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Burma–Bengal Crossings: Intercolonial Connections in Pre-Independence India

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ABSTRACT

The large-scale movement of people between Burma and Bengal in the early twentieth century has been explored recently by authors such as Sugata Bose and Sunil Amrith who locate Burma within the wider migratory culture of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. This article argues that the long and historical connections between Bengalis and Burmese were transformed by the British colonisation of the region. Through an analysis of selected literary texts in Bengali, some by well-known and others by obscure writers, this article shows that, for Indians, Burma constituted an elsewhere where the fantastic and superhuman were within reach, and caste and religious constraints could be circumvented and radical possibilities enabled by masquerade and disguise.

KEYWORDS

Bengal; Burma; Saratchandra Chattopadhyay; cultural studies; anti-colonialism; migration; diasporas

This is Burma and it is unlike any land you know about.

Rudyard Kipling, *Letters from the East* (1898)

Introduction

Burma is a spectre that haunts the story of the east coast of India. Its geographical placement as one of India's closest neighbours, sharing a thousand kilometres of common borders, is in contradiction to the elusive shadow that it intermittently casts on the emotional cartography of eastern India and, for the purposes of this paper, particularly Bengal. This lacuna in the shared and layered histories of the Eastern Indian Ocean has as much to do with shared colonial pasts as with the tendency of modern nation-states to treat relatively recent borders as sacred and inviolable, thereby denying all of the flows, movements, connections, fluidities and uncertainties that are the very stuff of human history and the imbrication of social, cultural and emotional worlds.

Yet these absences may be riven with traces that emerge vividly from family and oral histories, memories and stories of people who lived or grew up in Burma before returning or being forced to repatriate to India. I grew up knowing that my father, who had run away from home in Dhaka, Bangladesh to avoid a medical career, ended up in Burma teaching

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in Judson College. In 1942, he was part of the mass exodus of refugees who managed to make it back alive to Chittagong. In the papers that we found after his death, there was a small cutting – an advertisement in Indian and Burmese newspapers – in which my father was seeking a woman from whom he had obviously been separated during that arduous trek. Who was she? A wife, friend or companion? All we have is a name because my father never spoke of that journey.

Burma inserted herself into my life again when I went to boarding school in Jaipur in the former princely state of Rajasthan. The principal, Miss Lutter, was a European woman who had escaped from Burma. Her companion was a *lungi*-clad Burmese woman who taught us yoga and whom we called "Miss Emma". She always called our principal "teacher". Long after I left school, I learnt that Miss Lutter had begun her teaching career as the Head of Morlan Lane School in Moulmein, Burma. When World War II broke out, Miss Lutter set out with her mother and sister, and a group of 30-odd students, including a young Emma, on a treacherous, month-long trek to Dimapur in Assam.

Both of these stories illustrate the tenacious and long relationship that Eastern India shared with Burma in pre-colonial times. Sunil Amrith (2013) and Sugata Bose (2006) amongst others have described the pre-colonial connections between South Asian nations and the presence of a cosmopolitan world across the Bay of Bengal that predated colonial contact. Rajat Ray agrees that the pre-colonial Indian and Chinese chain of trade and finance, ranging from Zanzibar to Singapore, "formed a distinct international system that never lost its identity in the larger dominant world system of the West" (1995, pp. 553–554), while K. N. Chaudhuri (1990) puts forward the claim that the Indian Ocean blends imperceptibly into Asia, comprising Chinese, Sanskritic, Indian and Southeast Asian civilisations. Considering movements of people across and within this oceanic space offers an opportunity to rethink imperial connections and control and to question our understanding of these relationships and topographies. If the seas are flexible highways with infinitely variable branches rather than sealed tubes of controlled passage (Hau'ofa, 1994), claims of imperial control may be re-evaluated to recognise the vernacular politics and connections that circulated via these links. This article argues that the long and historical connections between Bengal and Burma were transformed on both sides by the experience of British colonisation. This is demonstrated by a number of novels, stories, belles-lettres and memoirs written by Bengalis who had travelled and lived in Burma. These writings show that the hierarchies of fear, desire and power experienced by Bengalis in Burma were structured and experienced in radically different ways. The upheavals of World War II and the end of British rule in Burma started a process that almost completely erased these long and deep-rooted relationships.

Entangled Histories

On the southeastern coast of India, there are forts built by Mughal rulers, and by the French and the British, as well as ancient Roman trading outposts. There are the former colonies – the French one at Pondicherry and the Danish port town of Tranquebar. The complex diversity of this coastline speaks to an ancient history of connections, movements, migration, imperial conquest and ocean trade. As Sunil S. Amrith writes in *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, the countries bordering the bay have for centuries been home to a cosmopolitan world that is strangely familiar from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century – a world of

polyglot traders and cross-cultural marriages, a world in which long-distance travel is a common experience. He points out that far more people crossed the Bay of Bengal than any other part of the Indian Ocean and that Burma eventually attracted the most migrants of all:

> Of the nearly 30 million people who left India's shores between 1840 and 1940, all but 2 million of them travelled back and forth between eastern India and just three destinations, Ceylon, Burma and Malaya. (Amrith, 2013, p. 28)

Before the colonial period, India had religious, commercial and political footholds in the lands of Southeast Asia. Cambodian and Malaysian kings paid tributes to the medieval Tamil dynasty, the Chola. Muslim merchants from Gujarat established many coastal trading posts. The Buddhist temples of Pagan, in central Burma, had Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil prayers inscribed on their walls (Pandian & Mariappan, 2014, p. 49).

