**Hostility in History, Friction in Future: An Account of Marginalization in Myanmar**

**Introduction:**

I can still remember vividly the conversation that I once had with a fellow passenger on a flight from Delhi to London. The young charming American lady was returning from Cambodia. I asked a routine question: “Returning from a holiday?”. Her answer was “No, went to experience my ancestral roots”. The answer was captivating enough to generate a long interaction. She was the daughter of a Cambodian couple’s second marriage; both her parents had lost their families from their respective first marriages due to conflict in their country of origin. Her story of parents meeting each other in the land of hope and new beginnings (America) and starting the second phase of their life’s journey was a tale of overcoming pain, showing resilience, cultivating resourcefulness and garnering positivity. Two things struck me while she was talking: firstly, that the second generation wanted to explore their cultural roots even though they were born and raised abroad, secondly, individuals experience belonging, separation and nostalgia in different and varying degrees. Attitudes towards impending struggle are tackled differently with one missing ‘home’ and struggling to create an adopted home; whereas the other more open to challenges as a refugee in an ever changing and fluid landscape. Her parents had dealt with the change in their topography of life differently.

This story of one family led me to the next logical question: How varied can experiences of refugees and forced migrants be? A ‘*refugee*’ is defined as someone who cannot return to his/her own country due to fears of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or because of a particular social group that he/she belongs to.[[1]](#footnote-1) Often they are in no position/unwilling to seek help from the country of their origin, neither does the host country see any reason to shelter them. Thus they are in ‘grey zones of uncertainty’ and the non-recognition of their presence further leads to their daily discrimination. Various categories: stateless person, person of concern, irregular migrant worker, transnational migrant, dejure and defacto stateless are created but the overlapping of many of these groups/categories cannot be overlooked.[[2]](#footnote-2) Conventions & laws including UNHCR rules tell us about the sheer size of the challenge by quoting statistics but the emotional trajectory of each of these groups often than not remains undocumented. As Ranabir Samaddar observes, “*the numbers game creates its own history, constructs a world where observers are enchanted into entering, arguing and counter-arguing in a closed circle*”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The history of South Asia is one of migration and challenges resulting from it. Migration across frontiers in colonial history and territorial tampering by the British (for administrative and security purposes) impacted this region immensely. Later Partition and the creation of new states led to further unprecedented movement of people. Along with creation of new nations, new citizens were created whose hearts and emotions were divided between two countries. One felt uprooted physically but perhaps was becoming emotionally trans-national. Salman Rushdie, the writer aptly remarked of roots being a ‘conservative myth’ meant to keep us in our places but also pointed to a new post-colonial novel/de-centred, trans-national, cross-cultural novel taking shape.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, Edward Said also warned against romanticizing the exiled one or the migrant as a ‘nomadic hero’. The experience of a migrant, according to him, was essentially that of pain.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Over the years, meanings of space, place, identity and citizenship have been re-defined and re-articulated, leading to innumerable stories of desirable inclusion (as a citizen) and motivated exclusion (alienated from rights). Saskia Sassen has observed that the blurring of lines between the citizen and the alien are clearly visible in global cities: the two groups of ‘*authorized yet unrecognized*’ (like housewives – citizens whose social and political agency does not matter to anyone) and the ‘*unauthorized yet recognized*’ (migrants who are undocumented without any formal status but whose informal daily practices lend them a kind of loose social and perhaps political influence).[[6]](#footnote-6) The unspoken yet visible lines of socio-economic divide were seen in India in the 1940s in many cities which took in migrants with these stubborn lines of segregation impacting our society even now, duly reflected in our attitudes towards displaced populace.

