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The Burma Exodus of 1942: Life Narratives, Humanitarian Crisis, and Colonial Failure

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The Burma Exodus of 1942: Life Narratives, Humanitarian Crisis, and Colonial Failure[1]

Dr Leisangthem Gitarani Devi

Abstract

This paper foregrounds the 1942 Burma Exodus by examining the life narratives written by Indian refugees from Burma, alongside a critical enquiry of administrative correspondence regarding evacuation policies. It highlights the humanitarian crisis following the exodus of almost half a million refugees from Burma to India in 1942. Situating the exodus and the evacuation policies within a broader colonial framework, the paper argues that civilian safety and welfare were undermined by the imperial focus in safeguarding its military and economic interests. Beyond documenting the visceral experiences of displacement, discrimination, exhaustion, and disease, these narratives and correspondence reveal the fault lines within the colonial apparatus for evacuation and the decline of public confidence in colonial authorities. At its core, the paper contends that the humanitarian crisis of the exodus was not simply an inevitable outcome of the Japanese incursion into Burma; it was rather a culmination of the administrative crisis in addressing the apprehensions and anxieties of the colonial subjects in Burma.

Keywords: Burma exodus, evacuation, life narratives, Second World War, refugees, colonial crisis

Introduction

Writings on the Burma Exodus of 1942 not only document the mass displacement of Indian settlers from Burma,[2] but also reveal the fault lines and crisis within the colonial

[1] This paper is a revised version of the public lecture delivered at Centre for Contemporary Studies, PMML, New Delhi, on 24 July 2025.

[2] As this paper categorically focuses only on Burma refugees, it does not engage with the accounts of Indian evacuees from other parts of Asia-Pacific, particularly from Malaya. When Japanese Army invaded larger parts of these regions, evacuees from Malaya also arrived in India around the same time that Burma Exodus was taking place. While Indians from Malaya – those who arrived via ships – endured tremendous hardship and displacement after the Japanese bombing of Malaya, there was no notable mention or report of hostilities by the Malays. This, however, is not to state that there is no history of resentments and misgivings between the two communities. Despite their contribution in building Malaya's resources and economy and despite being in Malaya for decades, Indians bore the brunt of unequal legal provisions and prejudices. K.A. Neelakandha Iyer, *Indian Problems in Malaya: A Brief Survey in Relation to Emigration*, (Kuala

administration. Triggered by the swift advances of the Japanese Army into British held territories in Southeast Asia during the Second World War, particularly after successive air raids on Rangoon and on other parts of Burma in December 1941, almost half a million people fled from Burma to India.[3] By the early months of 1942, thousands of people escaped Burma by sea and air routes, while they were still in operation. Evacuees who could not get passage through sea and air routes eventually trekked through the mountainous routes leading into the borderlands of Assam and Manipur.

Life narratives, official and personal correspondence, and newspaper reports reveal how the arrival of these refugees in haggard and emaciated conditions cast the colonial administration in disarray. The colossal failure in protecting colonial subjects, in the wake of Japanese advances, drew sharp criticism from several Indian nationalists. Civilian evacuation, however, was a secondary concern compared to other imperial concerns owing to the military exigencies in Burma. In such circumstances, how did imperial priorities and policies shape the experiences of civilian evacuees? How did refugees navigate an imperial logic that sought order and control over humanitarian welfare? To examine these questions, this paper offers a critical reading of the accounts by Captain Salahuddin Nadir Tyabji,[4] Dr Jehangir Anklesaria,[5] Manoranjan Chakravarti,[6] Manasi

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Lumpur, F.M.S.: "The Indian" Office 1938), 36; Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957),*(London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44-45.

[3] Estimates vary depending on which source is being referred to. Hugh Tinker, one of the first to write about the Burma exodus, informs at least 400,000 refugees trekked to India (2). Furthermore, an estimate of 14,154 people were flown out of north Burma, and 70,000 were shipped out to Madras and Calcutta, Tinker reports in "A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1975): 1–15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20070108, 5, 9. Michael D. Leigh in his exhaustive work on the colonial evacuation in 1942 presents a comparative "best guess" of the different estimates by different colonial officials. Leigh informs 60,000 people taking boat from Rangoon, and 74,000 through the Arakan route partially by trek and by steamer from Prome-Akyab-Chittagong; 12,200 travelling to India by air; and 2,20,000 trekking through the Hukawng-Ledo route and Tamu-Imphal-Dimapur route, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma: Analysing the 1942 Colonial Disaster* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). 27.

[4] This memoir is hosted on Amitav Ghosh's website in the section "1942 Burma Exodus Archives." The "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42; a Memoir by Captain Nadir S. Tyabji" was compiled by Hashim Tyabji, Nadir Tyabji's son. It is approximately 30,000 words long and posted in 12 parts, https://amitavghosh.com/exodus-from-burma-1941-42-a-memoir-by-captain-nadir-s-tyabji-part-1/.

[5] Dr Anklesaria was a port health officer in Rangoon and was later appointed the Agent of the British Army to manage the outbreak of cholera during the Retreat from Burma. Tehmton S. Mistry compiled Dr Anklesaria's experiences in *The 24th Mile: An Indian Doctor's Heroism in War-torn Burma,* (Noida: Harper Collins India, 2021).

[6] Manoranjan Chakravarti in his memoir registers the experience of the Rangoon bombing on 23 December 1942 and the chaos and crisis thereafter. He was part of the many thousands who trekked through the Chindwin Valley-Imphal route, *Bomār Bhoye Burma Tyāg* [Leaving Burma in Fear of Bomb], 1944. I have retained the translation of the title from Parthasarathi Bhaumik, *Bengalis in Burma: A Colonial Encounter (1886–1948)* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 157. Bhaumik's book informed me of the memoirs written (in Bengali) by evacuees who undertook the Burma trek.

Mukhopadhyay,[7] and M.P. Mariappan.[8] They were Indian settlers in Burma until 1942, when they were forced to leave their homes in the midst of destruction and death.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the emergent conditions in Rangoon that triggered the massive trek of settlers from Burma to Manipur and Assam. They passed through mountainous jungles and rivers under the most trying circumstances. The second part charts the overland routes traversed by the refugees on their flight from perils to 'safety.' When these refugees arrived at the borderlands, they were a sight of horror and pity. The third part foregrounds the emotional resonance of witnessing the 'homecoming' of the Indians from Burma and establishes how they implicated the colonial empire. The fourth part foregrounds the visceral experiences of the exodus as registered in the life narratives of the Burma evacuees.

