regarding Buddhist-Muslim marriages and deliberately inciting feelings against Muslims to drive them away from Burma”.⁶⁸ Muslim-Burmese marriages emerged as an important concern and were held as the main reason for the series of riots that broke out in Rangoon in July 1938, as discussed ahead.

The larger aim behind the construction of anti-Indian sentiments over the issue of intermarriages and the Indianization of Burma was not merely to curb down economic competition and restrict unregulated Indian mobility to Burma in the backdrop of conditions created by the Great Depression but, more importantly, to raise and sustain with more vigor the anti-colonial movement and the political demands of ‘separation’ from British India and ‘self-government’ for Burma. In January 1922 itself U Po Bye, Member of Burma in the Indian Council of States moved a resolution “for the appointment of a committee to examine the question of separation of Burma from the rest of Indian Empire”. However, the resolution was withdrawn by the government in 1924, calling it premature. The government stated, “that a demand for separation must follow and not precede the introduction of a reformed constitution in Burma”.⁶⁹

It was in this context that Reginald Craddock, Governor of Burma and Chairman of the Indian Constitutional Reform Committee, called for the introduction of reforms that led to the birth of ‘diarchy’ in Burma (1923-36). This happened even

⁶⁷ Gupta, 2001.

⁶⁸ As cited in Mazumder (2013, p. 208).

⁶⁹ Memorandum on Separation of Burma, 1930.

though the Montague-Chelmsford reforms and the Joint Select Committee on the GOI bill had not included Burma within the scheme of constitutional reforms, stating “Burma is not India...and its problems are different altogether”. The Joint Select Committee had conveyed “the people of Burma are entirely different from the people of India, they come from a different stock and have a different history, a different religion, different language, different social system, different manners and customs and different ways of life, and that Burma was included as a dominion of India for administrative reasons”.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms highlighted that it was for military reasons that Burma must always remain a part of India. The introduction of diarchy in Burma was merely a colonial plot to delay the Burmese demands for separation from British India. But this position could not be sustained for long in the background of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and rising political consciousness and demands which repeatedly reverberated in form of open conflicts between the Burmans and Indians.

There were a series of violent insurrections against various classes of Indians from the 1920s, which acquired more brutality and force by the 1930s given the prevailing social, economic and political conditions. In the 1920s, there was a rise in revolutionary groups in the delta against the Chettiars and other classes of Indians over the issue of loans, debt and land. They often resorted to crimes like robbery, cattle maiming, arson, and even murder. In 1924, there was an outbreak against Chettiars led by the *bu athins*, an inner secret group determined to achieve home rule for Burma. In the Tharawaddy District, the *bu athins* tried to force Chettiar agents to reduce the debts of cultivators using threats and force. They also used violent assault against the Burmese to force them to join the movement against the financial depredations of the Chettiars, which became the “butt of Burmese cartoonists”, “Public Enemy No. 1”, and were described as “shylocks”, “bloodsuckers”, “deceivers”, and “fiery dragons”.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Report of the Joint Select Committee, 1919.

⁷¹ Grantham, 1930; Harvey, 1946, p. 55.

A major conflict occurred in May 1930 in Rangoon among the Indian and Burman dockyard laborers. It began with the issue of a strike over wages, dismissal of Indian workers and their replacement with the Burmans. However, reconciliation and the reappointment of Indian workers infuriated the Burman workers leading to the riots which soon spread to neighboring regions and to a massacre of migrant Indians.⁷² The figures vary but at least 100 people were reported dead and approximately 1,000 wounded. No compensations were given to any Indians as there was “no evidence of who committed the atrocities”.⁷³ There was further anti-Indian rioting in Rangoon in 1931 against Chittagonian agriculturalists and the Chettiars, who came to be stigmatized as usurpers of land. In March 1931, there were riots in Pegu and Toungoo districts and in the delta which then spread south into various parts of Hanthawaddy and other districts.