Even while the struggle for achieving the basic rights of life and livelihood for the displaced has continued; the language of human rights needs to be accompanied by some sort of morality, responsibilities and duties towards fellow human beings. The whole aspect of acting ‘*humane*’ in a humanitarian crisis is probably the first aspect that people fail to remember. Bhikhu Parekh has mentioned the value of free gifts like love and friendship with moral life involving character, virtue, public responsibility, all of which cannot be reduced to rights.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, the way a migrant or a refugee is treated is not always dependent upon one’s accessibility to formal rights but depends also upon the benevolence/ sensitivity shown by civil society towards newcomers/outsiders. However, there is also the need for a wider debate on public rights as one cannot totally depend on benevolent subjective behaviour. Seyla Benhabib states that ‘*the right of hospitality occupies the space between human rights and civil rights*’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Benhabib further analyzes Kantian notion of hospitality to be not just an act of kindness but sees it as a right which all human beings should enjoy as members of a world republic.[[9]](#footnote-9)

People moving across frontiers from India to Burma since colonial times experienced the entire gamut of ruptured feelings and abandonment of familiar terrain; from starting new lives in unknown surroundings in Burma to facing discrimination from the local Burmese people; from sudden voluntary (also involuntary at times) return to India (in the 1940s to the 1970s) to fellow Indians not acknowledging their role in mainstream society and dominant narrative. The trauma associated with these multiple situations cannot be easily forgotten or effortlessly recollected. The need to forget (what one forgets is equally important as what one remembers) is an intrinsic part of how migrants feel. *Faultlines*, an autobiographical novel by poet and novelist Meena Alexander captures this by the phrase “*I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times, she can connect nothing with nothing*”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It’s also important to recognize the agency that people exercise even in difficult circumstances (like the Bengali refugees in the Andaman Islands), so the tendency to focus only on loss and victimhood should be avoided. Similar dynamism was displayed by refugees of Indian origin from Burma too. South Asia has also witnessed the rise of ‘*refugee warriors*’ where refugees were used as tools in the geo-politics of the region to destabilize local regimes and fuel insurgency, with criminality often being associated with refugees/forced migrants (like the ‘*Kalasnikov culture*’ in Pakistan or the supposed links between the Chakmas and the Tripura National Volunteers).[[11]](#footnote-11)

The repercussion of this negative connotation of crime being attached to refugees was also experienced by the India returned migrants from Burma. The subtle distinction in treatment meted out to regular citizens and second class citizens / displaced or forced migrants has remained till today. With asylum-seekers and migrants of non-Indian origin, the divergence is perhaps even more as there is no cultural commonality but sometimes perhaps it can be easier for them as they don’t carry the baggage of historical-ethnic connections. As Michael Walzar notes that if states were to remove all these differences (between citizens and non-citizens), then there would be more random exclusion at the lower level, which he terms as the ‘*thousand petty fortresses*’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Can one create flexible citizenship which Aihwa Ong discusses or can one re-craft collective memories as they are fluid? It is very important to ask who wants what and whom to remember and in what ways and why. Ultimately these can be manipulated by vested interests, thus recollection, documentation, shared experiences have the potential of being used and politicized. Just like experiences are gendered with women’s bodies (more than men) witnessing pain and healing. Feminist counter-memorializing can create opposite narratives which in turn can lead to questioning, change and activism.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Willem van Schendel’s work on the Bengal border tells us that borders through which refugees pass is an excellent place for re-imagining social spaces, removed from state-centric imagination. The nation state has spaces which are fixed and ordered but the refugee’s physical presence disturbs that ordered space.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus the uncomfortable feeling that the state experiences in dealing with mass numbers crossing over the borders – it is an unexplored journey for the refugee but equally scary for the nation state grudgingly receiving them as they have no other option; often the geography of the region making it impossible to avoid communication. Demographic imbalance, religious turmoil, social chaos, economic pressure and political unease – issues linked with a refugee’s presence - make the refugee a ‘permanent irritant’. Exceptions are there like in Bongaon where refugees were welcomed by the host population as the former were much better in fishing, which was the main occupation of the locals. Thus 500-600 refugees were absorbed in the two Bongaon camps by the local fishing industry.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This brief introduction to the various ideas surrounding refugees (treated as ‘others’/outsiders) would help in placing this paper titled ‘*Hostility in History, Friction in Future*’ in proper context. The paper is divided into three parts: the first part will delve into the experiences of Indians in Burma, their return to India and the struggles that continue; the second part will discuss the challenges and discrimination that ethnic communities of Myanmar (who are an intrinsic part of Burma’s history and culture) face; finally the conclusion will try and sum up the attitudes that prevail and policies that function which do not augur well for the future of Myanmar.

