

A Study of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar in Contemporary Period

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Abstract

In the recent decades the roles of Indian Diaspora around the world is considered as a significant factor in the Foreign Policy of the country. It is said to be one of the important tools in the soft power diplomacy of the country which helps to bridge the gap between the countries. Also, in the recent years India have been much focussed on her South East Asian neighbours through her 'Act East Policy' where the role of diasporas have been given quite importance. In this connection the role of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar is considered as significant not only because of its proximity, but because these diasporas had played a significant role in its economy from British period. Although their statuses had changes during post-Independence period and decreased in number, mainly Military rule, but still they held an important role in the country and today nearly 2% of the total population of the country consisted of People of Indian Origin (PIO), the original migrants of British period. Although the political participation is limited, they played an important role in the cultural assimilation, socio-economic condition of the country.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Foreign Policy, Burmese Indians, Sanatan Dharma SwayamsevakSangh, Hindu KalyanSahyogSamiti*

Introduction

Diasporas are always considered as important factor in the Foreign Policy of India. The Diasporas of India had also played the important role during the Indian Independence movement, and India recognised their contribution and to strengthen the engagement of Overseas India by celebrating Pravasi Bharatiya Divas once in every two years on January ("Pravasi Bharatiya Divas", 2019). The role of Indian Diasporas have been given quite significant as they are considered as the powerhouse of Indian Foreign Policy, and India have now the largest number of Indian Diaspora in the world, consisted of 17.5 million person of Indian origin living abroad ("At 1.75 Million", 2019). The Diasporas' are also considered important in terms of economic importance of the country for the remittances that India have received from them, India is also the world's top recipient of remittances of about USD 80 billion ("India highest recipients", 2019). The Diasporas' are also important for spreading Indian cultures abroad. The term 'Diaspora' had been derived from the Greek word means dispersion, and had earlier used to describe the status of Jewish community before the rise of Christianity (Ages, 1973), but in the later years, the term diaspora had been used to define

other ethnic groups who had been dispersed during the various phases of history. The first theory of Diaspora was given by Gabriel Shaffer, where the term had been used to describe the other diaspora community of the world, other than the Jewish Diaspora. His idea includes the maintenance of collective identity of the diasporised people and the significant contact with the homeland (Yemeni and Berthomiere, 2005). Another significant contribution in the theory of Diaspora is Safran had brought the concept of 'homeland' in the study of Diaspora, where the Diaspora usually retained the memory of their homeland, or continued to relate to their homeland in various ways (Cohen, 2008). Diaspora has emerged as various academic disciplines in the later half of the 20th century (Pierre, 2013).

The Indian Diaspora in Myanmar (formerly Burma) is considered as very significant factor in relation to the foreign policy of the country as most of them had migrated during the colonial period, after Myanmar had become part of British India. Myanmar was known to be called as *Suvarnabhumi* or the land of Gold which may have been act as a 'pull factors' in terms of opportunities for the Indians migrants. They had also contributed significantly towards the economy of the country during that period. But the fate of the migrants had changed afterwards as they were subjected to discrimination, especially during post-colonial period and during military rule in Myanmar, which had led to large scale exodus and reduction in their number population, nevertheless in contemporary scenario they hold a great significance in the socio, political, cultural and economic status of the country mainly known as 'Burmese Indians'.

Brief Historical Background

The migration of Indian to Myanmar had been taken place since the ancient times due to its proximity with India and cultural connection between India and Myanmar which is quite evident from the archaeological, cultural, and language similarity between the two nations (Devi, 2017). The Buddhism had also been spread from India and Myanmar. It can be said that the ties between India and Myanmar were quite indispensable from the ancient times. The migration of Indian to Myanmar had increased after the British colonial ruler had captured the Lower Burma in 1852 and transporting people from India to Myanmar for labour as well as administrative work. The Indians were provided to be the cheap labour to the British government who were there to rebuild their newly occupied territories. The Indians were used for building roads and railways and towns, production and marketing of rice and extraction of timber. The Famine Commission of India had also recommended the removing the congestion of Indian cities and develop the waste and unproductive lands of Myanmar (Singh, 1980). Not only the labourer and agricultural classes were there, but there were influential classes too during those periods. The money lenders or the Chatterjee community of the Tamil Nadu, who had been migrated to Myanmar after opening of Suez canal in 1869, and passing of the Burma Act had hold an important factor of agricultural credit in Lower Burma region (Turnell, 2005). The other non-agriculturalist classes from India to Burma

includes the government servicemen, police and military personal and professionals like doctors and lawyers etc(Yadav, 2005). It can be easily accomplish that the Indian hold great importance in rebuilding Burmese economy during the colonial period. The percentage of Indians in Rangoon (now Yangon) has increased from 16% in 1872 to 53% in 1931, whereas the Burmese population in Rangoon was decreased from 70% to 1872 to 32% in 1931. (Bhattacharya, 2003).