Burma was gradually annexed to British India by the Anglo-Burmese Wars of the nineteenth century. The intervention of colonialism elided Burma's historical links to India through its Buddhist identity and the old Arakanese Buddhist tradition as memories of such connections were discouraged by colonial regimes. The feeling of Hindu-Buddhist brotherhood, for example, prevailed until the late 1930s. The Buddhist renaissance, inaugurated by Anagarika Dharmapal through his Mahabodhi Movement in the 1890s, held Muslim rule responsible for the decay of Buddhism in India but asserted close ties with Bengal, which was a strong centre of Buddhism between the fifth and twelfth centuries (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 2). The presence of words such as *magh* and *barma* in Chittagong, and in Bengali folk poems, shows the knowledge of Arakan in Bengal. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, a renowned Bengali professor of linguistics, gave a lecture on Bengali literature at a conference in Burma in 1936. Speaking on common etymologies between Burmese and Indian languages, Chattopadhyay emphasised that "both India and Burma accepted the same spiritual ideology preached by the ancient saints and the Buddhists and are thus religion-brothers to each other" (Chattopadhyay, 1936, p. 34). He called the Burmese "distant cousins" (p. 34) and enumerated the old Sanskrit and Pali names of various Burmese regions, pointing out that the seventh-century Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang, knew the city of Prome by its ancient Sanskrit name of Srikhetra (p. 36). Thus Chattopadhyay's argument was for the ties that bind Burma into the greater Indic *dharmarajya,* a kingdom of shared religious roots.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Calcutta, the intellectual and cultural capital of British India, maintained very close contact with Burma for political, commercial, strategic and economic reasons. For example, Fort William in Calcutta was the centre of the military operations for the British annexations of Burma. The University of Calcutta, as the first university of colonial India, produced "educated" and "smart" Bengalis who were sent to Burma to run the day-to-day bureaucracy (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 1). Chettiyar moneylenders and other Indian traders controlled the local trading, banking and money lending activities. Indians also dominated the security and military forces, as well as the education, health and administrative sectors of British Burma.

Although Burma and Bengal have similar physical features (van Schendel, 1991), the former's economic and social structures were quite different from those of Bengal. There were few landlords in Burma's reasonably prosperous society and literacy was high compared to Bengal. There was relatively little caste or religious hierarchy. What India, and Bengal in particular, did offer middle-class Burmese was higher education. The Hindu College, Calcutta University and the Calcutta Medical College were all popular

destinations for well-off Burmese (Myint-U, 2013, p. 251). Much later, Aung San Suu Kyi herself was educated at the Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi (Nobelprize.org, 2014). The unstable administrative structures and political uncertainties in the mid-nineteenth century prompted British administrators to try to centralise the bureaucracies of Bengal and Burma; thus Judson College and Rangoon College were both affiliated with Calcutta University. The monk U Ottama, who opposed the separation of Burma from British India (Ottama, 1931), was associated with the Bengal National College and had studied in Calcutta for three years before travelling around India. He also introduced the wearing of clothes made from handwoven Burmese cloth, or *pini*, inspired by Gandhi's promotion of *khadi* (Sengupta, 2012, p. 116). It was through him that much of the contact between the Burmese and the Bengali nationalists (such as those affiliated with the Indian National Congress) was maintained.

By 1911, more than 100,000 people were arriving in Burma from India every year by steamship from various eastern ports, doing everything from pulling rickshaws, working in docks and rice mills, trading in rice and other commodities, staffing railways and customs offices, and financing the development of rice paddy cultivation throughout the Irrawaddy River delta (Amrith, 2013, p. 104; Pandian & Mariappan, 2014, p. 49). Historian Thant Myint-U writes:

> At the beginning of the 20th century, Indians were arriving in Burma at the rate of no less than a quarter million per year. The numbers rose steadily until the peak year of 1927, [when] immigration reached 480,000 people, with Rangoon exceeding New York City as the greatest immigration port in the world. This was out of a total population of only 13 million; it was equivalent to the United Kingdom today taking 2 million people a year. (Myint-U, 2006, pp. 185–187)

By then, in most of the largest cities in Burma – Rangoon (Yangon), Akyab (Sittwe), Bassein (Pathein), Moulmein – the Indian immigrants formed a majority of the population. By 1900, Rangoon was more or less an Indian city, and it remained so until the 1930s. More Indian migrants travelled to Burma than any other destination, between 12 and 15 million in the decades between 1880 and 1940 (Amrith, 2013, p. 122).

Colonial Fictions and the "Golden Land"

Just like my father and my school principal, all of these people had stories that disappeared into the ebb and flow of history. Yet some resonances sound down the decades, not only in these family remembrances but also in the literature of the period. British bureaucrats, travellers and explorers, of whom Orwell is perhaps the most famous, wrote of Burma. The first European explorers who visited Burma during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries described in their ships' logs and private journals societies and cultures quite different from any they had encountered before (Selth, 2012, p. 5). Their exoticisation of Burma portrayed a land of mighty rivers, swaying palm trees, golden pagodas and gentle people.