The history of exclusion continues to play out in contemporary times with ethnic minority groups like the Kachins, Chins, Shans and Rohingyas facing the dilemma of constant movement and harassment due to internal pressure factors. The old narrative of non-acceptance of the ‘other’ remains the same but its impact is now felt by its very own i.e. by internal minorities/indigenous groups within Myanmar.

* 1. **A Community’s Debarment: Burma’s\* Calculated Parochialism**

According to W.S. Desai, there were three kinds of Indian immigrants to Burma: permanent settlers who had made Burma their home (some had on their own will and some were driven by circumstances), long term settlers like railway employees and government servants and finally migrants who came for a fixed short period (during the rice planting season and during harvest time).[[16]](#footnote-16) The Chettiar community from the Chettinad district of Tamil Nadu was criticized as it was considered as the typical money-lending class, out to make money by charging high rates of interest. Most of the lending was against titles to land and in the agricultural sector. The Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry (BPBE) observed that there were 1650 Chettiar offices by 1930 with J.S. Furnivall stating that in 1939, the total Chettiar loans outstanding was at 50 million pounds (around Rs. 670 million). He further stated that this figure was equal to all British investments in Burma combined.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Indians were present in every department from the ports to the rice mills, from the factory workers to the construction business. They remitted money to their places of origin/birth with the colonial authorities viewing them as ‘*sojourners*’ who had to be repatriated once their services were no longer required. Unskilled labourers - Tamils and Telegus dominated the migrant labour flows.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rangoon was known as the ‘Indian city’. However, the conditions of working and living were poor with workers not really included in the discussions on wage and working conditions. They really had no influence whereby they could have changed the conditions.

If one looks at the Acts of that time, the Factories Act of 1911 and 1934 did not really apply its safety provisions well with the Payment of Wages Act 1938 applicable only in selected areas in Burma. The Labour Inspectorate was often ineffective in supervising the Act as the smaller rice mills were geographically scattered. The maistry system did not make it easier with its own forms of exploitation like illegal deductions, lack of distinction between day and night workers. Prior to the depression of the late 1920s and the Second World War, the unskilled Indian labour’s monthly average earnings ranged from Rs 20 to Rs 25 (India Rs 6.25 to Rs 9.50).[[19]](#footnote-19) One finds that rickshaw pulling was entirely done by the Indians from Southern India in Rangoon which not only reduced their social status in the eyes of locals but also the policy of the Rangoon Municipal Corporation to reduce the number of licenses and finally abolish rickshaw pulling must have affected the community.[[20]](#footnote-20) Prevalence of diseases like Cholera, Dysentery and Tuberculosis, skewed sex ratios (majority were single men who had left their families behind), prostitution, having a Burmese second wife/mistress, high infant mortality rates were all part of the Indian labour community’s accounts in Burma.

The success of the Indians was not appreciated by the Burmese who felt left out of the economic success. Furnivall’s famous description of the plural society in Burma, “*they mix but do not combine*” was quite appropriate in its portrayal of a country where the Indians, the Chinese and the Burmese all interacted yet did not form lasting bonds. The Indians and the Burmese had separate schools and institutions with the Burmese language being made compulsory for Indian students in the 1920s. Separate personal laws, separate representation for Indians (first introduced in the Rangoon City Corporation in 1882), dislike for mixed marriages and anti-Indian racial riots of 1930s in Rangoon were signs of a society which was creating exclusive spaces and not willing to embrace the ‘other’. Desai points out that the police officers who cooperated with the rioters in the 1930 anti-Indian riots were not punished with a number of Indian constables resigning in protest. The Indians in 1931 were paying 55.5% of the taxes (to the Municipal Corporation of Rangoon) as compared to 11.2% by the Burmans and 15.3% by the Europeans and Euroasians. The Indians did contribute to the welfare of Burma but the Burmese perhaps overlooked that fact; the fact that Indians set up charitable dispensaries and hospitals (the Ramakrishna Hospital in Rangoon was run by the Indians), a Chair of Commerce was set up by the Chettiars and Raja Ramanatha Reddiar contributed to the setting up of the Rangoon library building.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The advent of the Second World War and the Japanese onslaught changed the landscape dramatically. Before that, laws such as the Sea Passengers’ Tax Bill and the Expulsion of Offenders’ Bill were seen as problematic for outsiders/Indians with the former seen as against Indian immigration (by taxing Indian labourers) and the latter ordering non-Burmese to give security for good behaviour or be expelled (if convicted of criminal offenses) respectively.[[22]](#footnote-22) Three other bills can be considered as exclusionist like the City of Rangoon Municipal (Amendment) Bill 1937, the Distribution of Lands Bill 1937 and the Burma Domicile Bill 1937. The Indians too were aware of this treatment, therefore efforts were made to protect the specific interests of the community in Burma. In the 1930s, E.P. Pillai, a member of the Legislative Assembly demanded a separate delegation – an Indian delegation to represent the ‘Indians in Burma’ at the London Round Table Conference, as he felt that the interests of the Indians in Burma were quite unique to the province. The Burma Round Table Conference (from November 1931to January 1932) was held in London which represented the Indians, besides representing other communities like the Chinese, Burma Muslim, Anglo-Indians and women. Before this conference, an All Burma Indian Conference was also convened in Rangoon in 1931 – basically to garner support for the Indian community and its representatives.[[23]](#footnote-23)