The report on the rebellion attributed its outbreak to the increasing number of Indian cultivators in the Burma delta, and the increased competition due to their lower standards of living. The Saya San rebellion in December 1930 led by Saya San, an ex-monk, folk doctor and nationalist could not be brought under control until 1932. The rebellion constituted a series of insurrections against the landlords and the colonial government. Oaths were taken to “behead the heretic *Kala*”, and excerpts from rebel documents read “after small towns had been attacked, big towns should be attacked, and finally, Burma should be wrested from *kalas*” and “when we get back our country, debts due to Chettyars will also not have to be paid”.⁷⁴ The insurrection at the end claimed nearly 1,700 lives and millions of rupees in property damage.⁷⁵ Indian migrant laborers and upper classes in the cities

⁷² Rao, 1930.

⁷³ Collins mentioned that “the number of dead were unknown” and “no Burman was sent up for trials except a couple ... hundreds of murders passed unpunished, because there was no evidence of who committed them. The massacre was called a riot” (1938, p. 159).

⁷⁴ The Report on the Origin and causes of Burma Rebellion, as cited in Siegelman, 1962, p. 280.

⁷⁵ Adas, 1974a, p. 200.

and rural areas all became victims of communal violence perpetrated by the Burmese. Meanwhile, in a motion regarding the separation of Burma from British India in December 1932, U Pe Maung stated in the Council, “Indians have swallowed up Burma”. In April 1933, U Ba Than, explaining the inundation of Indians in Burma in another motion regarding the separation stated, “if this state of things goes on for a long time, there will be no Burmese women left, and in fact, in ten years we would have to hand them over our women and our money”.

Thus, by the 1930s, the separatist sentiments and diarchy generated a range of serious problems: racial-religious antagonism, hatred for intermarriages and the low standard of (Burmese) living, economic competition, sociocultural distinction, and fear of Indianization. These issues not only widened the gulf between Indians and Burmans but also hampered Burma’s relationship with Britain and the Commonwealth. Given the rising pressure, the question among colonial officials was no longer whether Burma should be separated from India or not, but how to execute the process given the difficulties, and solutions related to various issues: immigration, finances, debts, trade, the military, currency exchange, and constitutional problems.⁷⁶ These issues were debated and negotiated subsequently leading to the separation of Burma from British India in 1937. Immigration was set to be governed by the Government of Burma Immigration Order, 1937. The crux of this Order was that there shall be “no restriction on the entry of Indians in Burma for 3 years (until March 1940) or until 12 months have elapsed from giving by the Governor of Burma to the Governor-General of India a notice to terminate the operation of this Order, whichever last occurs”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Memorandum on Separation of Burma, 1930.

⁷⁷ Burma – Statistics, 1936; Immigration Agreement with Burma, 1935.

Critiquing the System & Restricting Migration: Repercussions of the Depression on the System of Indian Mobility to Burma

There was a shift in official narratives occurring from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century concerning the characteristics of intermediation and the system of Indian migration to Burma. This migration stream was consistently described as “free migration”, “other migration”, and “unregulated migration”⁷⁸ as it was characterized by a “paternalistic” setup where recruitment took place through a network of kin-intermediaries, family and friends and was devoid of any regulation (unlike the indenture system). However, by the twentieth century, it came to be characterized as one of the most exploitative systems of migration and the entire responsibility for it was laid on the maistry mediators. Various contemporaneous official studies and conferences studying the maistry system of Indian emigration to Burma had criticized its functioning and called for its regulation. E.J.L Andrew, based on his personal experience as Assistant Protector of Immigrants and Emigrants, Rangoon, and as Labor Officer, criticized the maistry recruitment system and their supervisory activities. He asserted that if ever a case for legislative actions existed, the case of contract labor in Burma is one such case (1933).

By the 1930s, the Depression and the conditions generated thereof marked increasing hostility against the Indians. There was a pattern of declining Indian migration to Burma and increasing return which automatically regulated the role of maistries at the level of recruitment (Table 2). There was also a radical shift in the official narratives from demanding regulation and reform of the maistry system to demanding its abolition. Pillai and Sundaram in their 1933 Report asserted that the vicious maistry system based on the pivot of contracts should be abolished.⁷⁹ The *Rangoon Daily News* asserted the maistry system

⁷⁸ Annual Report of Emigration Department, 1890-1919.