George Orwell, later renowned as the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, served with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for five years and was one of the few writers of the early twentieth century who found the experience of imperialism in Burma perplexing and unsettling. In his famous story *Shooting an Elephant*, he recalls being "hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me". Theoretically, and secretly, he was for the Burmese and against the British. Nevertheless,

> the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been bogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective… With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty. (Orwell, 1936, p. 309)

The experience of being forced to shoot a magnificent beast that had killed a man encapsulated for Orwell the cruel paradox that imperialism produced. He was forced to take this action, not because he wished it, but because it is the condition of the white man's rule "that he shall spend his life in trying to impress 'the natives'". He continues:

> And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib… To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at. (Orwell, 1936, p. 312)

Orwell's 1934 novel, *Burmese Days,* portrayed the country and its expatriate community in unflattering terms. He described Mandalay as famous for five products all beginning with "P" – namely, pagodas, pariah dogs, priests, pigs and prostitutes (Orwell, 2001, p. 296). Orwell later modified his stance somewhat, writing of his harsh portrayal of Burma and colonial society: "I dare say it's unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting of what I have seen" (Orwell, 1970, p. 142).

For the vast number of Indian migrants, however, Burma was the "golden land", a space of infinite possibilities (Chakravarty, 1971). Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay attributes that particular term to the name given to south Burma, "Suvarnabhumi", in ancient Sanskrit texts (Chattopadhyay, 1936, p. 36). Thant Myint-U speculates that Indians may have first gone to Burma to find new sources of gold when the Roman Emperor Vespasian banned gold exports in the first century AD (2013, p. 241). This poem, written by an obscure Oriya writer from Cuttack in 1918, is evidence of the notion that Burma was a land where people could become extremely wealthy very quickly.

> You will be amazed how much you can earn over there. You will be paid one rupee if you cut down a banana plant. You will amass money as people pile up cowdung cakes. (Sarangi, 2010, p. 119)

Even after a difficult journey to Rangoon, and commenting on what he perceives as the venality and luxury of the society there, his poem ends thus:

> Here they till the land and sow it with seeds. They don't have to weed the fields. It rains every day… This is a land blessed by Lakshmi, the goddess of property. The fields are flat and fat with crops. (Sarangi, 2010, p. 126)

In the novel *Srikanta* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, the protagonist, Srikanta, a Bengali high-caste Brahmin, is one of the educated unemployed, living in penury. An acquaintance tells him of a relative who had made his fortune in Burma:

> Burma – a land whose cities had streets paved with gold and where Bengalis were at such a premium that they were lifted bodily from ships carrying them the moment the latter touched the shore, and carried away by Englishmen to be showered with jobs, money, power and prestige. (Chattopadhyay, 1996, p. 916)

More recently, Amitav Ghosh's historical novel, *The Glass Palace*, both deconstructs and celebrates this trope – Rajkumar, a major character, was lured to Burma in the 1880s by a labour contractor who assured him that "no one ever starves" in Burma (Ghosh, 2000). Ghosh's poignant narrative movingly delineates how the organisational discipline and superior technology of European colonialism transformed ancient Burmese culture and traditions.

Roads to Revolution and Rupture

The idea of Burma as a land of infinite possibilities was also demonstrated by the fact that, from the 1920s, Burma became the site of radical political activities for Bengali revolutionaries who chose armed struggle. The Chittagong-Arakan land route was particularly important and activists such as Surya Sen, of Chittagong Armoury raid fame, worked in Burma and had many allies there (Nayak & Bhaumik, 2010, p. 14). Two of the most well organised radical resistance bodies, Anushilan and Jugantar, also developed close contacts with Burma. Their programs included arms smuggling, disruption of communication systems, bomb-making and individual or group action.

By this stage, the British government in Burma and Bengal was working to stop this traffic of dissent. The 1918 *Sedition Committee Report* proposed a series of preventive and punitive measures that would allow suspects to be tried without juries and to be confined in "non-penal custody" for a year or more (pp. 205–207) for certain offences, including the publication of seditious literature, which the British government saw as both a symptom and a cause of unrest. The importation of printed materials from Bengal to Burma came under rigorous surveillance by British Intelligence. For example, the editor of *The Rangoon Mail*, Nripen Banerjee, who published information about the maltreatment of Bengali prisoners in Burmese jails, had ultimately to leave Rangoon in 1927, the year Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi* was proscribed (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 22). Revolutionaries were often deported to Burma. Bhupendra Kumar Datta, who started out in the Anushilan Samiti, was deported to Mandalay prison in 1923, where he met Trailokya Chakravarty and Harikumar Chakravarty as well as Subhash Bose, who was incarcerated there in 1925. In his autobiography, *Viplaber Padacinha* (*Footsteps of Revolution*), Datta recounts his experience of being contacted by Burmese and a few Bengali revolutionaries who had absconded to Burma, and describes how the Bengali prisoners in various Burmese jails tried to smuggle news in and out of the prisons (Datta, 1973). In fact, Gandhi, on a trip to Rangoon in 1929, reminded cheering crowds of Tilak's stint in Mandalay Jail twenty years before. "The way to *swaraj* passes through Mandalay," he noted (Myint-U, 2013, p. 255). For the Burmese nationalist politician Ba Maw, Subhash Bose personified the spirit of the long and passionate Indian revolution and the wider Asian revolution that would change the face of Asia (Sengupta, 2012, p. 119). Thus Burma, like the Andamans, was significant for Indians as a

place of incarceration where many Indian nationalists, including Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal, were jailed (Nayak & Bhaumik, 2010, p. 14).

