

Chapter - I
Introduction

The present thesis titled 'The Bengali Settlers in Burma (1824-1962): Their impact on the political, economic and cultural life of Burma (Myanmar) aims at portraying the rise of the immigrant Bengali community of Burma. The study covers the immigration of the Bengalis in Burma (Myanmar) after their annexation of Burma and their settlement in the country. The British colonial rulers after their annexation of Burma in the three consecutive wars of 1824, 1852 and 1886 wanted to establish a full fledged administration in Burma. They, therefore, wanted labours and workers from India for clearing jungles, swamps, construction works, railways, road building and also for the clerical works. They encouraged the unlimited and unchecked immigration which was mainly from two of the presidencies, Bengal and Madras. The Bengalis were recorded as the highest in number in the census of India during the 1901, 1911 and 1921. It has to be noted that in this study the Bengalis are meant for the Bengalis of undivided Bengal which included men from Comilla, Chittagong, Noakhali and other parts of eastern Bengal (at present Bangladesh). The number of the Chittagonians became highest among the Indians in Burma so much that they were recorded as a separate category in the Census. However, Bengali became the largest language spoken in Burma during 1901-1931 among the Indian languages as shown in the Census of 1901-1931.

The time frame of my work is from 1824 (First Anglo-Burmese War) to 1962 (the rule of General Ne Win). It begins with the First Anglo-Burmese War signifying the beginning of the colonial policy of a concerted effort towards the immigration of the Bengalis in Burma. Though there were numerous references of Bengali immigration in the pre-colonial period in Burma particularly from Navadwip and south eastern part of Bengal to Burma. But the systematic and constant flow of immigration began in the colonial period. I have restricted my work up to 1962 which marks the beginning of military regime of General Ne Win in Burma. It also marks the final stroke to the nail of the Bengalis in Burma. The rights and privileges of maintaining the citizenship of the Indians came to an end in 1962. After the independence in Burma in 1948 there was the beginning of the process of nationalization which gave a warning to the Bengalis. But after 1962 the process became further intense. The Bengalis who chose to remain had to adapt to the culture, tradition and language of Burma. The present study does not take into account the contemporary condition of the Bengalis in Burma after 1962. But

the period is a turning point in the life of the Bengali settlers in Burma. The final decline of the Bengali community took place in 1962. There was a huge exodus of the Bengalis during the Second World War and in the post independent period. The Aung San Government had recognized the efforts of the Bengalis who took part in the independence but after assassination of Aung San the changes appeared in the Indo-Burmese relations. The coming of General Ne Win and his military rule rather disturbed the life style of the Bengalis. The Bengalis did not feel themselves secure and there was a sense of the loss of identity. Therefore, a large number of Bengalis came back after 1962. The glorious history of the Bengali settlers in Burma also came to an end in the year 1962.

The present work has been selected as the Bengali community had occupied an important place among the immigrant community in Burma. In fact, as the Census reports suggest the Bengali community had been the largest group among the Indians in Burma. The community was present in the form of temporary or permanent settlers in Burma. Burma 'muluk' was special for the Bengalis who wanted to earn a prospect and a better livelihood. The community had occupied different professions in Burma. Bengalis were found from the labourers, workers, civil servants, business magnets, factory owners, petty businessmen, clerks, railway employees, teachers, postmasters, government office holders and even important government services. Thus the presence of the Bengalis was there in every occupation of Burma. The community had carved a significant identity among the Indians and immensely. There was a rise of the immigrant community in the early years of the twentieth century. The community had close political ties with the Burmese. The Swarajists like C.R.Das had a contacts with the Burmese political leaders and the movement. Besides the mainstream politicians the revolutionary activists groups namely Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar and Prabartak Sangha had established a network in Burma. They made contacts with the Burmese students and youths to foster a unity among the Bengali and Burmese youths. The 1940s saw a collaboration of Subhas Chandra Bose and Aung San in their national movement. The Bengali communists were prominent in the Thakin movement. The Bengalis had imprinted a cultural development in Burma. They established libraries, reading rooms,

cultural organizations namely charitable dispensaries, drama and theatrical centres, recreational gatherings and others sometimes with the Burmese.