Panic in Rangoon

Rangoon bombing, as the *punctum originis* that set into motion the harrowing flight of hundreds of thousands of people from Burma to India, is a tale told oft-enough and is yet crucial to framing the backdrop of the Exodus. The air raid on Rangoon on 23 December 1941 reportedly killed some 1000 people who had rushed out into the streets to watch the spectacle in the sky. Another 2000 people were left injured by the bombing.[9] Survivors reported witnessing thousands of bodies lying unidentified and unclaimed on roads and in hospitals. The macabre display of airpower by Japanese forces towards the end of December 1941 and January 1942 pushed people from Rangoon to flee either towards northern Burma or towards India.

While the Rangoon bombing was the immediate trigger for people fleeing the city, there was an increase in the evacuation due to "apparent inability of armed forces to resist invasion," preparations to evacuate Government departments, and "ill treatment of

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[7] As a woman, Manasi Mukhopadhyay's memoir offers a gendered perspective of the Burma Exodus, equally shaped by middle-class norms. *Bidāy Burma* [*Farewell to Burma*] (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1950).

[8] Anand Pandian collaborates with his grandfather M.P. Mariappan – who trekked from Prome to Taungup, and then travelled from Taungup to Chittagong by boat and by ship – in compiling this account of the Burma Exodus, Anand Pandian and M.P. Mariappan, *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2017).

[9] As many as 1500 people died on 23 December bombing of Rangoon, Michael D. Leigh, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma,* 82; and Felicity Goodall, *Exodus Burma: The British Escape through the Jungles of Death 1942* (Stroud: Stroud, 2011), 35.

refugees by Burmans, among other reasons."[10] Many left Rangoon to "escape from a ruthless and cunning enemy"[11] – having heard of Japanese brutalities in Asia-Pacific region. However, for the Indian refugees, the flight from Rangoon was also an escape from the Burman hostilities and not from Japanese brutalities alone. Indians, according to Major Bond, "fear the Burmese more than the Japs."[12] Looting of Indian homes and businesses in Rangoon, and hostilities against Indians were but the manifestation of a deeper crisis in racial relations between Burmans and Indians.

Racial relations in crisis

Prominence of Indians in economic and political space of Burma had instilled a deep-seated resentment among Burman nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s. Regardless of James Baxter rejecting the view of increasing presence of Indians "swamp[ing] the people of the country" as "widespread but erroneous view,"[13] unchecked arrival of Indians in Burma,[14] then part of British India, resulted in the preference for cheap Indian labour to Burman labour.[15] Among the non-indigenous workforce in Burma, Indians constituted the largest population. In 1931, they comprised "47.4 per cent of unskilled and semi-skilled labour among male earners in Burma."[16] Twenty-seven per cent of these Indian male earners were in Rangoon. Often called an "Indian city," Rangoon had

[10] Report by Robert Hutchings, 09 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S., 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[11] Geoffrey Tyson, *Forgotten Frontier* (Calcutta: W.H. Target & Co. Ltd.) 1945, 15.
[12] Report by Major Bond, 13 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[13] James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, (Rangoon: Government of Burma), 1941, 94, https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.20775, accessed on 10 August 2025.
[14] 1931 Census records 1,017,825 Indians in Burma, which constituted 6.9% of the total population (Baxter 5-6). Out of the total Indian population, 38% were born in Burma (Baxter 15). Indian population was denser in Lower Burma (849,381, which was at 10.9% of the total population in Lower Burma) compared to the population in Upper Burma (134,157 which was at 2.5% of the total population in Upper Burma) (5-6). Out of the total Indian population in Burma, 83.4% was found in Lower Burma (9). Rangoon itself was considered an Indian town, with a 53% Indian population (21), James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration.*
[15] Tehmton S. Mistry compiled Dr Anklesaria's experiences in *The 24th Mile: An Indian Doctor's Heroism in War-torn Burma,* Baxter notes the deplorable conditions in certain fields of employment, particularly in Rangoon, which repelled the Burmans from entering them. While the wages paid were too less for consideration, the conditions of such jobs entailed "sacrificing their [Burman] self-respect and abandoning the ways of decent living to which they are accustomed" (108-109). Baxter, however, also adds that the Burmans were particularly not inclined to work which involved "hard, exhausting, mechanical effort," Baxter *Report on Indian Immigration,* 109.
[16] B.R. Pearn, *The Indian in Burma: Racial Relations: Studies in Conflict and Co-operation*, No. 4 (Ledbury: Le Play House Press, 1946), 11.

198,760 male earners, of whom 73.3 per cent (145,715) were Indians, while 15.8 per cent (31,413) were indigenous.[17]

Younger generations among the Burmans therefore resented the strong presence of Indians in economic and political arenas. They feared Indians would continue to expand their economic interests and would remain the preferred choice for employment in government and private establishments – despite the availability of qualified Burmans.[18]

Besides being seen as usurpers in employment, Indians were also perceived "as associates of the Imperial power in the subordination of their [Burman] country."[19] Indian Army soldiers had fought for the British in subjugating Burma in the three Anglo-Burmese wars in the nineteenth century. The prominence of Indians in economic enterprises, administrative departments, and in law enforcement agencies gave "the appearance of an Indo-British occupation rather than British occupation of Burma."[20] However, apart from the social[21] and economic causes of anti-Indian prejudice, the political underpinnings – with Indians being viewed as colonizers in Burma – heightened the resentments against Indians.[22] Indians were not just the collaborators of British administration; they were perceived as "co-colonialists" – Matthew J. Bowser claims – "working for and within imperial interests, at the same time using capitalistic ventures to further their own interests."[23] Indian dominance – both real and perceived – therefore strengthened anti-Indian sentiments and consolidated Burmese nationalists forces in their demand for separation from British India in the twentieth century.

Anti-Indian sentiments eventually culminated in and fanned the anti-Indian riots of 1938, which erupted in several parts of Burma, killing 204 people, injuring 1,000, and destroying properties worth two million rupees.[24] It was in such a climate of uncertainty that the Japanese made incursions into Burma, setting the stage for a traumatic exodus

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[17] Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, 36.
[18] Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, 95.
[19] Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 96.
[20] Ibid.,97.
[21] B.R. Pearn examines the circumstances under which Indians became a dominating presence in Burma and why the Burmans viewed them with resentment. Pearn, *The Indian in Burma*, 1-36.
[22] Matthew J. Bowser, "Partners in Empire? Co-colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 1 (June 22, 2020): 118–147, https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1783113, 120, accessed on 23 July 2025.
[23] Ibid., 121.
[24] Bowser, "Partners in Empire?", 119. The riots began on 26 July 1938 and continued till mid-September 1938, Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*, 158.

and displacement of Indians from Burma. Encapsulating the hostility in the years preceding Japanese invasion, Chakravarti puts:

> 1937-42 became the most eventful and fateful years for the Indian community in Burma. This period witnessed a spate of legislative and executive measures, cleverly designed within the four corners of the Constitution but clearly directed against Indian interests, a massacre of Indians far exceeding that of 1930 and 1931, and a total eclipse of Indian interests in Burma with the advance of the Japanese Army in 1942.[25]

This targeted exclusion and growing hostility, combined with the looming threat of Japanese aggression, further fuelled fear in the minds of the people who were already losing confidence in the colonial authorities. The collapse of British administration had become imminent in the face of an aggressive advance by Japanese Army and it raised the spectre of renewed Burmese hostilities among the Indians.