The *Sedition Committee Report* took note of this "menace" of unwanted Indians and recommended that the movement of passengers by ship be audited and controlled. Passengers on ships leaving Calcutta ports had to be present in the log before the steamer started for Rangoon. It was in these years of the mid-1920s that bills were brought in the Legislative Council to halt free immigration to Burma from the coastal provinces of British India, including Bengal (Morton, 2009). In spite of these measures, many leaders of the terrorist movement went underground in the 1920s and fled Bengal for other territories, particularly Burma. As Durba Ghosh points out, they were able to rely on imperial networks of trade and employment while evading police detection, and set up secret societies to support violent counter-insurgencies (Ghosh, 2006, pp. 271–292).

But, by the 1930s, the extensive presence of Indians in Burma predictably created widespread Burmese frustration and popular bitterness at what was perceived as economic, cultural and political domination. This led to widespread antagonism towards the Indian communities, particularly the Chettiyar moneylenders, culminating in repeated anti-Indian riots during the 1930s (Egreteau, 2011, p. 36). The Burmese felt swamped by the massive influx of Indian migrants and reacted with a "racism that combined feelings of superiority and fear" (Myint-U, 2006, pp. 186–187). Tinker claims that the Burmese term for foreigner, *kala*, was derived from the Indian term *kala*, meaning black, and was used derogatorily for Indians (1975). Certainly there was some feeling that Indians in general were implicitly or overtly *de facto* colonisers in Burma. Ramnath Biswas, writing in the 1930s, asked a Burmese acquaintance the meaning of the word *kala* and was told that, although it meant foreigner, it was usually used to refer to Indians. He comments:

> They did not call the British *kala* because they believed the British were not harmful. They found it was the Indians who were doing them most harm. Actually the Indians carried out all the orders of the British on the people of Burma. (Biswas, 2010, p. 74)

Suniti Chattopadhyay, on the visit in 1936 mentioned above, was acutely aware of the schisms. Speaking in the context of Burmese antagonism to the Indian population in Burma, he advised Bengalis to accept Burmese nationality: "there is nothing to be afraid about this … they would get closer to the Burmese" (1936, p. 39). Although Chattopadhyay was against the changing of names and the loss of the Bengali mother tongue, he was sensitive to the complexities of living in a different culture, however closely tied by historical connections.

Some prominent Indians, anticipating these conflicts, emphasised how Burma's traditions and history differed from those of India. For example, Mohandas Gandhi said that Burma was never a part of Bharatavarsa (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 1). Visiting Rangoon in 1902, he wrote of his sadness at seeing Indians collaborate with the British to exploit the Burmese (Myint-U, 2013, p. 254). The poet Rabindranath Tagore made three voyages to Burma in 1916, 1924 and 1927 (Bose, n.d., p. 7). He also thought that the "double colonialism" of both British and Indian populations gave the city of Rangoon the most unpleasant form of Vanijyalakshmi (Goddess of Commerce). Other than the Shwedagon temple, Tagore did not find anything in the city that was distinctively Burmese.

> This city has not grown like a tree from the soil of the country … this city floats like foam on the tides of time... Well, I have seen Rangoon, but it is mere visual acquaintance, there is no recognition of Burma in this seeing … the city is an abstraction. (Tagore, 1941, p. 14, pp. 17–25)

In her thesis "Constructing the Indian Immigrant to Colonial Burma, 1885–1948", Rajashree Mazumdar describes the events in the period from the late 1930s to the Japanese invasion that saw an end to the Indian idyll in Burma. In August 1930, the leading Burmese newspaper *Thuriya* (*The Sun*), published a series of articles entitled "A Word to Non-Burmans". In them, the author stated, "Indians are outsiders to Burma and while we are not going to punish them for coming here to work and make money, it would be best that they leave for their home". In her view, public resentment over growing unemployment within the country in the midst of worldwide economic collapse in 1929–30 reflected the belief that Indians in Burma were responsible for taking scarce jobs from the indigenous Burmese. Sexual and financial oppression of Burmese women by Indian men added to this resentment. Such xenophobia found expression in the slogans of the Dobama Asiayone ("We Burmans Association") commonly known as the "Thakin Party", formed in 1929, which wanted to preserve "Burma for the Burmans" (Mazumdar, 2013).

The last complete census of Burma, in 1931, counted 1,017,825 Indians. Japan's entry into the war in Southeast Asia in December 1941 created a mass exodus of at least 400,000 refugees, most of whom fled overland to Chittagong, Manipur or Assam (Tinker, 1975). Yet several Indians remained and were influential in Burmese politics; for example, among the founders of the oldest party in Burma, the Communist Party of Burma, established in 1939, were two Bengalis who had taken Burmese names. H. N. Goshal, also known as Yèbaw Ba Tin, was the party's major theoretician and Dr Amar Nath, alias Yèbaw Tun Maung or U Hla, was a doctor who trained the party's medical brigades. Both Nath and Goshal travelled often to India and Goshal in particular played an important role as liaison between the Communist Party of Burma and the Communist Party of India, although he was tried and executed by his own party in 1967 (Lintner, 1990).