⁷⁹ Pillai & Sundaram, 1934.

was rotten, to be mended, if not ended, while the *Rangoon Gazette* called the maistry system a scandal and disgrace. Further, a seven-member deputation including A. Narayan Rao, Secretary to the Central Labor Board, Rangoon, and other Indian officials in the legislature discussing Indian emigration to Burma called for complete elimination of the maistries from the engagement, dismissal and payment of labor to maintain a free entry for Indians and improvement of the conditions for migrant laborers already there.⁸⁰ It can be asserted that the maistries took advantage of their power and position to earn more profits at the expense of laborers' wellbeing, but nevertheless, maistries were customized, promoted and expected to perform the way they did through the immense power vested in them by the state and capital. They performed under immense pressure with contractual obligation to employers and fear of legal liability in case of an aberration. However, official narratives in the twentieth century stigmatized the intermediaries as the primary source of all migration evils and exploitation of laborers, while shielding the state and employers of any role in the persisting conditions of the migrant laborers.⁸¹ The stigmatization of the intermediaries and calls for the abolition of the maistry system also helped neutralize the Indian nationalists' critique of British colonialism as the reason for the abysmal condition of Indian laborers in Burma and their demands for reforms and restrictions.

Table 2: Indian Migration to and from Burma, 1929-38 (in thousands)

Year	Indian Migrants to Burma	Returnees from Burma	Surplus/Deficit
1929	405.3	371.8	33.5
1930	368.5	399.2	-30.7

⁸⁰ Immigration Agreement with Burma, 1935.

⁸¹ For more details on the demonizing of brokers/intermediaries as the source of migration evils and drawing attention away from employers, see McKeown (2012).

1931	319.6	367.1	-47.5
1932	334.2	288.4	45.8
1933	263.8	252.2	11.6
1934	279.1	226.6	52.5
1935	296.6	234.2	62.4
1936	269.2	221.6	47.6
1937	271.2	232.2	38.9
1938	240.5	253.4	-12.9

A step further in this direction were the proposals for the complete abolishment of Indian unskilled migration to Burma. The Royal Commission on Labor in 1931 recommended abolition of the system along with the prohibition of emigration of unskilled labor from India to Burma altogether because the security for employment and standards of housing and labor conditions were not adequate to justify continued migration. Based on the Royal Commission's Report, the Reforms Office called for power to restrict assisted emigration in general and to allow "free emigration".⁸² In contrast to Ceylon or Malaya which recognized that it was dependent on a continuous supply of Indian labor, there was no general recognition of this sentiment in Burma. The Burmese opinion generally favored the complete cessation of Indian migration.⁸³

Several discriminatory resolutions and bills were proposed to reduce Indian influence and bring forth a complete ban on their migration.⁸⁴ For example, a resolution was proposed by U Ba Hlaing (Rangoon Non-Indian Labor) to "Burmanize up to 90 percent of the labor employed in all factories, industrial estab-

⁸² Views of the Education, 1933.

⁸³ Immigration Agreement with Burma, 1935; Report of the Royal Commission, 1931, p. 440.

⁸⁴ A series of measures were introduced against Indian money-lending and land-owning groups, especially Chettiars, such as the Land Alienation Act, the Land Purchase Bill, and the Tenancy Act. Further there were acts/bills like the Rangoon Municipal Bill and the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act which raised the anxiety of Indians (FNo 43/39-Os, 1940).

lishments, public utility services, docks, wharves and jetties, inland waterways, local bodies, etc., in Burma”.⁸⁵ U Lun Maung, sub-divisional officer, Kyaiklat pointed out that the “proportion 90 percent was too much...only at most two thirds of employees should be Burman”.⁸⁶

The extremity of the anti-Indian agony was again seen in the form of major open confrontations. For example, the July 1938 riots spread northwards from Rangoon to Mandalay.⁸⁷ A meeting of Buddhist monks and laymen was held at Shwedagon Pagoda in protest of the anti-Buddhist book written by Burmese Muslim Maung Shwe Hpi that had been published seven years before and then republished. The gathering turned violent against Indians, leading to huge loss of lives and property.⁸⁸ Though the immediate cause of the riots was Maung Shwe Hpi’s book, which contained passages disparaging the Buddha, several other socio-racial, economic and political passions were already at work and were merely unleashed by the book viz. unchecked Indian immigration, a rise in crime rates, collapse of respect for local institutions, the Depression and its attendant unstable agricultural economy, rampant tenancy and rack-renting, the provocative coverage of riots by the press, to name just a few.⁸⁹ All played a significant role in increasing tensions.