Nadir Tyabji, Assistant to the Agent of Indian Government in Burma, captures this uncertainty and anxiety that prevailed:

> daily bombing raids by the Japanese and the growing public realisation of the pathetic inadequacy of defence preparedness both in the air and on the ground had led to a growing certainty that the British were on their way out. The dilemma for the majority of Indians … [was] whether to stay back and make their peace with the Japanese or risk the hazards of a trek of some hundreds of miles with wives and children … as also Burmese brigandage along the hill tracks further north.[26]

While the conditions above fuelled the panic retreat of Indians from Rangoon, thereby almost bringing the city to a halt, the colonial authority in Rangoon was in a dilemma, initiating civilian evacuation while mobilising for a defensive position against the Japanese attack. The delayed and mismanaged evacuation of civilians compromised their safe passage, resulting in the chaos and crisis that characterised the evacuation efforts. In their flight from the Japanese invasion and possible Burmese atrocities, Indian evacuees – forced to trek through jungle routes – were exposed not only to the perils of the terrain and the climate but also to discriminatory evacuation policies. The exodus of refugees on

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[25] The Tenancy Act and Land Purchase Bill 1938 were two such legislations that were considered anti-Indian as their provisions disadvantaged the landlords, who happened to be primarily Indians. Hutchings, "Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in Burma for the year ending December 1940," Enclosure 2, Letter dated 20 April 1941 by Gilbert Laithwaite, Private Secretary to the Viceroy of India, to M.J. Clauson, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for India, NAIPUB00007586, File no. 194, (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 1941; Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*, 154.

[26] Hashim Tyabji, "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42; a Memoir by Captain Nadir S. Tyabji," Part 1, *Amitav Ghosh (Blog)*, 2014, https://amitavghosh.com/exodus-from-burma-1941-42-a-memoir-by-captain-nadir-s-tyabji-part-1/, accessed on 15 January 2025.

overland routes from Burma to India laid bare a visceral experience, shaped by military and other prerogatives, that undermined the integrity of colonial rule in Burma and India. Before we examine how colonial priorities and policies shaped the 1942 Burma Exodus, it will be helpful to first look at the evacuation routes.

Overland Evacuation Routes:

Major-General Wood, the Administrator General of Eastern Frontier Communications and Chief Refugee Administrator, Burma Refugee Organisation, describes the overland route through the frontier regions as:

> a jungle tract of country about 400 miles from North to South and varying in width from 100 to 200 miles, which might be described as a 'desert' in which communications, transport, supplies and medical resources were in no way sufficient for the numbers of refugees who had to traverse it…. In the middle of this 'desert' like a backbone is the hill barrier separating Burma from India with its passes ranging from 5,000 to 8,000 feet high.[27]

The extremities of this jungle tract were heightened by the unforgiving monsoon conditions under which the evacuation was organized. Field Marshal Viscount Wavell**,** Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in 1942, recounts that besides being "one of the wettest parts of the world" at the height of the monsoon,

> the thick jungle was infested with all the tropical plagues of mosquitoes, leeches, flies and similar pests; there were long steep ascents and descents; deep, swift, swollen rivers lay across the path; there were no local supplies of food available.[28]

The evacuation process on these mountainous routes pushed human endurance to a breaking point, above all, put humanity on trial. There were three overland routes that the refugees followed during the Burma exodus: Arakan-Bengal Route, Chindwin Valley-Manipur route, and Hukawng Valley-Ledo route.

The Arakan-Bengal Route

The Arakan-Bengal route comprised four stages of travel: (a) Rangoon-Prome (b) Prome-Taungup (c) Taungup-Akyab and (d) Akyab-Chittagong. The first stage – Rangoon to Prome (180 miles) – was either covered on foot or by train. The second stage entailed a journey by river launch between Prome and Padaung, and by trek of 110 miles from

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[27] Wood, Broadcast on "The Evacuation of Refugee from Burma to Assam," in Delhi at 7.30 p.m. on 11 November 1942, File No. 126-87/42 O.S., (New Delhi: National Archives).
[28] Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, "Preface," *Forgotten Frontier* by Geoffrey Tyson (Calcutta: W.H. Target & Co. Ltd, 1945).

Padaung to Taungup Pass in the Arakan 'Yoma' (hills). The third stage, from Taungup to Akyab, a distance of 36 hours, was covered by steam launch or even by country boat. It could take 7-9 days of travel. People who trekked the overland route from Taungup to Akyab took 22 days to reach Akyab, which was about 200 miles.[29] The route from Akyab to Chittagong could be travelled either directly by sea transport or partly on foot or motor vehicle and partly by river launch. Evacuation on this route was closed on 08 May 1942.

Chindwin valley-Manipur route

The second overland route – Chindwin Valley-Manipur route – became the sole route for evacuees when the Arakan-Bengal route was closed. This route involved a 3-stage journey: Chindwin valley to Kalewa, from Kalewa to Tamu – the last frontier town of Burma – and finally, from Tamu to Manipur. Tamu could be reached either (i) by rail from Mandalay to Monywa, then by boat from Monywa to Kalewa, and by foot or bullock cart to Tamu; or (ii) by country boat up the Irrawaddy and Chindwin to 18 miles west of Kalewa, and then by foot or bullock cart to Tamu.[30] The road from Kalewa to Tamu was at the mercy of weather conditions: it was motorable only during the pre-monsoon season, or when there was no rain. Tamu could also be reached via Monywa-Sitthaung and via Pakokku-Kalemyo.

A shorter and easier route into Manipur from Tamu was the road towards Palel, a 36-mile-long route. Another route to enter Manipur from Tamu was the Mintha-Heirok route, leading up to Imphal. Tamu-Bishenpur-Silchar track was the third route especially planned as the 'overflow route,'[31] if the communication between Tamu and Palel were to break down. Evacuees even entered the Naga Hills region up to Imphal and Kohima from Homalin and other neighbouring areas on the Upper Chindwin.[32] Evacuation on Kalewa-Tamu route was closed on 12 May 1942.