Seductive Tricks and Ambiguous Women

The pre-colonial movements and connections in the Eastern Indian Ocean mentioned above contributed to the paradoxical and ambivalent place of Burma in the Indian consciousness. Burma was not only a place where fabulous wealth could be amassed but also a place where Indians, both men and women, could liberate themselves from caste and tradition, throw off the shackles of custom and become something other than their birth and family destiny. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, two of the better-known doyens of Bengali literature, wrote fascinating and ambivalent stories set in Burma. Besides these well-known authors, there were memoirs, reminiscences, autobiographies, all shot through with the sense of an elsewhere and elsewhen, a time when other worlds seemed possible and the schizophrenic world of imperialism with its distorted economic, social, cultural and political relationships could be visualised clearly without the gloss of the colonial civilising paradigm.

Although this article examines mainly Bengali representations of Burma, there are some tantalising glimpses of the Burmese perceptions of Indians in the San Shar stories written by Shwe U-Daung (1889–1973) in the 1930s, some of which were published in *The Case Book of San Shar*. Many of them were adaptations of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales. San Shar was a detective who worked for "royal families and Indian Maharajas". In "The Scorpion's Traitor" (1930) and "A Murder Case on Boundary Road" (1936), San Shar tries to help Indian victims of Indian criminal groups. These stories depict an Indian man who had come to

Burma from India to track down the son of the leader of a secret society who had killed his lover. Like Holmes' Baker Street Irregulars, San Shar's detection is assisted by a group of homeless Indian boys. Another story, "The Examination Paper" (1936, based on "The Three Students"), shows a friendship between an old Bengali servant and a young Burmese student. "An Indian Woman Hiding in her House" (1931, based on "The Veiled Lodger") presents modern city life in Rangoon where neighbours are alienated and strangers. It depicts San Shar's intervention to stop the suicide of a lonely Indian woman to whom he appeals through their shared interest in the teachings of Buddha (Takahashi, 2008).

Colonialism tinged with orientalism characterised both British and Bengali representations of Burmese women. Lord Dufferin, the conqueror of Ava, wrote to England, commenting particularly on the grace, charm and freedom of Burmese women (Maung Htin Aung, 1970, p. 21). Rudyard Kipling needed only to spend three days in Burma in 1889 to be impressed by the beauty of the local women and write his immensely popular Barrack Room Ballad, "Mandalay", which later became a popular song (Kipling, 1940, pp. 418–420). The British painter, Gerald Kelly, was inspired by his visit to Burma in 1908–09 to paint landscapes and portraits of young Burmese dancers that, according to Somerset Maugham, "[gave] us the character of the East as we of our generation see it" (cited in Hudson, 1975, p. 36).

In contrast, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's works present a complex and politicised view of the fortunes of Indians in Burma. He wrote two novels with sections based in Burma, *Srikanta* (4 parts, 1917–23) and *Pather Dabi* (*The Demands of the Road*, 1926), as well as a short story, *Chhobi* (*Picture*), a tale of two young lovers, Ma Shway and Ba Thwin, their misunderstanding and reunion. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) spent a considerable part of his creative life (1904–1916) in Burma and worked briefly as a government clerk there. Some of the most interesting tropes in his novels are the depictions of women freed from the thrall of caste and custom, breaking taboos in a way that would be impossible in India.

Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta* is the eponymous story of a young man who goes to Burma to forget an impossible love. In this place on the margins where rules could be broken, where adventure waited around every corner, a middle-class educated Indian could attain his/her true identity openly. The fantasy of Burma's cartography as an enabler of emancipation for women is demonstrated by the character of Abhaya who is depicted as living openly with another man on being repudiated by her husband who had taken a Burmese lover. Consider, also, this description of Burmese women from *Srikanta*:

> Women of all ages dressed in magnificent costumes, laughing, chatting, singing on the roads … no covering the head, no running away in shame if a man is close by, without embarrassment or hesitation – this is what we need … something like jealousy seized me. Is this a small thing that these women create joy wherever they go? Are their men the losers? Rather, we who have bound our women hand and foot and paralysed them, what have we won? (Chattopadhyay, 1996, p. 919)

Gandhi added his voice to the chorus of admiration for Burmese women on his 1902 trip to Rangoon. "The freedom and energy of the Burmese women charmed just as the indolence of the men pained me" (Myint-U, 2013, p. 254). Kuntala Kumari Sabat (2010, p. 132) reinforces the stereotype in the 1930s with her depiction of Burmese women wearing shining new dresses of many colours, with their hair in neat buns decorated with flowers: "Their faces were smeared with sandalwood paste and golden zinc powder. They also wore silk

chappals, gold anklets, gold knotted bracelets around their arms and diamond studded earrings". Rameshwari Nehru, a writer, editor and political activist, published an ethnographic account of Burmese women in the Hindi women's periodical *Stri Darpan* (*Women's Mirror*, 1909–28). She had travelled in Burma but was also drawing from discourses of Burma produced by nineteenth and early twentieth-century orientalists, missionaries and colonial administrators and on Indian nationalist accounts of Burma. Their common denominator was the description of Burmese women's economic independence and social emancipation. Nehru highlighted the supposedly advanced status of women in Burma as a sign of civilisation that warranted political emancipation and independence from colonial rule (Nijhawan, 2012, p. 1017).