To escape the mayhem of the Second World War, the long and perilous journey from Rangoon and other cities of Burma to India through the jungles and difficult terrain of the Indo-Myanmar border was undertaken. Many lost their lives. Sir Reginald Dorman Smith who took over the role of the governor (in May 1941) was criticized by journalists for the failures in civil defense in the city of Rangoon and the subsequent failure in planning the evacuation of civilians.[[24]](#footnote-24) Michael Leigh observes that the evacuation of Indian refugees (about 96% of the refugees were Indians) had political ramifications. According to him it “*undermined colonial rule in Burma, sparked unrest in India and reverberated around the corridors of power in Westminister*”[[25]](#footnote-25) Nehru raised this issue of discriminatory treatment meted out to the Indians in his talks with Stafford Cripps in April 1942. The 9th April *News Chronicle* had a piece written by Philip Jordan which mentioned how he had seen preference and priority being given to the Europeans over Indians in taking airplanes for evacuation.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The Indians in Rangoon under the leadership of S.A.S Tyabji (a politician) set up a Committee for Evacuation in February 1941. But it did not get sufficient support although an evacuation scheme was worked out. The difficult land route was undertaken by at least 400, 000 refugees or perhaps even more with as high as 100,000 deaths or perhaps even more as there is no concrete evidence. The Indians were asked to stay back in Rangoon in their jobs and were promised that their lives would be secure in government organized camps near the city. There are tales of how the Indians were not allowed to cross the Irrawaddy by the Burmese police in certain places unless they paid two rupees or how no-one could access the Taungup route without the possession of an inoculation certificate which cost between two to six rupees, the price varying depending upon the status of the traveller.[[27]](#footnote-27)

North East India was the first point of refuge as Assam, Nagaland had refugee camps supporting huge numbers. Many moved to their native states like Bihar, Bengal and Madras to find shelter and support from relatives and kinship networks. The levels of trauma, pain and loss was immeasurable. It seemed as if they had abandoned/traded the settled phase of their previous life for an uncertain and unfortunate future. Many were separated from their families. Yet stories of help being provided in exceptionally difficult circumstances do fill our historical accounts like that of relief operations carried out by the Indian Tea Association and the assistance provided by them to the refugees in 1942.[[28]](#footnote-28) Lekhapani’s reception centre in the Tinsukia district of Assam saw the *Tea-pot Pub* for the evacuees where they were greeted with tea, biscuits, cheese and jam on arrival.[[29]](#footnote-29)