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[29] Note by Department of Overseas, 04 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942., (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[30] Report by Bond, 13 March 1942, File no. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[31] Telegram by Administrator General, 12 March 1942, File no. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India). Report by Robert Hutchings, 09 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S., 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[32] Correspondence by A.V. Pai, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, 21 April 1942, File no. F Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S., 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

Hukawng Valley-Ledo route

This route took the evacuees through the Patkai range – scaling the Pangsau Pass at 4,000 feet above the Hukawng Valley – via Shinbwiyang to Ledo (Lekhapani).[33] Evacuation on this route began on 13 May 1942, after the Indian Tea Association (ITA) was entrusted with the evacuation project on this route. After Mandalay was bombed on 03 April 1942, some 100,000 refugees from Rangoon who had been camping in Mandalay fled toward the Kalewa-Tamu route while some fled toward Myitkina, hoping for evacuation by air. However, after Kalewa route was closed on 12 May, and after Bhamo and Myitkina fell to the Japanese Army, those refugees who could not take the Kalewa-Tamu-Imphal route and also those who could not be evacuated by air from Myitkina – which was bombed on 08 May – travelled further north towards the Hukawng Valley-Ledo route. The advancing monsoon and subsequent broken lines of communication made access to the most forward camps difficult. Under such trying conditions the Royal Air Force stepped in for airdropping large supplies at Shinbwiyang and at camps between Shinbwiyang and the Pangsau Pass. The ITA formally withdrew its evacuation operations on 31 July 1942.[34] The ITA reported the arrival of 1,64,984 evacuees at Margherita Rest Camp in Assam.[35]

The formal withdrawal of the evacuation operations, however, in no way signaled the end of the exodus. Several refugees remained stranded along the Hukawng Valley-Ledo route, and rescue efforts continued as late as December 1942. Institutionally, the delayed and disorganized evacuation operations amounted to a colossal failure on the part of the British Empire. Individually, colonial officials were left frustrated and helpless upon being confronted with the straggling mass of evacuees, desperately seeking some relief on the way to their homeland. Justice H.B.L Braund, Chief Refugee Administrator of post-monsoon Burma Refugee Organisation, could not help complaining:

> The fact remains that, if we had been more freely supplied with men of the right type to work on this road, we could have reached out further and undoubtedly done more. It has

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[33]Another route was through the Chaukan Pass on Patkai hills which was the most exacting route and therefore evacuees were cautioned against using the same. H.F. Oxbury, "Diary of events regarding Land Evacuation from Mytikyina to Assam," In *Report on the Evacuation of the Northern and Eastern Districts of Burma by Routes Leading to Northern Assam*, File No. 601/10920/H, (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 94. Millar's Diary records the tortuous conditions under which Millar crossed the Chaukhan Pass, Mr. Millar's Diary, Enclosure, Letter from Andrew G. Clow to the Viceroy of India, 16 June 1942, File No. MSS_EUR_F_125_35_2177, (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 101-104.

[34] Correspondence by A.V. Pai, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, 21 April 1942, File no. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India)

[35] Ibid.

> been a niggardly effort and I think that feeling will run high in India when the facts are fully known.[36]

Therefore, the scene of thousands of desperate Indians trudging toward their homeland acquired deeper political implications.

Witnessing Indian refugees' 'homecoming'

Before leaving Rangoon on 01 March, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the Governor of Burma, in his last radio broadcast, invoked Tobruk and Moscow in a sort of rhetorical promise to see Rangoon through the siege heroically and eventually emerge victorious.[37] However, thousands of refugees arriving from Burma to their 'homeland' in tattered and emaciated condition disrupted the colonial rhetoric of order and protection.

Manoranjan Chakraborty portrays the chaos that characterised the escape from Rangoon in his memoir *Bomār Bhoye Burma Tyāg [Leaving Burma in Fear of the Bomb]* where "people are hanging from the handles like bats" and some "even climbed up and sat on the roof." Chakraborty saw people "lifting their cloth up to the knees, dirty coolie-class men … standing and sitting packed tightly in first class, and the pant-wearing babu-sahibs … sticking their faces out through the broken glass of the third-class toilet window!"[38] Manasi Mukhopadhyay too portrays a similar scene in the river-launch in *Bidāy Burma [Farewell to Burma]* where "there wasn't a single inch of space left." Much to her repulsion, she felt like people had "turned into livestock." The launch she was in presented "a grotesque sight" with "noise, shouting, garbage, and foul smells."[39] Both the scenes of departure from Burma – presented from a middle class perspective – are visuals of chaos indicating disillusionment with and loss of confidence in colonial rhetoric of order and protection.

The Governor of Burma had assured that he did not intend to leave Rangoon "whatever may happen in the immediate future," and he would do everything to defend Rangoon.[40] Yet, upon listening to the Governor's assurance that "the British Indian forces had

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[36] Letter by H.B.L. Braund to G.S. Bozman, 30 October 1942, File No. 126-59/42-O.S., (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[37] Gallagher, *Retreat into the East,* 212.
[38] Chakravarti, *Bomār Bhoye Burma Tyāg*, 10.
[39] Manasi Mukhopadhyay, *Bidāy Burma*, 8.
[40] "Bassein Bombed – heavy casualties inflicted on the Japanese," *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 22 February 1942, Calcutta, MF2790 (28 JAN-5 APRIL 1942), Prime Ministers Museum and Library, New Delhi.

consolidated their position around Rangoon,"[41] Nadir Tyabji knew that "Rangoon was finished" and that they were to "prepare for the final exodus from Burma! So much for credibility!"[42] Robert Hutchings, the Agent of Indian Government in Burma, too conveyed the "popular feeling at the moment" which was "one of complete lack of confidence in everybody and everything"[43] – either in British, or the Japanese, or most importantly the Burmans.

After having trekked through the mountainous terrains of Assam-Burma frontiers, refugees arriving in bedraggled condition in Manipur and in other parts of British India became a sight of colossal losses. Nimaicharan, a Manipuri who witnessed this scene of 'homecoming,' recounts how the refugees looked "lifeless" and "could barely hold themselves together." Their stories were of "terrible losses and separation – of brothers and sisters, of mothers and fathers, of sons and daughters either dead or left behind to die – along the hills and valleys they had crossed."[44]

Indians from Burma began entering Manipur from January and February 1942 in their hundreds. By April, thousands of refugees were stuck in Manipur and unable to proceed towards Dimapur due to the unavailability of transport.[45] Refugee camps were overflowing and food prices soared exponentially.[46] The refugees often arrived "sadly exhausted, some having been sent on their way by the Japanese without food. In addition, the evacuation of the Burma army used up all the available transport."[47] Ramani, a resident of Manipur who witnessed the refugee crisis, remembers

> …. As there were no motor vehicles those times, they had to leave behind the infirm and the sickly who couldn't proceed further. Sometimes, they even had to leave behind their loved ones as they themselves couldn't carry another. Those left behind lay on the road