These descriptions were, however, often like mirages; they hid other realities, because in these fictions Burma was actually a place of masquerade where people were able to assume chameleon-like characteristics and infinite disguises. Some of these are particularly venal, as in this eloquent and scathing depiction of the hypocritical and exploitative domestic and sexual mores of Bengalis in the Burmese episode of *Srikanta*. Srikanta meets a young Bengali man in Rangoon who had been living with a gentle, devoted and humble Burmese companion whom he was abandoning to return to India permanently. He had no plans to return or bring her to India "as the entire clan would descend upon them like locusts". When Srikanta asks if the girl would not be extremely grieved, the man laughs uproariously:

> "Grieved! Burmese women are filthy prostitutes with no caste. This one will hook another man before the ship sails from the harbour. This slut eats *neppi* (a pickle of decomposed fish called *guanpi*) and the stink! It's unbearable. They are nothing like our women, sir." (Chattopadhyay, 1996, p. 922)

There is also another searing description in the novel of a Bengali man bidding his Burmese lover farewell, masquerading as a weeping husband at the same time as he contemptuously discloses his real plans in Bengali, a language she cannot understand:

> The girl hid her face in the end of her sari and wept inconsolably… The man wailed in Burmese mixed with idiomatic vulgar Bengali: "Of course I'm not going for a month. Actually, I'm never coming back. Oh my jewel, I am giving you the finger, I've taken your 500 rupees, everything you had, I tried to sell your house but I couldn't make that killing". (Chattopadhyay, 1996, p. 921)

The beauty and gentleness of Burmese women is also a masquerade hiding aggressive unfeminine characteristics. The same gentle beautiful women Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay described above are the ones who violently assault a rickshaw puller. Many Indian male migrants who lived with Burmese women despised them because of the more flexible marriage laws and supposed "loose" sexual practices in Burmese society. As Sarangi says in his poem, "Burmese women are full of all manner of seductive tricks. They make you fall for them and then they loot everything you own" (Sarangi, 2010, p. 121). Thus the independence and emancipation available to women in Burma contains traces of subversion; the tropes of gentleness, beauty and independence conceal aggression, the breakdown of marital relations and avarice. Burma is a topography where nothing is as it seems.

Disguises and Masquerades

In Bengali writing on Burma, things frequently appear to be what they are not, concealed in multiple layers of disguise. Swapna Bhattacharya, in fact, argues that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*, which ostensibly tells the story of the Sanyasi rebellion, is

actually a veiled parable for the anti-British movements in Burma in the late nineteenth century. In 1886, after the final act of annexation and the destruction of the Mandalay palace, the deposed Burmese king was exiled to India, even as the last Mughal king, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in symbolic irony, had been exiled to Rangoon, to die there in poverty. Chattopadhyay, in response to a question from a Russian visitor who was shocked by the annexation of Burma, apparently said, "Bengal was stunned, but kept quiet, since she was afraid of protesting" (Kar, 1992, p. 68). Bhattacharya concludes that Chattopadhyay was greatly impressed by the resistance movements taking place in various parts of Burma between the period of the second and the third annexations, which accounts for his revisions in every edition of *Anandamath* (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 19). It is certainly possible that Chattopadhyay disguised the Burmese resistance as the armed struggle of the Sanyasis. Shishir Kar (1992, pp. 68–69) hypothesises that in the third edition of *Anandamath* (1886), Chattopadhyay included Glieg's *Memoirs of the Life of Warren Hastings* and Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* to foreground the story of the Sanyasi Revolt of Bengal and later "invited" reviews in journals such as *The Liberal*, in 1883, consolidating this narrative in order to conceal his support for armed opposition to the British in Bengal and Burma.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was revered in Burma not only for his literary works but also for his establishment of Visvabharati at Shantiniketan, a place where indigenous and spiritual education could be transmitted and inculcated. In Burma, the national education movement became a central force well integrated into the broad nationalist movement (Aye Kwaw, 1993, pp. 13–14). A Buddhist national college was opened at the Shwe Kyin monastery, Bahan, Rangoon, on 14 August 1921, with 70 students. Of the eleven foundational staff, six were Burmese, two were from South India and four were Bengalis (Aye Kwaw, 1993, p. 45).

Tagore was welcomed in Rangoon by a speech in Bengali on his birthday, 8 May 1916 (Pal, 1997, p. 174). As mentioned above, the editor of *The Rangoon Mail* was another Bengali, Nripendra Chandra Banerjee, who acted as Tagore's host. The Tagore Reception Committee of Rangoon included Indians, Chinese, Burmese and Europeans, and one of the meetings was chaired by the Burmese nationalist, U To Kyi. *The Rangoon Mail* wrote in its editorial:

> May we in India and Burma rise to a proper comprehension of Rabindranath's message and his work! In honouring such a personality, in helping the cause which he holds so dear, Burma will only be honouring the best in her own soul. (Bhattacharya, 2004, p. 16)

Tagore's continuing popularity in Burma can be attested to by the fact that the famous nationalist and intellectual of Burma, Kodaw Hmeing, is called "the Tagore of Burma" (Aung San Sui Kyi, 1990; 1991).