The large number of the Bengalis who came to Burma occupied important positions in the country. Their numbers began to increase till 1931. After 1931 the immigration was disturbed due to anti-Indian riots. Gradually, there was a change in the atmosphere as the unlimited immigration. . But it is interesting to note that the alienation of the Burmese towards the Bengalis was reflected in their occupation of jobs, lands, particularly in the economic level but in the political sphere there was a close collaboration of the community with the Burmese. Subhas Chandra Bose and Aung San had a close relation and cooperation. Moreover, Bhikkhu U Ottama, the Gandhi of the Burma was highly influenced by the concepts of Bengal politics. The Bengal politics had a deep impact on the Burmese politics and nationalism. Therefore, the Bengali – Burmese tie up was present in the political sphere and the man to man relationship was very positive in Burma. There was no anti –Indian feeling in that relationship.

The Bengalis occupied a significant place in the history of Burma but so far no work has been done in the academic sphere. Though many scholars and researchers have paid attention to the activities of the Bengali revolutionaries in Burma but no one has paid much thought towards the Bengali community. There are number of historians and scholars who studied the Indian migrant community in Burma but no particular work has been done on the Bengali settlers. Some stray work has been found in vernacular or Bengali periodicals and newspapers but comprehensive work on the subject has not yet been made. The Bengali community which had been politically, economically and culturally played an important role in Burma has not been explored yet by any academician.

The present work includes eight chapters consisting of the Introduction as the first chapter and Conclusion as the eighth chapter. The Chapter II titled 'Migration of the Bengalis from Bengal to Burma' deals with the immigration of the Bengalis to Burma in the colonial period. It also analyses the various reasons which acted as the push and

pull factors for the Bengalis to go to Burma. They migrated to the important cities to make fortune like Rangoon, Moulmein, Mandalay, and Akyab. There was unabated immigration to Burma from Bengal though the coming of the Burmese to Bengal was negligible. The colonial government also encouraged the immigration for the sake of colonialism and imperialism. There was also seasonal immigration during the harvest season as well as permanent immigration. Most of the immigrants in the early period were workers, labourers, and agricultural workers, the capitalists and businessmen. The workers wanted to save themselves from poverty and immigrated to avoid hunger and moneylenders and for the businessmen it was to earn quick money. The immigration, in fact, started with the fundamental change in the economic life of the Burmese and the rice being valued and estimated in the foreign market. The white collared job holders came to Burma as they wanted to look beyond Bengal to earn fortune and sometimes they were transferred by their colonial masters. The Bengali babus were the masters of the English language official works and British legal systems. This helped them to migrate to Burma.

The businessmen on the other hand tried to utilize the growing economy of Burma and immigrated to take a chance to make a brighter future. There was a constant inflow of Bengali migrants to Burma till 1931 from various towns which increased the population of Burma. It also created the Bengali community as the largest among the migrant community of India.

The Chapter III of the present work deals with the occupational dispersal of the Bengalis in Burma. The Bengali settlers in Burma had taken various professions. They were agricultural labours, skilled and unskilled workers, carpenters, cooks, guards, artisans, tailors, etc. The labours were mainly from Chittagong, Noakhali and Dacca. The men from Chittagong were hardy and they worked as agricultural labourers. They were the highest in numerically and the Census authorities had to make a separate head for the Chittagongians. The educated Bengalis had taken to various clerical jobs in railways, post and telegraph, municipal offices, schools, and hospitals. There were doctors, teachers, contractors, engineers and others who served in various professions in Burma. It is to be mentioned here that Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay had come to Burma seeking prospect in life. He had secured a number of jobs in Rangoon,

Langlabein and other places. There were many Bengali businessmen who had come to Burma seeking the opportunity of the expanding colonial rule. Burma, in fact, became the nurture place of the ambitious and prospecting Bengalis in the 19th and the 20th century. Most of the Bengalis had established themselves in high positions and also earned profits from Burma. There were ample jobs and opportunities in Burma which lured the Bengalis to migrate to Burma.