Repatriation Years

The colonial Burma was act as opportunities for Indian Migrants, an open a new door of opportunities for them, but it was proved to be short lived for the Indians as they were subject to discrimination and victim of xenophobia especially after the Independence, but these discrimination had rooted earlier in the colonial period, when the Burmese shows discontentment about growing number of Indians in their land. In 1930's there were several attacks on the Indian workers in Myanmar. The riots by the ethnic Burmese to the Indians workers had left as many as 200 injured and 2000 deaths (Egreteau, 2009). The separations of Burma from the British colonial territory in 1937 had not relieved the Indians as fresh riots against Indians were continuing. The short Japanese Occupation in 1948 had also led several Indians' flew to India out of fear.

Myanmar had gained independence in 1948, but Myanmar had faced turmoil in the political situation of the country. The fate of the Indians were again reached nadir, when U Nu had gained power by staged a military coup at March 2, 1962 (Egreteau, 2009). U Nu had followed the policy of *Burmanization* and Nationalisation, which had led to the nationalisation of private properties and many Indians were forced to leave Burma, it was estimated that around three lakhs Indians were forced out of Burma from 1962 to 1964 ("Historic Flashback", 2017). The people who chose to stay back faced the effect of *Burmanization* policy, the Burmese language was introduced by replacing multi languages of Indians and celebration of Indian rituals were also limited during those periods("Historic Flashback", 2017).

Contemporary Status

The Indians in Burma who have once contributed the socio-economic and cultural formations of the country were became the victims of racism and had reduced to a great number in the later periods, but still they hold an importance in the country in the contemporary days. The 2.5 million Indian Diasporas (Maini, 2015) in Myanmar, known as 'Burmese Indians'havenearly constituted the 2% of the country's population ("Myanmar's immigrants", 2014) concentrated mostly on Yangon and Mandalay. Though very little in percentages still they have hold a great connotation for both the countries.The Data shows

that during the colonial years the city of Yangon (then Rangoon) itself had the percentage of Indian population to the total population was 53% in the year of 1931 (Baxter, 1940) from where it had reduced to only 2% of the total population in the contemporary years. The importance of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar has also been clearly reflected in the Foreign Policy of our country, when during the visit of our Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Myanmar on 5-7 September in 2017. Apart from the strategic and economic ties, the focus was also on these large numbers of Indian communities settled there. The Indian Diaspora in Myanmar has not only helped in building bridges between the countries but also it had largely influenced the cultural linkages and assimilation between India and Myanmar. The cultural assimilation can be said to be started during the process of *Burmanization* in 1960's, when many of the Indians had started adopting Burmese names and also the Burmese language have become compulsory in schools in Myanmar (Egreteau, 2015), although the Indians had retained their indigenous and ethnic cultural and religious practises in Myanmar. The Indian communities in Myanmar are one of the largest heterogeneous groups consisting of different ethnic and religious groups of India. One can find the Bengalis, Tamils, Punjabis, Biharis in Myanmar of different religion of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikhs and Buddhist etc. In Yangon one can find the glimpses of Indian culture; the 125 year old Durga Bari in Yangon celebrate the largest festivals of Hindus Durga Puja with offering of Bengali as well as Burmese *bhog* (an offering to deity) (Bose, 2018), most of these original Bengali migrants of colonial periods have been belongs to undivided British India, now from the present day Chittagong region of Bangladesh. Yangon also has Shri Kali Temple, prominent even today, this temple was built by the Tamil Migrants from India in the year 1871 (Henderson, 2013) which celebrates Diwali every year. Myanmar also consisted large number of Tamil Migrants even today, around 7 lakhs Burmese Tamils resides in Myanmar concentrated in Yangon, Moulmein, Mandalay and Tanintharyi ("QNo 5784", 2015). Both Bengalis and Tamil migrants have maintained their culture in Myanmar. Apart from these two Hindu temples there are several others Hindu Temples in Downtown Yangon. The city also has Sikh temple, which had first build in the year 1897 and had been inaugurated by Captain H Parkin, who was the deputy inspector general of the military police (Maini, 2015). The Sikhs were served as military under British rule during the colonial rule. The Guru Nanak Free Dispensary in Yangon has been involved in the welfare activities of the British Sikh communities (Egreteau, 2015). The Yangon cities also have several Burmese Indian Muslims organizations that looked after the Muslim organisations, mosques, trusts and community oriented hospitals. Some of them are Variav Sunni Vohra Panchayat Trust established in 1895, Jamiat Ulama El Islam established in 1916, Muslim free hospital build in 1937 are the few oldest and still active organisations (Egreteau, 2015)