Tagore's short story *Dalia* is a more nuanced example of the transformative potentialities that Burma held for the Bengali consciousness (Tagore, 1961). This story is based on a seventeenth-century event: an Indian Muslim king, Shah Suja, and his family were promised asylum in Arakan by its Buddhist king, but when they arrived, the king demanded Suja's daughter, Amina, in marriage. When this was refused, the king ordered the entire family killed. Tagore transmutes this tragedy into a love story, a tale of enemies to lovers layered over the palimpsest of the historical event. Swapna Bhattacharya concludes that this move was the way in which Tagore reworked his unease at what he perceived as the spiritual atrophy in Bengal. Tagore, deeply drawn to Buddhism, as his later voyages to Siam, Burma, Southeast Asia, Japan and China demonstrate, found in Buddhist Arakan a way of dealing with the growing Hindu-Muslim schism in colonial India (Bhattacharya, n.d.). For Tagore, it

was impossible that a Buddhist king could be a murderer. The magical space of Burma translated this story of violence and massacre into a beautiful meeting between apparent foes.

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's later novel, *Pather Dabi,* was banned for alleged sedition from 1927 to 1939 and again in 1940 under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code and under the Dramatic Performance Act respectively. On 1 March 1939, the Fazlul Haque government finally lifted this ban, a year after Chattopadhyay's death (Dosanj, 2010). *Pather Dabi* presents a sympathetic portrayal of Bengali revolutionaries in the 1920s, dwelling on racial injustices against the industrial working class, and codifies a discourse of terrorism through the language of anticolonial disaffection (Morton, 2009). The novel celebrates militant youth power, whose most famous proponent, Subhash Bose, had been imprisoned in Burma. The novel was not explicitly aligned with Burmese nationalism; it expressed no affinities with the anti-imperialist struggle of the Burmese. Rather, it portrayed debate among Indians in Burma about alternatives to the nationalist movement (Sarkar, 1985, pp. 451–453). It contained searing criticisms of the double standard of the British and the Indian capitalists in Burma and the oppression of Indians by British and Anglo-Indian bureaucrats. It was also controversial in its day because Chattopadhyay condemned several deep-rooted customs of religion, law and social structure and the cowardice of native Indians.

In *Pather Dabi*, masquerade and disguise are ways of dealing with the pathology of colonialism and such strategies are peculiarly possible within the heterotopia of Burma; its curious innocence and energy allows this kind of revolutionary zeal to flourish. The secret society "Pather Dabi", organised by the Doctor, is a microcosm of the idea of India. The other members of the society include Bharati Joseph, a Christian in love with Apurba Haldar, a conservative Calcutta Brahmin, Sumitra, the president of the organisation, whose mother is Jewish, Ramdas Talwankar, a Marathi Brahmin, Hira Singh, a Punjabi, and Krishna Iyer, a South Indian. The location recalls the flight of many of Bengal's terrorist leaders to Burma, and the hero, Sabyasachi (the Doctor), arrives in Burma after imprisonment in Poona and Singapore. Many of the debates of the nationalist movements are canvassed in this novel, especially the role of women in the freedom struggle. Apurba, for example, feels that women and men have different roles and spheres in the freedom movement, but the well-educated Bharati disagrees with him completely.

The connections to transnational movements and the strategies of masquerade adopted by the Doctor to elude the police and government officials in Burma resemble those used by revolutionaries to attack armouries, assassinate British officials and smuggle arms to Singapore, Japan and China. The Doctor's persona recalls that of Surya Sen, the brain behind the Chittagong Armoury raid. Kalpana Dutt recalls that Sen was supposed to be a master of disguise who could slip through police cordons and walk through villages, talking openly to police who did not recognise him (1979, p. 10). The activities of revolutionaries almost have an aura of enchantment; Ramnath Biswas recounts his meeting with a Tamil Muslim in Burma who, in telling the story of a theft of money by a Bengali youth, added, "When the police fired at a Bengali *baboo*, he caught the flying bullet with his own hands, put it in his mouth and ate it up. I saw it with my own eyes. The Bengalis must be magicians" (Biswas, 2010, p. 72).

As Stephen Morton has pointed out, the British colonial government claimed that revolutionary terrorists were legible to the gaze of the police; the police, on the other hand, claimed that they were inconspicuous, hence the difficulty in catching them (2009, pp. 219–220). In Chapter 6 of *Pather Dabi*, a Bengali police inspector, trying to apprehend the

Doctor in Rangoon, claims that he is hard to arrest because his appearance is so "ordinary" (Chattopadhyay, 2010, p. 34). The Doctor eludes the authorities, however, by hiding in plain sight, dressing inconspicuously as a hashish-smoking oil mill worker with bizarre clothes:

> The man had long hair in the front, but it was cropped so at the neck and ears as to make him look practically bald. His scant, profusely oiled hair was parted in the middle and a most offensive smell of lemon oil filled the room. He wore a rainbow-coloured *churidar-punjabi*[1] of Japanese silk with no shawl while a handkerchief printed with a tiger's face peeped from his breast pocket. Around his waist was a fine English mill-made *sari* with a black border; a pair of green stockings were tied above his knee with red laces, and on his feet were shoes of shining leather, the soles studded with nails for durability. He carried a cane with a horn handle. Everything about him was dirty after the long voyage. (Chattopadhyay, 2010, p. 37)