The Chapter IV delves into the political and economic development of the Bengalis in Burma and their impact or influence over the Burmese. The political developments included the activities of the revolutionary nationalists and secret societies namely the Anusilan Samitis and the Jugantar Party which had branches in Burma. They had a great impact upon the Burmese youths. The Bengalis residing in Burma towns engaged in various works had revolutionary connections. The political influence was felt in the Saya San Rebellion which was expressed against the Indians but the Saya San Rebellion also had a Bengali mind behind. Bhupendranath Dutta had contacts with the rebellions from the Mandalay jail where he was imprisoned. The Bengali revolutionaries chose to run away to Burma to protect them from the British surveillance. Moreover, they utilized Chittagong-Arakan route which is also mentioned in Pather Dabi of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. The Burmese youths before the establishment of the Rangoon College in 1920 came to Calcutta for higher education in the university or medical college were influenced by the ideas of nationalism and the anti-colonial movements. They returned to Burma with the ideas of nationalism and applied in Burmese national movement. The political influence apart from the Bengali residents was the Swarajists, namely C.R.Das who influenced and inspired the Young Men Buddhist Association. Bhikhu Ottama were in touch with the Bengali revolutionaries. He could speak Bengali and read Bengali books. He inspired the Burmese youths to join the Burmese politics of anti-colonialism.

The Chapter also deals with the cooperation of Aung San and Subhas Bose during the formation of the INA. The Bengali residents of Burma had cooperated with the INA and had donated their possessions in the call of Subhas Bose. Aung San followed Bose and formed the BNA. The Bengalis had also influenced the economy of Burma. The

Bengali businessmen had invested their capital in Burma which contributed to the development of the country. They established factories, rice mills, timber mills, shipping companies and others which helped in the commercial development of Burma. The Bengali petty shop keepers and businessmen had also contributed in the process of rapid commercialization and development of Burma. It is true that without the Bengali businessmen though earned profit from their investments but Burma would not have been modernized and commercialized without the Bengali capitalists.

The Chapter V deals with the cultural development of the Bengalis in Burma. The cultural development of the Bengalis included the formation of the libraries, reading rooms, social clubs and others which is typical to the Bengali settlement. The study of the Bengali culture in Burma cannot be completed without the reference to Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay who took a leading role in maintaining of the Bengali culture in Burma. There were numerous Bengali literary personalities in Burma namely Sita Devi, Pramod Sanyal, and others. There were regular visits from literary persons from Bengal. The most influential visit was by Rabindranath Tagore. The impact of Tagore was felt among the Bengali residents and also on the Burmese poets. Kodaw Hmaing was known as the Tagore of Burma. The influence of Tagore was felt in the writings of numerous up coming poets of Burma of the times. The chapter studies the visits of various professors and teachers from the Calcutta and Dacca universities. There were also Bengali teachers in the Rangoon University and schools who inspired the Burmese students with their ideas and ideology.

The Chapter VI takes into account the non –Bengali Indian settlers in Burma, their professions, development and their impact on Burma. The Indian settlers other than the Bengalis had migrated to Burma in search of better prospect in life and the immigration policies of the British Government of India. Indian settlers mostly from Madras presidency, Orissa , Maharashtra, Gujaratis, and others. The Tamils had migrated in large numbers and they took to works as labourers and workers in the constructions of railways, roads and others. The Indians other than the Bengalis were engaged in professions like the Gujaratis were shipping merchants and moneylenders. Sikhs were

also present in Burma. The Indians had also developed themselves in economy, politics and culture in Burma. The Indian capitalists and merchants immensely contributed for the development of Burma. The chapter also deals with the Chettiar community of Burma. The Chettiars or the money lending class had looked upon as the section of the Indian population who had deteriorated the Indo-Burmese relationship. The fact lies that though the Chettiars had occupied lands but they had invested their capital mostly in agricultural tools, seeds and agricultural requirements. Moreover, the Chettiars had used the capital for the development of Burma. The Chettiars had contributed for the growth of economy of Burma. The Chettiars have been identified as the exploiters yet they have helped to flourish the laissez faire economy of the British rule in Burma. The chapter also mentions about the contribution of the Indian civil servants, administrators, clerks, government service holders who were responsible for running the British administration in Burma. They helped to form the basic structure of the British administration in Burma. Besides the economic influences there was other social, political and cultural development of the Indians other than the Bengalis in Burma. The Indians had taken an active part in politics of both India and Burmese nationalism. Indian settlers had helped the revolutionaries like the members of the Ghadr party and at the same time they had cooperated with the Indian National Congress. The Burma Provincial Congress Committee was formed in 1908 under the leadership of Dr. P. J. Mehta with the support of some of the Indians in Burma. The Provincial Congress Committee in Burma had Burmese members and the Burmese nationalism also received Indian support. The Indians like Dr. P. J. Mehta and others had tried to uphold the Indian National Congress and its programmes and activities in Burma. In the cultural life the Indians had carved a separate cultural identity of itself by forming clubs, societies, religious associations and organizations. They created a united forum in a land away from home.

