India’s Vanishing “Burma Colonies”. Repatriation, Urban Citizenship, and (De)Mobilization of Indian Returnees from Burma (Myanmar) since the 1960s

Quand les colonies disparaissent : rapatriement, citoyenneté, urbanité et (dé)mobilisation des rapatriés indiens de Birmanie depuis les années 1960

Renaud Egreteau
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**INTRODUCTION**

To the curious eye, many a city map in India would reveal intriguing references to Burma.¹ This seems rational as both countries share a common colonial heritage under the British Raj from the 1820s until their administrative separation in 1937. Memorials and plaques inside Anglican churches in Madras and Calcutta commonly record the heroic fall of British soldiers at the doorsteps of Rangoon or Pegu during the Anglo-Burmese wars of the 19th century. But there are also a large number of identifiable urban and peri-urban enclaves, throughout India, which bear such esoteric names as “Burma Colony,” “Burma Bazaar,” “Barmiz Colony Street” or “Barma Nagar.” To the everyday visitor, these settlements may seem disconcertingly unexotic, lacking any unique Burmese feel. In other words, they do not seem like Burmese diasporic versions of Chinatown or Little Italy carved into an Indian modern landscape. With the exceptions of New Delhi and Moreh (in India’s Northeastern state of Manipur)

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these “Burma Colonies” are not even populated with Burmese recent expatriates, pro-democracy dissidents or forced migrants reproducing their own Burmese social world in an Indian exile. Instead, the residents are Burmese Indians who migrated during the colonial era into British Burma, and then repatriated back to India in a series of postcolonial, usually forced, return migrations in the course of the 20th century.

Very little research has been done on the post-independence repatriation of Burmese communities of Indian origin—hereafter named “Burmese Indians”. Only a handful of articles by Indian observers of the time, as well broader accounts given by historians of South and Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, have highlighted their forced return movements (Moorthy 1962; Chandrasekaran 1965; Sastry 1965; Chakravarti 1971; Tinker 1977). What happened to them once resettled in India has even less been explored by the scholarship (Bhaumik 2003; Mehrotra & Basistha 2011). This article aims to fill the gap in knowledge about this peculiar diasporic community by looking at the historical formation of some of the most visible “Burma Colonies” throughout India since the mid-1960s. Between October 2010 and August 2012, extensive fieldwork was carried out in eastern and southern India, as well as in New Delhi. Several urban and peri-urban settlements of “Burma Repatriates”—as the Indian government literature has labeled the Indian returnees from Burma since the 1960s—have been identified in the fringes of Calcutta (Kolkata), Madras (Chennai) and Vellore in Tamil Nadu, and the national capital New Delhi. In-depth interviews, as well as briefer conversations with first-generation Burmese Indian returnees, were collected.

After a backgrounder on the migration of Indian communities to, and out of, Burma over the past decades, as well as of India’s post-independence policies of repatriation towards its overseas Indian populations, this article examines the shaping of urban and peri-urban settlements for, and by, those Indian returnees from Burma. Through their narratives, it explores the social and political world they have subsequently created within the urban and peri-urban spaces they appropriated for themselves, or were forced to move into from the mid-1960s. Informal urban social and political movements have long been recognized by the literature as major political actors in, and of, a city (Handelman 1975; Castells 1983; Mitchell 2003; Roychowdhury 2008). Recent migrants in particular tend to organize their community within the urban spaces they (sometimes illegally) occupy in order to defend their rights to inhabit and work. In doing so, they strongly influence local policymaking by challenging—and lobbying—urban administrations and city rulers (Fisher & Kling 1993). Democratic practices and citizenship are therefore constantly revisited by sociopolitical urban movements and forces: by becoming politically active, migrants and newcomers earn their “right to the city,” and beyond, to the nation (Holston & Appadurai 1996; Appadurai 2002; Tawa Lama-Rewal & Zérah 2011; Smith & Mcquarrie 2012).

This phenomenon has been observed in most Burma Colonies explored during fieldwork, this article shows. Interviews have revealed the willingness of a handful of Burmese Indian returnees to mobilize their community around issues of land and property rights in the transit camps, urban squats and peri-urban colonies in which they were resettled, or illegally relocated on their own. Returnees have also organized themselves to protect their re-emerging business interests in various city markets (or “Burma Bazaars”), often illegally set up on sidewalks and streets in Madras or Vellore,
and secure the welfare of their community within the space of the new city they lived or worked. In doing so, this research argues, they have sought to prove their belonging to a wider Indian public realm, where they engaged with other groups, as well as the local urban and national authorities. Their struggle to expand their urban citizenship rights has thus been an important component of their search for national “Indian” citizenship and therefore their re-integration into the Indian society and the country of their forefathers.