My uncle narrated to me his journey from his birth in Hsipaw in 1944 to his home in Kyaukme (a small valley town in northern Shan state) where he lived with his family. The town had 18 Bengali families, all from Chittagong except his family who were from Faridpur (all now in Bangladesh). My uncle fondly recollected his Burma years: His father exercising influence as he was the only doctor in town, his own education in St Michael school in Maymyo and in Mandalay University, celebration of Durga pujo in Kyaukme, disruption to life in 1962 with the military cancelling his father’s medical license, confiscating his car and importantly his stethoscope. The anti-outsider mentality was prevalent in the 1960s with most Indians sending remittances and not planning to settle in Burma. My uncle’s return to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1964 and the struggle that the family endured is known to his friends and relatives. The resilience displayed by this family known to me is just one of the many such experiences - many would find this tale very familiar, who crossed from the land of the Irrawaddy to India.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In India, the families retuning from Burma faced their own challenges. On one hand, they themselves felt uprooted and away from ‘home’ (their emotional connect to Burma being broken); on the other hand, they were treated as outsiders in their own country. There was a feeling of dis-orientedness with the compulsion to unlearn certain aspects of their identity. Their existence in relief camps in the initial stages led to ‘ghettoization’ with the state buying time to take a decision on these returned migrants. Often the Indian state’s policy of keeping people in campsites inhibits them from interacting with the local population which in turn reinforces the imaginations of ‘home’ in a refugee’s mind. Thus segregated and spatial arrangements do influence the psyche of a person, who can either feel completely isolated in the process or get motivated to exercise agency to change things for the better. Thus campsites become ‘sites of mobilization and opportunity’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Many refugees moved to Calcutta, Madras, Moreh in Manipur with a few families also known to be repatriated to the Andaman Islands (from the 1940s to the 1970s). Moreh saw an entire Tamil community getting established and giving a new flavor to the border town. The Burmese Tamils even dominated the border trade at one point to the resentment of the local Kukis, resulting even in violence in 1995. The competition from Chinese goods across the border as well as the local hostility made many of them return to Tamil Nadu. There are just 3500 Burmese Tamils in Moreh with many elders wanting to stay in this frontier town as they feel closer to their old home: Burma is visible and reachable, if not physically then emotionally and mentally. The younger generation is pragmatic to realize the lack of opportunities (poor education and employment prospects) and is willing to move out.[[32]](#footnote-32) The government also repatriated Tamils at Shoal Bay on South Andamans and Telugus were given jobs in a government sawmill at Haddo in Port Blair and in a rubber plantation at Shaitan Khadi on South Andaman.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Minor settlements were also established near Patna in Bihar, Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh and in the western suburbs of New Delhi. Many of the returnees were fluent in Burmese but also spoke the vernacular language of the areas where they eventually settled in India. Ships regularly plied between Rangoon to Calcutta, Madras and Vishakhapatnam with the port of Madras estimated to have received around 150,000 returnees from Burma between June 1964 and November 1968. In Tamil Nadu, the state repatriation scheme was in place (1964 - 1989) with an estimate of 144,445 Indians from Burma benefitting from it.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The mushrooming of these Burma colonies in a way compelled the otherwise distant and ever-busy fellow Indian to stop and look even if they did not want to contribute to the former’s rehabilitation. The physical, spatial and social presence of the refugee communities could not make them invisible anymore, although they hardly influenced refugee policy making or initiated thoughtful discussions on the subject.

Egreteau discusses not only the formation of civil society organizations by the refugees like the Burma Tamilar Munitra Sayalagam (BTMS) founded in Madras in 1965, the Burma Repatriates Welfare Society (BRWS), Burma Tamizhar Marumalarchi Sangam (founded in 1966 to protect the shopkeepers of the Burma Bazaar in Madras) but also laws being passed like the 1968 Urban Land Ceiling Act which asked the state governments to assign lands to overseas repatriates. He also mentions the deep asymmetrical trends emerging in community and regional mobilization with Tamils being more dynamic than the Bengalis in displaying their skills in organizing their trade, business and social networks.[[35]](#footnote-35) One finds glimpses of Myanmar in our public spaces like the Global Vipassana Pagoda in Greater Mumbai which is styled on the Shwedagon Pagoda of Yangon. This architectural piece represents the Indian Burmese diaspora especially the Marwaris and the old links between Bombay and Rangoon. Myanmar still has an Indian community with people of Indian origin forming about 4% of its total population. 400,000 are still considered stateless. Many are un-enumerated and this issue needs to be taken up.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Areas in and around Yangon still has a sizable Tamil population; the community has re-invented its identity by marrying local Burmese women with very few children able to speak Tamil. The Hindu temples exist but a Buddha statue also giving company to the Hindu gods and goddesses.[[37]](#footnote-37) There is also a small Sikh community with them practicing their religion too. Recently, 100 religious or ethnic minorities were surveyed by the Seagull Foundation in Mandalay and they found that almost all had faced problems in getting a national registration card. Religion and ethnicity continue to be important identity markers.[[38]](#footnote-38) This seems to be getting entrenched day-by-day with increasing hostility witnessed by the country’s internal minorities/indigenous communities, marked by inter-communal violence.