The Chapter VII mainly deals with the impact of the post-independent policies of Burma upon Indians and particularly the Bengalis. The Bengalis were the most numbered in Burma. They had settled in Burma but the strain in the relationship started with the separation of Burma in 1935 which came into effect from 1937. This was followed by the anti-Indian riots in 1930 and 1938. The small incident by the dock

labourers in 1930 and the publication of the book in 1938 had a deep impact in disturbing the relation between the Indians and Burmese. Further, the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of Burma created a panic among the Bengalis who decided to leave Burma. They had to leave their property, home, belongings and rush back to their country. In their emigration from Burma the Burmese Government had provided not much of help to them. They had to travel by road walking through the jungles of Assam and Manipur. Relief measures provided by the British Government were not enough in number and therefore, there were outbreaks of epidemics with cholera, dysentery, and fever. The Burmese nationalists by that time started to consider the Indians as a threat to the development of the Burmese and the nation. There were slogans 'Burma for the Burmese' and such strong nationalism led to the emigration of then Bengalis from Burma to Bengal. The post independent era under Aung San recognized the role of the Indians in the national movement of Burma but after the assassination of Aung San, the process of nationalization became further stronger which had put the a question to the safety and security of the Bengalis. So, there was another exodus from Burma to India in 1948. The Bengalis who remained back adapted to the process of nationalism. Further, in 1962 with the establishment of General Ne Win's Government in Burma the fate of the Bengalis was permanently sealed. There was again mass exodus to Bengal from Burma during this period. The Chapter also deals

with the problems faced by the Bengali Muslims who immigrated to Burma from Chittagong and settled in Arakan. There was Mujahid Movement in 1940s and in 1950s. The Bengalis Muslims had intermixed with the Burmese and had adapted to the Burmese environment. But these Bengali Muslims has been deprived of the rights and privileges. There was an exodus of these men from Burma to Bangladesh during 1950s and 1970s but the Bangladesh Government did not recognize them as their citizens. The Rohingyas are, in fact, stateless people suffering from non recognition of both the countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The chapter also deals with the problems and hardships taken up by the Bengali families while immigrating and up holds the struggle of the families to resettle and establish themselves in their motherland. The exodus had taken several lives. It is like a

nightmare for the suffering families coming to Bengal without proper medical help, police assistance, shelter, water and food.

A wide variety of tools and techniques are available and used by the scholars in this field. This research area has not been explored by any academician. In the present study, the primary sources, namely archival sources including published and unpublished Government records, secondary sources including books, journals unpublished PhD thesis as well as interviews has been used. Apart from these, there is an extensive use of the Bengali language source materials; particularly there is a heavy dependence on biographies, memoirs, auto biographies and travelogues. English literature and reminiscence in English language by the contemporaries have been used. These data is supplemented by the vernacular newspapers and contemporary English dailies.

Researches of the past scholars and academicians have been of great help in the work. A large number of works has been done by the scholars of high stature like R.C. Majumdar, B.C. Chhabra, N.K.Sastri, Kalidas Nag and Niharranjan Ray regarding the cultural bond of South East Asia with India. The Indianisation of South East Asia, architectural aspect of Buddhism and ancient Burma. The trend of Burma studies, in fact, begins with a systematic work in the ancient period of Burma and the sculptural studies. Further work has been done by Himanshu Bhushan Sarkar named 'Cultural Relation between India and South East Asian countries' and Krishna Murari in "Cultural Heritage of Burma" which deals with the India's cultural influence on South East Asia and cultural richness of Burma. There were adaptation, assimilation and even rejection of Indian culture in ancient Burma. Anil Chandra Banerjee wrote The Eastern Frontier of British India and Annexation of Burma which describes the importance of the eastern frontier and the description of the annexation of Burma. The scholars like D.P.Singhal published The Annexation of Upper Burma in 1960 (Singapore) also describes the reasons for the annexation of Burma. There are numerous scholars who described the Indo-Burmese relationships like W.S.Desai's book 'India and Burma: A Study'; N.C.Sen's, 'Peep into Burmese Politics'; Sudhangshu Bimal Mukherjee's 'Burma and the West'; Usha