Another riot broke out in Rangoon in September of that same year and further accelerated the loss of Indian lives and property. In January 1939, there were again riots in Monywa in which an Indian owned cotton mill was burned, scores of Indians were assaulted, and shops were looted. In September 1939, there were assaults on Indians in Mandalay by Burmese miners and sappers. The Interim and Final Reports of the Riots Enquiry Committee, 1939 mentioned widespread uneasiness about con-

⁸⁵ Burmanisation of Labor employed by Local Bodies, 1939.

⁸⁶ General Department Letter No. 2141/2M, 1939.

⁸⁷ Interim Report of the Riot, 1939; Final Report of the Riot, 1939.

⁸⁸ About 220 died and 906 were injured (Final Report of the Riot, 1939).

⁸⁹ Burma Anti-Indian Riots, 1938; Burma: Control of Immigration, 1938, pp. 1-72.

tinued Indian penetration in Burma as it led to the unemployment and under-employment of Burmans. There were warnings about the prevailing danger of renewed attacks on Indian lives and property on a wider scale. Hutchings, the Agent of the GOI in Burma stated, “jealousy of Indian success in trade and commerce, the universal dislike of the borrower for the money-lender, the racial incompatibility...in the times of trade depression combined with national and political stimulations broke out into violent actions”.⁹⁰

All these factors ultimately shifted the focus of the government from regulating the system of migration towards restraining migration itself. The near expiry of the time clause of the Immigration Order of 1937 led the Government of Burma to set up a Commission of Inquiry under James Baxter, the Financial Advisor to the Government of Burma. This Commission aimed to devise a sound policy on Indian immigration, to decide its future course and curb the prevailing sentiments.⁹¹

The Agent of GOI in Burma, the Burma India Chamber of Commerce as well as Professor Bernardelli (Statistician acting as Secretary to the Baxter Committee), through their detailed reports, informed the governments of both countries to be aware of several factors before taking any major steps such as restricting the emigration of laborers, partially or wholly. These factors include the availability of inaccurate statistics made it impossible to understand the complexity of Indian migration flows, the fact that labor migration flow was self-regulating to demands and trade patterns, and that in the past decade Indian immigrant arrivals had declined. Thus, any restriction, they argued, would be detrimental to the economic interests of Burma and could spoil the mutual harmony between the two nations.⁹²

On the other hand, the Burmese nationalists at the time were less concerned with tackling the atrocities faced by Indian laborers, functioning of the *maistries*, or regulating Indian mi-

⁹⁰ FNo 43/39-Os, 1940; Confidential Note by Dr. H Bernardelli, 1940, pp. 208, 213-14.

⁹¹ FNo 43/39-Os, 1940, pp. 72-144.

⁹² Burma: Control of Immigration, 1938, pp. 144-289.

gration. They persistently advocated for a total break on the immigration of Indians. As a reaction to the prevailing sentiments, Indian nationalists like Tyabji, who was the Chairman of the Central Relief Committee, wrote “to the employer an excess of labor is an advantage because it creates or helps in creating or maintaining the disorganized condition of labor, impermanency of work, maistry system, low wages, bad conditions of life and work; secondly, the landlords in whose premises the labor stays, charges high rent from the labor; thirdly, the shipping companies who enjoy a lucrative trade in carrying”. Therefore, a restriction of unregulated immigration of labor by a reduction of 25,000 immigrants and emigrants each year would be imposed.⁹³ In a more radical tone, Hutchings, Agent of GOI in Burma, stated:

The average Burman, I am convinced, feels in his heart that Indians in their present numbers are a nuisance and ought to be got rid of, that they are sort of persons...who ought to be kicked out...(and therefore) the vital thing in the true interest of Indians in Burma at present is to get them, first of all, *respected* and secondly *wanted* rather than be exposed to hatred and contempt from a *minor nation* for the sake of pittance, and so the restriction on immigration might be used, here as elsewhere, not only to make the true economic position clear but to maintain that prestige.⁹⁴ (*Emphasis added.*)

Baxter’s Committee in its report concluded that based on available statistics there was no evidence of displacement of Burmans by Indians, that Indian labor was largely supplementary rather than alternative, and that there was no evidence of serious excess of Indian labor over the current requirement. However, looking at the anti-Indian immigration sentiments prevailing in Burma, the committee recommended the introduction of passports, visas in the form of employment permits, worker registrations, a regular compilation of immigration statistics, and

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-144.