Yet, it will be highlighted, political activism and social mobilization using specific urban and/or peri-urban spaces in these Burma Colonies have decreased overtime. Not only have Burmese settlements of repatriates progressively been absorbed by a sprawling “Indian” urban landscape. But, with the fading of the first generation of returnees from Burma and the end of India’s official repatriation policies in the late 1980s, the various Burma Colonies have slowly lost their “Burmese” characteristics. They became fully integrated into the “Indian” urban and cultural space, as were, in the process, the returnees themselves. Once re-integrated and accepted as Indian national citizens, the latter have demobilized, including at the local urban level, and their community efforts have dramatically decreased.

**Background to Indian Migration to, and Repatriation from, Burma**

During the 19th century, the consolidation of the British empire east of Calcutta was instrumental in generating massive migration of Indian labour into Burma. From the mid-1820s, an array of Indian communities of rural labourers, dock workers, but also traders, civil servants, and security forces were imported into the British-ruled province. Whilst temporary migrations of fortune-seekers were rather the norm, a substantial minority of Indian migrants opted for permanent settlement. All played an active socio-economic role, notably the Chettiars, a Tamilian community from South India, as highlighted in a well-referenced scholarship (Mahajani 1960; Chakravarti 1971; Adas 1974; Tinker 1977; Mahadevan 1978; Turnell 2009).

Yet, most of the Indian migrants hardly assimilated with the rest of the Burmese society, the literature suggests (Moorthy 1962; Khin Maung Kyi 2006). This, combined with the dire economic impact of the Great Depression in the 1930s, prompted localized sectarian violence and anti-Indian riots during the late colonial period. In 1937 Burma was administratively separated from British India, a decision greeted by a rising Burman militant nationalism. The first autonomous Burma Legislative Council then enacted a series of chauvinistic laws intended to curb the influence of foreigners and reverse immigration flows from India (Desai 1954: 49). The Chettiars were thus among the first to consider the repatriation of their assets back to Madras in the late 1930s. But it was the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 that prompted the tragic re-migration of a more substantial majority of Indian communities by sea, air or through the jungles of north-western Burma. Nearly half a million fled between January and June 1942 (Tinker 1975).

After independence in 1948, the chauvinistic policies were furthered by the new Burmese administration—mostly dominated by ethnic Burmans. Resentment and harsh memories of colonial humiliation strongly contributed to the shaping of
enduring negative perceptions of both India and the Indians in the Burmese post-colonial psyche (Egreteau 2011). The *Union Citizenship Act*, 1948 and *Land Nationalization Act*, 1948 (the latter revised in 1953) both proved strong obstacles for the Indian communities to repatriate back to independent Burma and recover their properties (Tinker 1959: 188). Besides, the legal status of the Burmese Indians was soon to become subject of endless discussions between New Delhi and Rangoon (Singh 1979). Indeed, echoing the Saw-Bajpai immigration agreement of 1941, neither the Burmese Constitution, 1947 nor the *Union Citizenship Act*, 1948 considered the Burmese populations of Indian origin as an indigenous race or a “national” minority (Chandrasekharan 1965, Taylor 2006). In 1949 therefore, thousands of Indians, unwilling (or unable) to adopt Burmese citizenship and gradually excluded from import-export businesses and public services, started to return to India. By the mid-fifties, only about 700-800,000 Burmese of Indian origin remained in Burma.

In March 1962, the advent of the openly xenophobic military rule of General Ne Win prompted a new wave of return movements of Burmese Indians back to India. Unveiling a Fabian-inspired “Burmese Way to Socialism,” the new regime intended to re-indigenize (read, “Burmanize”) the country and its economy (Badgley 1965; Holmes 1967). The post-coup revolutionary policies crystallized a sudden paranoia among Burmese Indian communities who had yet decided to remain in Burma after 1949 (Sastry 1965; Chandrasekharan 1965). Whilst not directly threatened, most simply panicked in the face of what were taken to be official anti-Indian measures announced by the Revolutionary Council, in particular the *Enterprises Nationalization Act* adopted in February 1963. Many started to look for official support from the Rangoon-based embassy of India.³ A year later, scores began to rush there to find assistance and a way to leave the country when the nationalization programmes were furthered. By March 1976, 207,000 Indians had officially left (Singh 1977: 187). The waves of repatriation continued until the 1980s. Others had progressively migrated to Thailand, Singapore, East and West Pakistan, and beyond, to the West.