[41] Hashim Tyabji, "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42; a Memoir by Captain Nadir S. Tyabji," Part 3.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Telegram from Agent of India to Indian Overseas, 15 February 1942, File No. Progs. 126-8-O.S., 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[44] Nimaicharan Singh Khuraijam, *Manipurda Prithibigee Anisuba Lanjao Amasung Eina Angang Oiringei* [*The Second World War in Manipur and My Childhood*], 2nd ed. (Imphal: Imakhol Publications, 2013), 15. This book is also available in English translation; however, I have used the original Manipuri text and provided my own translation of the excerpt quoted in this passage.
[45] E.F. Lydall, *Administration Report of the Manipur State for the Year 1943–1944* (Imphal: Government of Manipur, 1945), https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.125400, accessed on 16 April 2025, 2. Mohendra Irengbam, *My Memories of Imphal from 1941,* (Great Britain: ML Robson Publishers, 2022), 242.
[46] The price of rice not only rose from Rs 1½/- to Rs. 7/- and then eventually to Rs 10/- per maund, it was scarce. Other food items such as flour, *atta, dal,* and sugar were also scarcely available. E.F. Lydall, *Administration Report of the Manipur State for the Year 1943–1944*, 2.
[47] Lydall, *Administration Report of the Manipur State for the Year 1943–1944,* 2.

> dying. While many dead bodies that lay on the road were cremated by soldiers, many others were found floating in the … river. Fishes fed on these dead bodies, and upon seeing that I stopped eating fish for a very long time.[48]

By the time the refugees reached the railway stations in Calcutta, stories of death and destruction from the air raids, along with the horrors of trekking hundreds of miles spread and alarmed the local populace in India. These accounts also unsettled the narrative of protection and order that proponents of colonialism had upheld for centuries. More importantly, the refugee condition ran counter to the propaganda of resilience the British Government in India had been spreading since Japanese incursions into the Asia-Pacific region.

In January 1942, the Government of Madras reported that the incursion into Malaya and the air raids on Rangoon had caused considerable "bewilderment" and "anxiety" over the "possibility of similar attacks on coastal towns in south India." Yet, it maintained that there was "no appreciable panic anywhere in the Province" despite the increasing exodus of civilians from one part of the city to another. The government further expressed confidence "that the power of the allies when once it is fully mobilized will crush Japan."[49] Provincial governments elsewhere conveyed a similar reassuring message even as they reported unease over the prospects of air raids among the people after being informed of refugees' plights. The fortnightly reports represented a collective effort by the provincial arms of the colonial state to preserve a fragile balance between public confidence in the government and panic gripping parts of British India.

Despite colonial intentions, "the tales of woe" brought by the refugees "raised sneaking doubts on the capability of the British to defend Calcutta."[50] The arrival of refugees in India continued to feed into the sentiments of the people, keeping the level of alarm and defeatism high. While on the one hand Wood lauded the indefatigable spirit of the soldiers who, despite bandages and "limbs in Plaster of Paris," insisted on not being"sent back to

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[48] Leisangthem Gitarani Devi, "How Women Remember War: Unearthing Memories of the Second World War in Manipur," (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2019), 18, https://zubaanprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SPF-2018-Grant-Papers-Leisangthem-Gitarani-Devi-How-Women-Remember-War.pdf, accessed on 20 July 2025.

[49] *Fortnightly Report on the Political Section in India for the Month of January 1942,* File no. Home Political_I_1942_NA_F-18-1, (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1942).

[50] Amit Kumar Gupta, *Crises and Creativities: Middle Class Bhadralok in Bengal c. 1939–52* (Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009)*,* 94.

their Depots in India but to rejoin their battalions once more,"[51] on the other hand "trains full of defeated soldiers arrived[ing] in Bihar" made "the plight of the state visible to the populace."[52] More importantly, the "failure of the Allies to check the advances of the Japanese" heightened the alarm and uncertainties in India.[53] The developments in the ongoing war had sparked more panic in India than the colonial authorities were willing to publicly acknowledge.[54]

Against this backdrop, the wave of incoming refugees became a telltale sign of a formidable empire in crisis. The colonised subjects were equally disillusioned. N.C. Kelkar, lawyer and political leader, barely disguised his resentment when he wrote to M.S. Aney, Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council: "it must be few consolation after all to be of some service to mere evacuees and refugees whom *your* Government could not defend and protect.[55] By virtue of his official position, M.S. Aney was perceived as a collaborator of a government that failed in its moral duty. The British Government found its credibility dented—neither could it defend Burma nor protect its subjects. The public loss of confidence was not lost on the colonial authorities:

> There can be little doubt that generally the thinking public is sceptical of the chance of an effective resistance by the armed forces, and the continued rumours directed at creating the conviction that Japan will treat Asiatics considerately encourage fatalistic resignation.[56]

The British administration countered such alarmist and defeatist positions by resorting to propaganda measures.[57] Congress leaders were also held accountable for undermining

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[51] Wood, Broadcast on "The Evacuation of Refugee from Burma to Assam," in Delhi at 7.30 p.m. on 11 November 1942, File No. 126-87/42 O.S., (New Delhi: National Archives).
[52] Indivar Kamtekar, "The Shiver of 1942," *Studies in History* 18, No. 1 (February 2002): 81–102, https://doi.org/10.1177/025764300201800104, 85, last accessed on 10 August 2025.
[53] *Monthly 'Appreciation for Dominions' 1942,* 18 March 1942, File No. 47/1/42 (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 1942.
[54] Indivar Kamtekar argues that the "shiver of 1942," as he called the scare of Japanese invasion in 1942, received scant attention as it involved "an ignominious flight for personal safety," in "The Shiver of 1942," 100. Mukund Padmanabhan informs how despite widespread panic in 1942 – which came to be referred to as "the Great Flap of 1942 – "the magnitude of this flap and the extent of the disruption have not received the attention they deserve," in *The Great Flap of 1942: How the Raj Panicked over a Japanese Non-invasion* (Haryana: Penguin Random House, 2024), (xxi).
[55] Letter by N.C. Kelkar to M.S. Aney, 24 April 1942, *MS Aney Papers,* Prime Ministers Museum and Library, New Delhi.
[56] *Fortnightly Report on the Political Section in India for the Month of February 1942,* File no. Home Political_I_1942_NA_F-18-2, (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1942).
[57] Vehicles of Propaganda like war propaganda vans and Defence Services Exhibition were deployed to inspire public confidence and spread awareness about air raid precautions and civil defence. *Fortnightly Report on the Political Section in India for the Month of January 1942,* File no. Home Political_I_1942_NA_F-18-1, (New Delhi: National Archives of India), 1942.