⁹⁴ Burma Demi-Official correspondence, 1939.

classifications of Indians in Burma that helped regulate their immigration with a mutual immigration agreement between both the countries. Ultimately, a notice was given, as per the regulation, by the Government of Burma to the GOI for the termination of the Immigration Order of 1937 with effect from 1 April 1941. The Indo-Burma Immigration Order executed between the two governments, which was to come in effect from October 1941, called for strictly regulating the migration of Indians, especially unskilled laborers, through permits, qualifying tests, visas, and passports.

It is important to note that the root of Burman discontentment was not as much against the Indian laborers who had populated the Burman cities and were competing for 'low works' as against the prosperous Indian classes, mainly the Chettiers to whom the agricultural Burmese lost their land, towards the prosperous traders overshadowing Burmans, and those Indians who occupied positions of authority in the administration, police or military. Hutchings, Agent of GOI in Burma stated:

It was said to me more than once that Burman feeling is not against the immigrant laborer so much as the settled trader and shop-keeper...outcry against capitalists and landlords at the moment is really against the settled population in the town and Bazaars, more than against migratory laborer.⁹⁵

And Bernardelli wrote:

It is not the Indian who came here in fair number to do all sorts of useful work in a humble occupation that forms the root of Indian trouble Burma, it is rather some of those who have gained, or who are gaining a foothold in this country and are so conspicuously prosperous, relatively more prosperous than the indigenous inhabitants.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939.

⁹⁶ Bernardelli went so far as to compare the situation of Indians in Burma (the trading and propertied classes) to the catastrophe of the Jews in Central and Western Europe (Confidential Note by Dr. H Bernardelli, 1940, pp. 213-16).

However, the immediate hostility, as well as the restrictions, fell upon the most *visible* and *vulnerable* migrant laboring class in Burma, the people who labored to develop Burma and bring it global recognition, as they were easy targets to satisfy Burmese discontentment. Rao, member of the Legislative Council, Burma, asserted:

Burma could not have built her splendid railway systems, cleared her inaccessible forest domains and transformed them into smiling fields, operated her factories amidst fumes and high temperature for a miserable poor wage but for these patient, long-suffering, obedient, faithful and grateful but much maligned sons of India.⁹⁷

The Immigration Order of 1941 and its various provisions—viz. the high amount charged for different permits, especially Permit A for skilled laborer of Rs. 500, quotas of unskilled labor based on demand to be determined by Immigration Board, the amount to be paid for dependents, qualifying tests, marriage issues, the cancellation of privileged status if one stays out of Burma for more than a year—all generated a wave of protests in India as they violated the promise of protection of Indian interests.⁹⁸ Gandhi’s speech blamed the British for creating an unwanted rift between the two countries and he called the agreement as an “An unhappy agreement” and “breaking every canon of international propriety”, “an insult to the whole nation”, “panicky and penal”, and “a brutal reminder that both India and Burma are under British heel”.⁹⁹ He was also probably the first one to refer to the separation of India and Burma in 1937 as “partition”. Retrospectively, the separation of India and Burma might be termed as the first partition.

⁹⁷ Rao, 1933, p. 16.

⁹⁸ The Burman press was overall extremely favorable to the agreement. Europeans in Burma were reserved but thought that the fees were extravagant (Burma: Control of Immigration, 1938, pp. 536-649).

⁹⁹ Mahatma Gandhi’s Statement, 1941.

