

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

Dr. Reshmi Banerjee

Myanmar, the land of the beautiful Shwedagon and the captivating Irrawaddy has garnered a lot of attention in the last decade. From its hesitant and somewhat faltering steps towards democracy to receiving widespread criticism for its treatment of the Rohingyas, the country has traversed through tumultuous times with political uncertainty and military violence meeting social protests and economic hardships. In a nation's narrative which is marked by constant turmoil, one aspect which has remained unchanged over the years has been its treatment of minorities. They have always felt alienated, estranged and fearful of the future, in a country which has failed them on several occasions to protect their life and dignity. Meanings of space, place, identity and citizenship have constantly been re-defined and re-articulated, leading to innumerable tales of desirable inclusion (as a citizen) and motivated exclusion (alienated from rights, choices and opportunities). This process of disentanglement of ethnic minorities (often they are synonymous with religious minorities and border-communities) is rooted in history, which leads one to question the resilience of divisive forces and power of exclusionary tendencies.

People moving across the borders from India to Burma during the colonial times were witness to this fragile peace prevalent in a terrain surrounded by ruptured feelings. Furnivall's famous quote on colonial Burma, "*they mix but do not combine*" was reflective of a society where communities interacted for economic exchange but remained socially divided. The Indian immigrants were at the receiving end of the wrath of the majority Bamar population which was eventually visible not only in the poor living and working conditions in which the majority of the Indians found themselves but also in the acts/policies which were implemented to keep the Indians out. Burma's calculated parochialism resulted in a community slowly getting debarred from the socio-economic space, a process which could not be overturned even after independence. The antagonistic treatment which was meted out to the Indians was unfortunately prescribed for the ethnic minorities within Myanmar too with groups like the Chins, the Kachins, and the Karens facing constant rejection of their right to co-exist in harmony. They have faced innumerable challenges of land dispossession, ecological devastation (loss of forests and resources), food insecurity, religious persecution, harassment of women with a general disregard shown towards their very existence and ways of life. Political institutions, judicial courts and religious bodies – the avenues of support which should have worked to curb perennial hostility seemed to have inadequately performed to protect (rights including cultural rights), prevent (crime and violence) and promote (livelihoods). Lack of voice combined with institutionalized omission has deteriorated the prospects of future progress.

This paper will thus delve into the continuing narrative of the non-acceptance of the 'other' existing in Myanmar (by looking at the experiences of the Indians and the ethnic

minorities), its impact on the political economy and the grievous social friction that it can cause in the future.