British defence abilities.[58] Jawaharlal Nehru was particularly held "responsible for a decline in confidence in the ability of the Army to defend India" and for allegedly spreading the propaganda that "active resistance was unnecessary as the Government was, in any case, doomed."[59]

In a bid to prevent the Congress from causing "alarm and despondency" at a time when "confidence and morale" were deemed vital, the authorities banned the circulation of the Congress Working Committee's First and Second Resolutions (28 April 1942). These resolutions exposed the collapse of the British administration in Burma and denounced how the government "sought their own safety and abandoned their posts just when their presence was most needed." Congress members also expressed their dismay at the reports of "molestation [of] women by soldiers in railway trains and evacuated [sic] and other places" and "the shooting of people who resisted in some places." [60] The third resolution (01 May 1942) criticized the failure of the colonial officials in protecting the lives of the people and condemned the racial discrimination in the evacuation process in Malaya and Burma.

While institutional criticism of colonial policies—particularly in the context of the Burma exodus and evacuation—was suppressed by invoking the Defence of India Rules, visceral responses to the evacuation process revealed a deeper rupture between imperial imperatives and civilian welfare.

Colonial Priorities and the Visceral Experiences of the Exodus

The colonial logic underpinning the evacuation project stressed on restoring order and rationing resources aligned with broader imperial priorities. Within this complex schema,

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[58] After the colonial government pulled India into the conflict without seeking the consent of the representatives of Indian people, nationalists of different political persuasions swayed between vociferous opposition to the war and conditional support at different points of time. G. Ahmed charts the course of the Congress Working Committee's stance on the war in "Congress and the War," in *Towards Freedom Project – Linlithgow Collection – Letters to Secretary of State for India,* NAIPUB00007586, File No. 194(New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1941); Srinath Raghavan examines the "politics of war" in *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (India: Allen Lane, 2016). Amit Kumar Gupta also foregrounds the paradox of taking position on the war, thereby aligning supporters and opponents of Britain's war efforts with either anti-Fascist or anti-Imperialist positions in *Crises and Creativities.*

[59] *Fortnightly Report on the Political Section in India for the Month of February 1942,* File no. Home Political_I_1942_NA_F-18-2, (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1942).

[60] "Issues of Prohibitory Orders under Defence Rule 41(1) (b) against the publication of resolutions adopted by the Congress Working Committee at Allahabad," File no. F-4-2/1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1942).

the exigencies of evacuation—more often than not—was subordinate to other administrative and military concerns. Civilian evacuation was therefore not only delayed but also implemented in half measure, resulting in an untold humanitarian crisis. The visceral responses of the refugees—as borne out in their life narratives—articulate this crisis with searing clarity.

With people fleeing Rangoon after the bombing, roads and buildings, ports and refineries, hotels and offices, banks and hospitals had almost come to a halt. Dr Jehangir Anklesaria recalls in *The 24th Mile*

> The docks had come to a standstill. The roads were choked with Indians using every mode of transport available to go north…. Despite mass exodus, the port of Rangoon, and indeed Rangoon itself, was too vital to be shut down. Through it flowed the lifeblood of Upper Burma and all the resources the British would need to counter the Japanese invasion.[61]

Burma Government therefore kept the land routes—Prome to Akyab route, and Chindwin Valley-Imphal route—closed from January until 06 February to prevent workers in essential occupation from leaving Rangoon. When this route was finally re-opened—after a month's closure—following complaints to the Indian Overseas Department, Burma Government chose to not advertise the opening of the Taungup route for fear of starting "a landslide of essential labour from Rangoon" as at least 10,000 people waited to go to Prome.[62]

Rangoon was not only the supply-line for Upper Burma and beyond; it was also the commercial hub of the British Empire in Southeast Asia. O.D. Gallagher stresses the centrality of Rangoon to the imperial network of commerce: "it was a busy commercial port, the main outlet for Burma's rice, her oil, her teak, on the swift, muddy waters of the Irrawaddy."[63] The colonial administration had to keep this commercial machinery in operation – until the Japanese invasion made that untenable. Serving as the crucial conduit for military cargo arriving from the United States – as aid to China in its war against Japan – Rangoon was integral to the China-Burma-India's arterial network for

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[61] Mistry, *The 24th Mile*, 8.
[62] Telegram from Agent of India, Rangoon, to Indians Overseas Department, 11 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[63] Gallagher, *Retreat in the East,* 95.

logistics.[64] Besides its commercial tactical importance, Rangoon was also the capital of colonial Burma. Shutting it down would have been a defeatist act on the part of the government—Rangoon had to be kept operational.

Burma Government, despite Hutchings scepticism, therefore, ordered "certain classes of Indians to leave and forbidding other classes to do."[65] To protect Rangoon from collapsing, the Secretary of State wrote to the Viceroy of India pressing the need to bring to Rangoon leaders from various Indian communities "whose influence could persuade the workers to disbelieve wild rumours" and thus prevent them from joining the exodus. Jehangir Anklesaria was one of the Indians who was "induced to go out and reason with the refugees, to persuade and cajole them into returning."[66] The labourers were promised free stay at camps and free food, and were warned about the treacherous road through the Taungup Pass. Many refugees indeed returned and by early January "vital city services – including the docks – had resumed.[67] However, the delayed evacuation by the civil administration had profound consequences, with refugees exposed to infectious diseases, prolonged hardships due to road closure, and hostile circumstances.[68]

Human Toll of the Colonial Debacle

Refugees who had already left Rangoon immediately after the bombing – before the government placed restriction on leaving the city – had only a vague notion of what the overland journey on Prome-Akyab route entailed. There were no evacuation efforts as yet by the Burma Government. By 27 January, when the government initiated the civilian evacuation by Prome-Akyab route, Hutchings considered the effort to be "too desultory a fashion." He repeatedly reached out to the Indian Government for prompt assistance,

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[64] The Burma Road was "a key logistical artery for China" and of strategic importance to Allied operations in the China-Burma-India theatre. It was a critical route used to bring Lend-Lease supplies from the United States to the Chinese forces under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. When the Burma Road was closed for three months in 1940, the supply was routed through Rangoon. Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (India: Allen Lane, 2016). 203, 224. Burma Road had a transport capacity of 30,000 tons of good every month, and at least 5000 lorries running over the road daily, "By the Way," *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 04 February 1942, (Calcutta), MF2790 (28 JAN-5 APRIL 1942), Prime Ministers Museum and Library, New Delhi.