However, before the Order of 1941 could come into force, the Japanese annexed Burma in 1942 amidst the Second World War. The war and occupation are said to have brought about the exodus of approximately 400,000-450,000 Indians from Burma mainly through a difficult land route. This was more than 50 percent of the total Indian migrants in Burma during that time and 10-15 percent of them perished while trekking back to India. Those who remained lost all their wealth and belongings in looting and war damage, while many ended up in forced labor gangs run by the Japanese military.¹⁰⁰ In 1942, the Indian situation was marked by political and economic turmoil manifested through the Quit India Movement, and the Bengal famine of 1943, which made the conditions for returned laborers unsustainable. Thus, the Burmese agitation against 'surplus' Indians and their unregulated entry, competition for employment, their grievances against Indians' prosperity, and official criticism of the maistry system were yet to achieve anything concrete, until world events of the 1940s came to auto-regulate the numbers of Indians in Burma, their mobility, as well as the maistry system of labor recruitment and migration.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This article highlighted the changes in the social and economic composition of the agricultural and urban landscape of Burma in the 1930s. The foundations of this reshuffling were laid down by the Chettiar money lenders and financiers when they turned into absentee landlords. Their rise as landlords was facilitated by Burmese agriculturalists defaulting on loans taken on the security of land and there were few buyers of the defaulted land, unlike before, owing to the Depression. The Chettiar preference for Indians as tenants and laborers led to an increase in their

¹⁰⁰ Dorman-Smith, 1943.

¹⁰¹ The maistry as a supervisor of labor gangs did not cease to exist. They continued to be mentioned in various labor disputes and struggles (Labor Movement and Strikes, 1947).

numbers in agriculture, especially in the rice-producing districts of lower Burma. This preference was not merely guided by racial-religious-regional affinities, but also by the desire for maximizing profits. Indian labor, given their itinerancy and desire to earn and return, were more likely to accept higher rent and worse existing conditions, than the Burmese, and were, therefore, preferred tenants. Consequently, rural to urban migration led to an increasing number of Burmans in urban areas. They now competed with Indians for various 'menial and lowly' unskilled jobs in urban areas like Rangoon for which they did not compete for before. Thus, the 1930s Depression blurred the previous racial segregation of labor.

As a result of these shifts and changes in the 1930s, which was more of a pre-Depression continuity at an accelerated scale, there was an increase in hostility against the Indian migrants disrupting the relatively peaceful plural society in Burma. Polarized narratives about gender, race, religion, capital, and mobility of Indians spread through the press and propaganda which guided Burmese nationalists to construct a popular consciousness that was strongly anti-Indian and anti-migrant in its attitude and hostile in its nature. The Great Depression and the spread of anti-Indian and anti-migrant narratives through the press and nationalist propaganda helped the Burmese nationalists widen and strengthen the mass base for anti-colonial struggle and pursue the larger political goals for separation of Burma from British India, self-government, and thereafter independence.

The twentieth century also witnessed shifts in the official narratives on the maistry system of migration: from seeking for its reform and regulation towards demanding its annulment and the complete restriction of Indian unskilled labor migration. The increasing pressure created by Burmese nationalists marked several incidents of violence and discrimination that paved the way for an order restricting the "free flow" of Indians to Burma. However, the order could not be implemented because of the global events of the 1940s, in particular World War II and the Japanese occupation of Burma.

The global and local developments of the 1930s, such as the Great Depression, transformations in the global circuit of capital accumulation and production, and the rise of xenophobic nationalism in Burma, had a crucial impact on Indian migrants and their pattern and system of migration, and Indian migrants and capital were significant to the development of plantation agriculture as well as commercial and industrial enterprises in Burma. Against the backdrop of the socioeconomic transformations unleashed by the Great Depression, this article underlines the role played by Burmese nationalism, the press and propaganda in restructuring the social and economic lives of Indian migrants, both laboring and non-laboring. Indian migrants and non-European capital, mainly that of the Chettiars, played a key role in facilitating the emergence of Burma as one of the largest rice-producing regions of the world, and making rice an important crop for global circulation and consumerism. Chettiars stimulated large-scale Indian labor migration with great success through their financing of the maistry's recruitment activities and facilitated increased engagement of Indian laborers in the agricultural landscape of Burma during the interwar period. Complicating Eurocentric notions, this article draws attention towards the much-overlooked presence and contribution of non-European actors and capital in regulating colonial migrations, the lives of migrants, as well as materiality in the age of empires.

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