* 1. **Omission Within: Myanmar’s Designed Debilitation**

The ethnic minorities within Myanmar have been in the news recently because of the violence that the Rohingyas have faced. Nearly a million people are in dire conditions on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. They are not only helpless in the face of insufficient support and lack of empathy from the state machinery but also because of the conditions that they face in temporary shelters. Kutupalong camp in Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh is home to 700,000 Rohingya refugees. The camp has faced several elephant attacks since October 2017. It has led to IUCN and UNHCR to intervene in creating awareness amongst people with volunteer response teams working relentlessly.[[39]](#footnote-39) Camps are in the middle of migration corridors of elephants, thus the man-animal conflict is an addition to the conflict created by intolerant human interaction. Monsoons, mudslides, cyclone season add to the woes of this vast refugee population.

The Kofi Annan Foundation which brought out the report of the Advisory Commmission on Rakhine State in August 2017 has brought out the multiple layers of conflict in the area- developmental, human rights and security and seeks to address the structural and institutional issues. It does mention the Muslim ‘*Mujahidin*’ rebellion after 1948, the extreme poverty (78% as compared to 37.54%) with 60% landless households, flight of skilled people with fear restricting entrepreneurship, the conflict around issuance of resident cards - citizenship scrutiny cards and the lack of representation of women in the administration as well as in the state Rakhine Parliament. The Commission gives critical recommendations like creating inclusive decision making structures in resource extraction, giving proper compensation to appropriated land, improvement of access to justice, cultural development, civic education, enrolling the support of religious leaders in combating hate speech.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The Rohingyas have faced discrimination with restrictions on movement, employment, marriage, family planning with education and health facilities being very poor in the region. The aspect of cultural freedom has been restricted. The problem with Myanmar is that institutions have really not stemmed this discrimination, thus resulting in institutuionalised exclusion which becomes very deep seated with the passage of time. The Chins, Karens, Kachins and Shans have also suffered a similar if not more violent conditions of existence.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw observes that the 969 movement with its Islamophobia made people at large believe that Buddhists and Buddhism was under threat from Muslims and Islam. The rise of a certain siege mentality cannot be totally separated from the 969 movement, although it is difficult to find their leaders’ direct involvement.[[41]](#footnote-41) The xenophobia of the past towards Indians and Chinese seems to have now translated into xenophobia towards the Muslims. The boycott of Muslim businesses which is occurring now is something which was witnessed in Mandalay during the anti-Muslim riots of 1938 with the Report of the 1939 Riot Inquiry Committee also mentioning the role of the Young Monks Association (*Thathana Mamaka*).[[42]](#footnote-42) Certain fears in Myanmar now are quite similar to what we see across the border in India with the Buddhists being fed the notion that Muslims marrying Buddhist women are waging a conspiracy of *Romeo Jihad* or *Love Jihad* in the country, in order to convert the country.[[43]](#footnote-43) Social media including Facebook is further adding to fast paced spread of rumour and false information. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and its operations are not making the situation easy.

The Chins have faced their own challenges. The state has suffered from food insecurity since 2006 with thousands of acres converted into tea plantations. No wonder the Chin state is known as the ‘*Tea Kettle*’ with land being confiscated for cash crops, lands which should have been used for growing corn, beans and potatoes. Many villagers have been compelled to move on account of food distress and lack of agricultural productivity. The military presence and human rights violations have affected the harvests.[[44]](#footnote-44) There is poor awareness of rights, little access to information but the Baptist Church is strong in the northern Chin state. The women hardly own any land titles with the practice of ‘*parcel brides*’ in many townships where the women were sent outside the country to marry Chin men outside and to eventually improve their situation so that they could send remittances back to the home state. Children have suffered from malnutrition and deficiencies in food intake.[[45]](#footnote-45) This region which is Christian dominated has also faced the brunt of religious intolerance with bibles confiscated and Buddhist pagodas being constructed.