[65] Hutchings had reservations about "compulsion being used to keep essential workers at work in danger areas," Telegram by Agent of India, Rangoon, to Department of Information and Broadcasting, 13 January 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[66] Mistry, *24th Mile,* 8.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Leigh, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma,* 118.

insisting that "India should leave nothing to chance in this connection and should be prepared to cooperate with Burma route officers when appointed." He even recommended the Indian Government to "come into Burman territory" to aid the evacuation process.[69]

As a preliminary effort toward assisting the fleeing Indians, Nadir Tyabji, Assistant to Hutchings, was assigned the responsibility, on 31 January, to assess the refugee condition in the camps and villages along the road to Prome. Tyabji reported that Prome district was meant to handle approximately 50,000 refugees daily. It was planned to free space in the camps every 24 hours, and prepare the facilities and provisions accordingly "to avoid 'piling' up of refugees at these points."[70]

By 11 February, "some 10,000 people waiting to go at Prome and another 5000 at Monywa" were reported. Prome was overcrowded despite the daily passes of 1000 evacuees to Taungup. Shortage of launches and boats for ferrying the refugees forward made the situation worse. Lack of coordination among officials and insufficient facilities and other essentials aggravated the congestion. In addition, poor sanitary measures made the camp an incubating site for the spread of cholera among the refugees. Hundred people were dying everyday.[71] The evacuation facilities at Prome, or lack thereof, demonstrated the absence of foresightedness and coordination on the part of the officials. The desperation of the refugees did not alleviate the situation either:

> The distance of the Camp sites from the City centre, invariably over six miles in each case had led to families just dumping themselves on any open ground along the city roads creating critical public hygiene and health problems not only for the refugees but the permanent population as well…. Total lack of discipline and cohesion on the one hand and complete disregard of elementary precautions precipitated a horrendous public health problem resulting in almost 100 deaths from cholera each day.[72]

Owing to the outbreak of cholera at Prome, the authorities removed the rationed outflow of evacuees and allowed everyone to cross the Irrawaddy river. Hutchings was appalled

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[69] Telegram by Agent of India, Rangoon, to Indian Overseas Department, 27 January 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[70] Tyabji, "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42; a Memoir by Captain Nadir S. Tyabji," Part 2.
[71] Telegram by Agent of India, Rangoon, to Indian Overseas Dept, 11 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[72] Tyabji, "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42," Part 3.

by the situation: to prevent the crisis at Prome, the Burma Government released everyone without preparation and foresight of the perils ahead. "Some 10 to 15 thousand people" would have been pushed *en route* between Prome and Akyab. The urgency to contain the cholera situation at Prome led the colonial authorities to push the refugees—many of whom were carriers—out of the town and into the wilderness where further crisis and casualties awaited.[73] The evacuees released from Prome without any check either took a river launch (if available) or trekked some 110 miles to reach Taungup Pass.

An estimate of 40,000 evacuees was piling up at Taungup – and thousands more expected – due to shortage of river transport to Akyab. The spread of cholera from Prome and the shortage of water at Taungup worsened the situation.[74] M.P. Mariappan, an evacuee who took the Prome-Akyab route, lived to tell the tale:

> Whereever [sic] there was water running, wherever we lay down to sleep, we would find ten or even thirty bodies also lying there. We had to cook and eat right beside them. There were bodies lying right along the path, and the bullock carts were driven right over them. I remember how the feet of bulls and the wheels of the carts would grind into those bodies as we passed. These were terrible things to see. This is what we had to cross to come back to India.[75]

When Indian refugees started from Prome in early January, to reach India, there were no provisions to ease the situation. As a matter of fact, "neither the Burmese administration nor anyone else seemed to have any clear idea of the physical difficulties likely to be encountered by the refugees along the Prome-Taungup route."[76]

A letter by the Marwari Chamber of Commerce informs the perilous condition of the route from Padaung to Taungup, where the poor suffered the most due to water scarcity; and only the rich could afford to carry buckets of water from Padaung. While water was sold at Rs 2/- per tin and Rs. 12/- per bucket, food too was unaffordable for the poor. Those who survived the journey by foot between Padaung and Taungup reported thousands of dead bodies lying uncared for. They had died of thirst, exhaustion, and disease. There were also reports of looting by Burmese dacoits and extortion by bullock carters at Padaung – demanding "more money from the evacuees who can afford to hire

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[73] Telegram from Agent of India to Indian Overseas, 18 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[74] Telegram from the Commissioner, Arakan Division, Akyab, to the Government of India, 28 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[75] Anand Pandian and M.P. Mariappan, *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2017), 84.
[76] Tyabji, "Exodus from Burma, 1941–42; a Memoir by Captain Nadir S. Tyabji," Part 2.

these carts." Those refugees stuck at Taungup were neither allowed to enter the town, nor provided with any shelter or medical aid by the government.[77]

Another letter by Indian Evacuees from Burma drew a vivid picture of "dead bodies over five thousand … which have turned like charcoal by getting dried in the hot sun through the hillways." The evacuees sought help from the Government for arranging water on the route "which will avoid too much of the cholera deaths on the way." They considered this help to be of a "superior nature than that of the other helps [sic] arranged in India such as at Chittagong and Calcutta" with the provision of food and free tickets.[78]

G.S. Bozman, Secretary, Indian Overseas Department, took cognizance of the water situation *en route* from Prome to Taungup. He conceded that it was practically impossible for the Indian government to address this issue. The problem was in taking water further inland to Taungup from India, as they "could not get it inland for lack of any transport and similar facility." While there were some provisions along Prome to Padaung,[79] the stretch between Padaung to Taungup remained inaccessible to the colonial machinery. Bozman however was confident that he had "no doubt that persons now leaving Burma have at least been warned that water is scarce." At the same time, he put in, "that unfortunately does not necessarily mean either that they will be able to take sufficient water with them or that they will not be charged tortuous prices for it."[80] While Bozman (and other colonial authorities) acknowledged the crisis on the Prome-Akyab route and the difficulties involved in addressing it, he reassured himself by assuming that evacuees proceeding along Prome-Akyab route would have been 'sufficiently informed' about the water shortage. Bozman effectively assuaged the administrative failure in providing adequate relief to the refugees by presenting the problem as one beyond both measure and remedy. Bozman's response typically reflected the colonial government's half-

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[77] Telegram by Special Evacuation Officer B.J. Marathey to Secretary, Overseas Department, Government of India, 06 March 1942, and Letter by the Marwari Chamber of Commerce to M.S. Aney, 13 March 1942, report on the condition of evacuees on Prome-Akyab route. A telegram by Haran Guha and Maganlal Mehta, President and Secretary, Akyab Refugee Relief Committee to M.S. Aney, 6/7 March 1942, informs that over 2000 died *en route* and over 3000 stranded at Taungup for want of transportation. The committee claimed they helped the evacuation of 35000 since 05 January, with the Burma Government paying for destitutes. File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[78] Letter to the Secretary of State, Government of India, and the Indian Overseas, from Indian Evacuees from Burma, Palghat, Malabar, 17 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[79] Telegram from Agent of India, Sagaing, to Indian Overseas, 27 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942,(New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[80] Notes by G.S. Bozman, 4 March 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

hearted approach to the refugee relief situation. Inarguably, the colonial attention was directed more towards clearing the Taungup area than towards alleviating the misery of the evacuees.