Some other important Indian Organisations those are actively present in Arya Samaj which was set up in 1899 in Yangon city and still operates to promote Hindu culture in present day Yangon, as well as other cities of Mandalay and Myitkyina (Egreteau, 2015). The

All India Burma Hindu Central Board which was founded in 1953 has still existed and works to promote Hindu Festivals like Holi, Diwali etc (Egreteau, 2015). Also the Sri Ramkrishna Temple Trust work towards the causes for Indian society and running free dispensaries. The other important Indian organisations that have been very actively playing an important role in promoting Hindu or cultures and practises are Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Sanatan Dharma Swamsevak Singh. According to the official website of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, around 10 lakhs Indian Hindus are living in Myanmar, originating from different state of India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu etc (“Myanmar”, n.d). They enjoyed the religious freedom, although the economic conditions of the Hindus are not so sound. The Sanatan Dharma SwamsevakSangh (SDSS), which was formed in 1950 in Yangoon, is a branch of Indian Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (Egreteau, 2015), although in Myanmar, it merely have any political role but mainly involved in religious educational teaching like Sanskrit Yoga etc, for the Indian Hindus in Myanmar (Matthews, 2001).

One of the largest Indian population are located in town called Zeyawaddy in Myanmar, it is usually called as ‘Little India’, for large number of Indians residing there. Although their ancestors had migrated during the colonial period, they had maintained linkages with India, by maintaining the Indian culture and supporting the India’s political situation. In the town around 70,000 descendants of Indian origin people presently are staying in Zeyawaddy. These people were originally from present day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who had been migrated by the British cultivation in the area. They were bought by the Raja Keshav Prasad Sinha of Dumraon from Ara Bihar, when he had given 20,000 acres of land by the Britishers’ for rendering services from them. The cultivation was looked by the dewan of Raja Harihar Prasad Sinha, when most of the Indian farmers were settled there. These people even today have tried to maintain their culture (Roy, 2014). The Hindu Kalyan Sahyog Samiti used to look after the religious affairs also there were Hindi classes held for the children. The RSS which was known as Sanatan Dharma Swamsevak Sangh is the non-political body in Myanmar, which try to maintain the culture there (Roy, 2014).

Although there are cultural assimilations and many Indians had gained citizenship in recent decades as contrary to the status during the military rule, still they have not been active in mainstream politics, although some of them are active in local politics only. The Indians in Myanmar have only enjoy religion and cultural freedom although most of them are economically backward, as most of are small scale traders, coffee shop owners or teachers, and few of them are in government jobs (Han, 2016). They have enjoyed the Indian festivals and speak the Indian languages like Tamil, Hindi, Sanskrit etc. The more Indian socio religion organisations are sprawling in Myanmar for the benefit of Indians and protection of the right of Indian.

Conclusions

The Indians in Myanmar have held an important role in relation to the foreign policy of the country especially in the era when the Diaspora and soft power diplomacy have been given importance. Due to its strategic location, the Indian Diaspora in Myanmar has huge potential to play a greater role in the development of two nations. The Indians in Myanmar have maintained their unique Indian culture in Myanmar, and Myanmar is a place of religious freedom and harmony. Though they have very little political influence but surely they have huge impact on the socio cultural assimilation of the country. The Hindus of Myanmar worship both and Hindu deities and Hindus in Myanmar have enjoyed the religious freedom. Diwali is widely celebrated in Myanmar. It can be said they have strong connection to their 'homeland' as they are continuing thriving to maintain the Indian culture and languages in Myanmar. The Indian community not as much powerful in terms of administrative and political position but surely it need to be work out, so that they can hold better position in future and can contribute to both the nations in terms of economy and development.

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