The Kayah state like the Chin state has seen farmers struggle with the military’s instructions of growing rubber, coconut and sugarcane for export rather than working on the production of rice. Livelihoods have been impacted as the military has subjected people to forced labour with arbitrary taxation. Women have suffered from food insecurity and it has affected reproductive health. Internal displacement in eastern Myanmar has affected households with limited availability of food, poor iron content in food and resultant anemia.[[46]](#footnote-46)

All the borderlands, home to the ethnic minorities have witnessed land dispossession, resource extraction, illegal drug trafficking with insurgent groups and drug warlords often having a connection of mutual interest (something which North East India has witnessed too). Adam Simpson argues that the country has had incoherent environmental governance and policy making during the military rule which in turn has led to ad-hoc logging, mining and energy projects without keeping the environmental repercussions in mind. Civil conflict between the government and the ethnic groups has further aggravated the challenges.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The ethnic minorities (treated as the ‘other’) have been at the receiving end of controversial, disruptive and discriminatory development. This has been witnessed in various spheres ranging from construction of dams (Myitsone was cancelled with 7 more planned on the Salween River) to ambiguous laws and weak institutional presence. Failure to bring every disgruntled group under the ceasefire agreement (seven have not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement) has plagued Myanmar. The sheer number of refugees and IDPs on every side of its border raises issues of rehabilitation, retrieval of lost lands, planning on sustainable livelihoods and most importantly restoring the dignity along with normalcy in people’ lives. Issues like strengthening ethnic language schools, protecting indigenous rights, rejuvenating regional Parliaments are slowly becoming part of the discussion in the country with civil society organizations playing a critical role. However, the military still has a presence in Parliament, press freedoms are still poor with communal harmony at a fragile condition.

One is compelled to notice the familiarity in the country’s trajectory of treating its minorities. The Indians and the Chinese faced the ‘fear of the outsider’ in history; the ethnic minorities within Myanmar face the same xenophobia from the majority Bamar population. Security, economic, political and social forces /apparatus were all used in the past to control the ‘other’, a phenomenon seen even today in Myanmar. The only difference is the level of courageous social activism and civil society initiatives that have made inroads into the country – forcing sometimes the government to review its decisions.

**1.3 The Path Ahead:**

Myanmar’s march into the future will not be a successful one if it does not include democracy, decentralization and federalism as the three pillars in its functioning. These are also the demands of the ethnic minority groups – of getting reasonable autonomy and power in their own region. Whether rights should be ensured first or demilitarization of the terrain should occur - the battle over it continues. Meanwhile thousands continue to be displaced with no sensitive and sustainable intervention of inclusion yet in sight. Ad hoc measures of containment of a humanitarian crisis needs to be replaced by long term pro-active inclusive policies. Refugees, IDPs, ethnic minorities, women are the marginalized categories deserving justice (the notion of justice is becoming elusive everyday).Yet the decrease in aid in refugee camps (especially on the Thai-Myanmar border including in camps like Mae La) does make the future look a bit bleak and uncertain.

The three important institutions meant to protect people’s rights in a robust democracy (Parliament, Judiciary and Press) – seem to be functioning in a depleted manner and are still captive to the influential strings of the military. The Parliament still has military presence with control over critical sectors like defense, home and border affairs. The judiciary (according to the author an under-researched area in Myanmar) behaves tentatively although rural areas are seeing the birth of legal aid centers. It needs to champion much more actively the cause of freedom of expression in Myanmar. And finally the press constantly faces threats while doing their basic duty – of observing, analyzing and reporting. Myanmar recently imprisoned two Reuters’ journalists and has also taken action against other media personalities. The draconian Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law has been used as a weapon by the powerful who dare to question them. The role of civil society groups and the courage that they have displayed for many years in taking on challenges has been exemplary and this continues to be a ray of hope. Exclusion which was practiced in history should not be allowed to create stumbling blocks for the future. Institutionalized discrimination gets internalized even in the mindsets of people which if not broken on time can get dangerous for society. Myanmar needs to make concerted efforts to avoid that.

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