Race-based Relief

After Japan overran Lower Burma, overland evacuation was organized not only along the Arakan route but also along the Chindwin–Manipur route. Refugees who took the latter route endured comparable hardships, having to trek through wilderness and mountains without proper food, water, and rest. The journey was made more miserable by diseases like cholera and malaria. The Chindwin-Manipur route had been operational from the first week of February with a daily outflow of 200 refugees.[81] Apart from reports of diseases, distress, and death, evacuation accounts along the Chindwin-Manipur route also highlight racist policies. While extortion and hostilities by the Burmese heightened the miseries of Indian refugees along the Arakan route, they were spared the racist relief policies along the Chindwin-Manipur route.

A controversial evacuation policy was the closure of Tamu-Palel stretch (on Chindwin-Manipur route) for Indian refugees from 12 March 1942. This route however remained open for Europeans and Anglo-Indians. Wood however justified the policy by citing grave water scarcity at certain stages and the need to safeguard ongoing construction work on the Tamu-Imphal-Dimapur road.[82] The rationale behind forbidding Indian refugees from passing through the easier land route to Imphal was met with charges of racial discrimination. When Mukhopadhyay and her family got to know this information, she recounts:

> They brought the news that the 36-mile road through the hills from Tamu to India had been closed to Indians from March 12th onward. Now, only Europeans and Anglo-Indians would be allowed to use that road … the reason for this closure was that those Europeans and Anglo-Indians did not want to travel the same path as Indians, because apparently, Indians were considered to be "too unclean."

Mukhopadhyay asked with sarcasm "what arrangements the kind-hearted government had made for the filthy Indian community." She found out that Indians were directed

[81] Telegram from Agent of India to Indian Overseas, 11 February 1942, File No. Progs., Nos. 126-8-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).
[82] Telegram by Administrator General Wood, 12 March 1942, File no. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942., (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

toward a new path – "a 56-mile long road specifically for the unfortunate Indians."[83] Indians were allowed on this route – Mintha-Heirok route – only from 16 March onward. Bishenpur-Silchar route – also known as the 'overflow route'[84] was another route available for Indians. Apart from segregating the Indian refugees from the Europeans and Anglo-Indians, they were also informed not to expect *cooly* transport on both the routes and "must be clearly warned before leaving Mintha." Owing to logistical issues on Imphal-Dimapur road, and until the camps on Bishenpur-Silchar route were stocked up, flow of Indian refugees were to be limited to 750 daily.[85]

Mukhopadhyay's memoir confirms the complaints of racial discrimination by colonial authorities along the Chindwin-Manipur route. Accounts of refugees who trekked through the Prome-Akyab route did not register such complaints of racial discrimination, as majority of the evacuees who traversed this route were Indian refugees (and mostly the poorer lot). Several wealthy Indians and European evacuees had already left by sea passage either from Rangoon itself or by air passage from Shwebo.

The Chindwin-Manipur route, however, was taken by Indians as well as by Burmese, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Burmese, and so on. In the initial phase, the refugee traffic along this route was less compared to the Arakan route as (i) the route had been closed by the government (ii) not many were familiar with the route and (iii) Kalewa was farther up the country for refugees arriving from Lower Burma. By 10 February, when the Chindwin-Valley route opened, 200 people were allowed to pass every day.

Evacuation on the Hukawng Valley-Ledo route, on the other hand, was begun at a much later stage, when evacuation on the former two routes had been closed. Apart from those travelling from Maymyo and Mandalay, this route was also taken by those from Upper Burma who had earlier hoped for air evacuation. But, when the aerodrome in Myitkina – a town in northern Burma – was bombed on 8 March, all the refugees were funneled toward the HukawngValley-Ledo route through the Pangsau Pass, and even through the deadly Chaukhan Pass. People who trekked through these arduous routes experienced even more privations – threatened by diseases, hunger, thirst, wilderness, and death.

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[83] Mukhopadhyay *Biday Barma,* 92.
[84] Prepared specially to accommodate refugees when the lines of communication on normal route break down.
[85] Telegram by Administrator General Wood, 12 March 1942, File no. Progs., Nos. 126-7-O.S, 1942, (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

Closing remarks

Accounts of the Burma Exodus by Indian refugees and by those officials who were part of the evacuation process became a catalogue of hardships, desperations, and challenges during the trek. It was not just the fear of Japanese that persecuted the refugees through the journey; Cholera, thirst, Burman aggression and extortion hounded them. As colonial authorities failed to provide life-saving essentials and relief along the evacuation routes, evacuees were pushed to desperation. With the Japanese army advancing up north, the Arakan route was prioritised for closure. At this juncture, evacuees' welfare was not the primary concern; administrative closure of the route was. Whatever lines of communication remained were therefore utilised for mobilising civilian transport from Taungup to Akyab, and then from Akyab to Chittagong. Evacuation along this route came to a close by 08 May.

When volume of exodus along the Chindwin-Manipur route increased, new dimensions of experiences unfolded. The journey was not only marked by hunger, disease, and exhaustion, but was also made more challenging by preferential treatments accorded to evacuees based on their colour. Europeans and Anglo-Indians were allowed easier routes and provisions, including coolies on some stretches, whereas Indians were halted for days before entering Manipur, and were made to march longer distance on foot with little or no assistance. These refugees – already exhausted and emaciated by the arduous trek – were further humiliated by "desultory" (in Hutchings' words) and exclusionary practices of the colonial administration. In this sense, the evacuation routes – particularly the Chindwin-Manipur route – became a site where the physical terrains not only stretched human endurance but also revealed the moral crisis of discriminatory governance along racial lines.

The Burma Exodus revealed—for the most part—a saga of logistical mismanagement and a breakdown in communication and coordination, culminating in what can be described as a colonial debacle in evacuation efforts. At a deeper level, the exodus reflected a colonial logic that safeguarded imperial interests at the risk of engendering a humanitarian catastrophe. While the advancing Japanese army was the immediate catalyst for the exodus, deeply entrenched Burman resentment against Indians was also instrumental in pushing the Indian settlers out of Burma. The colonial government's failure in providing protection and a reassuring environment further worsened the

precarious condition of Indians in Burma, thereby catalysing the exodus through perilous frontier terrain.

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