Chattopadhyay depicts the Doctor as a dangerously hybrid revolutionary, absorbing strength almost by osmosis from alien shores, an enigmatic character who is able to move freely all over South and Southeast Asia. His plans and designs are a mystery and he is capable of literally anything. It is no accident that the name given to him, Sabyasachi, which means ambidextrous, is one of the names of the great warrior hero, Arjun, of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. In fact, the police inspector in *Pather Dabi* confirms that "the secret intelligence reports of our most powerful Government reveal that all of this man's faculties are equally swift. He is a dead shot with gun or pistol. He can swim across the mighty river Padma… He can speak a dozen languages so fluently that one would find it difficult to guess which one was his mother tongue. He studied engineering in Jena in Germany, engineering in France, law in England …" (Chattopadhyay, 2010, p. 33). The Doctor is the first superman in serious Bengali fiction (the prototype for later characters such as Dasyu Mohan in Sasadhar Datta's pastiches of Edgar Wallace novels) and it is significant that these superhuman abilities are only possible outside Bengal. Unlike Clark Kent's locally available telephone box, the revolutionary transforms into a superhero in a fabled faraway land. Apurba's panegyric of praise for the Doctor goes thus:

> You have given your all for your country, this is why your country's boats cannot give you passage, you must swim across the river Padma, that is why the highways of your country are closed to you, you must climb over the peaks of forbidding hills and mountains; in some forgotten past, it is for you that the first chains had been forged, prisons had been constructed thinking only of you – that is your glory! Who can dare ignore you! These countless guards, this huge armed force, they are all meant just for you! You are able to bear the terrible weight of sorrow, that is why God has placed this heavy burden on your shoulders! Pioneer on the road to freedom! Anti-imperialist rebel of a subject nation! A hundred million tributes to you! (Chattopadhyay, 2010, p. 35, quoted in Bose, 2006, pp. 182–183)

Yet the Doctor's superhuman rationality is shot through with empathy; his response to betrayal of him is one of understanding and kindness, representing Chattopadhyay's vision of independence, one that combined the rational modernity of Europe with the spiritual and merciful heart of India. This perfect combination of reason and affect is enabled by the heterotopia of Burma.

Conclusion

The historian Thant Myint-U, visiting Calcutta in the early years of this century, comments on how much Calcutta still resembled Rangoon. "At times Calcutta seemed almost identical not to Rangoon as a whole, but to downtown Rangoon … that had been built during

the Raj" (Myint-U, 2013, p. 250). He mentions the vendors hawking single cigarettes, the men in *lungis*, the potholes, the English and the "squiggly local alphabet". "Calcutta," he continues, "had clearly been the 'mother ship', the model on which downtown Rangoon was based" (2013, p. 250). He thought that, in the context of Rangoon, Calcutta was the path not taken, the centre of a democracy, untidy and hotly contested, with an elite still connected to its past. One of his great-grandfathers, perhaps with some Indian heritage, and a Muslim, had studied in Calcutta in the 1880s. He had ordered books from Calcutta bookshops, subscribed to newspapers and magazines, and taken his new wife there for their honeymoon. Myint-U concludes however that Burma has no real place in the emerging narrative of India as a twenty-first-century power. He found no one who had been to or was a scholar of Burma. "Instead there were hints of a slightly forlorn connection: a relative who had been born in Burma, a recipe that had been kept in the family after a time spent long ago in Rangoon, a sense of an old religious or cultural affinity, an interest, but otherwise little knowledge, and little focus on the changes taking place" (Myint-U, 2013, p. 246). The ties that bound Calcutta and Rangoon had been transformed completely by the experience of British colonisation. Burma's location at the crossroads of British imperial territory in Asia may have created, for a time, both a layered set of histories and a protean cartography where the possibilities of independence, not only from colonial domination but also from the oppressions of traditional social structures, seemed both possible and probable. However, imperial discourses of colonialism and counter-insurgency contributed to public anxieties in Burma around the massive numbers of Indian migrants, their transnational connections and, by extension, their perceived control of the economy which, along with the upheaval of World War II, first ruptured those old relationships and then elided their histories.

The fictions analysed in this article reflect those ruptures, ambiguities and uncertainties in the long relationship between these two deltas across the Bay of Bengal. They reveal the possibilities and limits of transnational connections, both complex and conflict-ridden and also intricately entwined and transformative and sometimes a mirror of each other. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, died in exile in a prison with a view of the Shwedagon Pagoda. His body was tipped into an anonymous grave, and the turf carefully replaced so that within a month or two no mark would remain to indicate the place of burial (Dalrymple, 2006). In fact, however, on 26 September 1943, the Indian National Army held a ceremonial parade and prayers at this site to signal the INA's determination to march to the Red Fort in Delhi (Bose, 2006 p. 183). Bahadur Shah Zafar's descendants still live in Burma today and over the years his grave has become a popular place of pilgrimage for Burmese Muslims who believe him to be a powerful saint, able to confer spiritual blessing and favours. Thibaw Min, the last king of Burma, was likewise exiled in 1885 to die in the port city of Ratnagiri on the west coast of India (Maung, 1970). His stay in India is largely forgotten, and his granddaughter still lives in poverty there. Neither monarch saw his homeland again. These corresponding exiles, symbolic of the end of old empires and the beginnings of new, demonstrate the complex webs of repulsion and desire that have defined these intercolonial relationships.

Note

1. North Indian style dress of tight trousers and long collarless shirt.

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