Mahajani's 'The Role of the Minorities in Burma and Malaya' and N.R.Chakraborty's 'The Indian Minority in Burma : The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community'. The works of N.R.Chakraborty and Usha Mahajani are of great importance and their studies have highlighted the role of the Indians in Burma. The contributions of the Indians have received prominence in their works. The Indo-Burmese relations have received further notice by the works of Uma Shankar Singh (Burma and India 1948-1962); Surendra Prasad Singh (Growth of nationalism in Burma 1900-1942) and Kumar Badri Narain Singh (Freedom Struggle in Burma). These works deal in details the political developments of both the countries. They have focused on the constitutional reforms, exchange and sharing of ideas of nationalism by both the Burmese and the Indians; the problem of the Indian immigration and the cooperation between the post independent India and Burma. The book of Uma Shankar Singh focuses on the friendship between the two contemporary prime ministers, U Nu and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Indians in Burma, their problems and identity has been dealt with by many academicians. A. Narayan Rao has dealt with the specific problem of Indian labours in Burma, the study migration, wages and settlement. As regards the migration some lights have been thrown by Haruprasad Chattopadhyay who wrote 'Internal Migration in India, a case study of Bengal'. He has highlighted the immigration of the Bengalis in Burma, their character and reasons for exodus.

Further studies have been made by Swapna Bhattacharya in her book India -Myanmar Relations (1886-1948). It is a thorough and detailed study of the immigration, political relations, revolutionaries in Burma and the changing aspects of Indo-Burma relationship. The book is an exceptional work on Burma studies. A recent book has been published by Lipi Ghosh and Ramakrishna Chatterjee edited 'Indian Diaspora in Asia and Pacific Regions: Culture, People, Interactions' (2004). It has an article by Paramita Das on the diasporic Indian community of Burma. Another author named I.J. Bahadur has published an edited book named Indians in South Asia which contains number of essays including

the Indians in Burma. A Bengali book named *Banger Bahire Bangalee* by Gyanendra Mohan Das has also described the various activities of the Bengali community outside Bengal including Burma. It has touched the development of the Bengalis in Burma in an abridged form. There are some fictional books on the subject and one of them is *The Glass Palace* by Amitava Ghosh which describes a story of Bengali boy migrating from Chittagong and establishing himself as a businessman.

The rice boom and the economic change of Burma have been given a highlight in the book of Micheal Adas, 'The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Changes on the Asian Rice Frontier 1852-1941'. Much recently a book edited by the Indian Communities in South East Asia by Kernial Singh Sandhu and A.Mani. It has an article by Tin Maung Maung Than titled *Some Aspects of Indians in Rangoon* which describes the history of Indian migration in Burma and Rangoon. A number of books, edited volumes and articles have been published on the Indians in Burma. But the academicians and scholars have not touched the contribution, development and character of the Bengali settlement in Burma and their political, economic and cultural impact in Burma. The Bengalis were a significant community residing in Burma. Most of the Bengalis were attracted to the growing economy and expanding colonial administration. Moreover, the geographical location was responsible for the Bengalis to migrate to Burma. There was

no natural barrier between Burma and Bengal except only the tropical jungles and the Arakan Mountains which are not too high. Chittagong was attached to Arakan and Akyab of Burma. This was added with the colonial policy of immigration. The Bengalis' prior acquaintance with the English language, rules, procedures and practices proved to be an advantage on which the British could rely upon and the local people could not compete with them. As a result they soon started dominating in the respective professional fields in their host societies. In its course of settlement in Burma it has left a deep impact on the political, economy and cultural development of Burma. The present study does not restrict itself on the Bengali community but it has also studied the Indian community other than the Bengalis in one of the chapter.

There are many new publications and reprints of the books used in the later years but I could not use them as they were not available to me. The Bengali books and writings have been made into English as free translation. The sources and earlier books have mentioned the country as 'Burma' though it is now known as 'Myanmar'. In the present study I have chose to mention the country as Burma as Burma 'Muluk' was more dearly and near to the Bengalis than Myanmar.