**India’s Politics of Repatriation: Return, Resettle and Rehabilitate**

Following the Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947, the Indian central government adopted an extensive legislation to rehabilitate refugees of Indian origin—mostly Hindus and Sikhs—who were forced to repatriate from both East and West Pakistan (Das 2003). A Ministry for Relief and Rehabilitation was created to deal with the massive flows of returnees. Its main objective was to reinstate the displaced persons, oversee their resettlement in newly constructed “colonies,” and facilitate their re-integration into the society of their erstwhile “Indian” homeland (Rao 1967). From the early 1960s, the programmes were extended to overseas Indians returning from Sri Lanka and Burma, and later in the 1970s from, among others, Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique (Mamdani 1973; Kanapathipillai 2009). Departments of Rehabilitation were also formed at the local level, including in Punjab, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu (Tamil Nadu State Government 2005).

There were four major components to New Delhi’s repatriation policies. First, overseas Indians wishing (or being forced) to return to India had to be identified and
their “Indian” lineage acknowledged by the authorities. This was the work of India’s high commissions and consulates abroad. Second, their passage to India was to be fully arranged by the Indian central government, with all transportation expenses covered. Third—and thereafter local governments were brought in—repatriates were resettled in newly built peri-urban colonies or rural villages throughout India. Fourth, “affirmative action” policies were promoted at the central and local levels in order to ease the reinstatement of the repatriates into the Indian society, most having lived abroad for several generations. Rehabilitation measures were thus introduced to provide returnees (but not their descendants born on India soil) with education support, employment facilities and easier access to bank loans to acquire land, build a house or start a business. A bank was founded in 1969 to specifically finance their projects: REPCO (Repatriates Cooperative Finance and Development Bank Ltd), which was administered by the Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi.4

The Supreme Court of India defined a “Burma Repatriate” (and not a “refugee,” as India did not sign the UN Convention on Refugees in 1951), as follows:

“Repatriate” means a person of Indian origin who was ordinarily residing in a foreign country, and who, on leaving, or being forced to leave, such country has—[...] (b) in the case of a person leaving Burma on or after the 1st day of June 1963 [...] returned to India with the intention of permanently residing therein. (Suri 1968: 207.)

Thus, Burmese Indians who had already returned from Burma before June 1963 (at the start of the nationalization programmes) were not eligible for re-integration programmes and seat reservations. After 1963, the biggest challenge for the Indian authorities was to identify who was, among the Burmese populations of various Indian origins, eligible to be repatriated from Burma. Many Burmese Indians still had unclear administrative status or even no paper at all; others were illiterate or know little about their family history (Chandrasekharan 1965; Sastry 1965). Once identified and deemed eligible for a fully sponsored re-migration, the would-be repatriates were provided with an “Emergency Certificate” (or EC), unless they had already been granted Indian passports or travel documents. India’s central government then arranged for several waves of sea repatriation out of Rangoon. From June 1964, India regularly chartered ships to link Rangoon to Madras, Vishakapatnam (Andhra Pradesh) and Calcutta. Between June 1964 and November 1968 for instance, the port of Madras received around 150,000 returnees from Burma, although not all were registered as “repatriates” (Chakravarti 1971: 184). The process of repatriation continued in the early 1970s, with ships regularly disembarking individuals or families. As far as the Tamil Nadu state is concerned, its administration recently reported that, in the twenty five years during which the state repatriation scheme was in place (1964-1989), 144,445 Indians from Burma had benefited from it and were resettled throughout the state (Tamil Nadu State Government 2005: 11).

LOCALIZING “BURMA COLONIES” AND “BURMA BAZAARS” IN INDIA

A great majority of the Burmese Indian repatriates were resettled during the 1960s and 1970s in eastern India, i.e. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal, as well as in the western suburbs of New Delhi. Minor rural settlements were also
established in Bihar (near Patna), Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal and Betul districts) and northern Uttar Pradesh near Rudrapur and Hastinapur (see Fig. 1). All these regions of India were by and large the initial sites of migration of the ancestors of these Indian populations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Incidentally, most returnees still spoke the vernacular languages of these areas (Bhojpuri, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Punjabi and so on).

Fig. 1: “Burma Colonies” in India. Selected sites of urban and peri-urban resettlements of Burmese Indian Repatriates since the 1960s, ©Renaud Egretou, Bertrand Lefebvre, 2004-2012 (boundaries are not necessarily authoritative).

Transit Camps for the Burma Repatriates

Whilst the central government in New Delhi monitored the overall process of repatriation and arranged for identification and then transportation of the Indian returnees from Burma back into India, it fell under the responsibilities of local governments to provide adequate facilities to shelter the repatriates upon disembarkation on Indian soil. For instance, in 1964 alone, the local government of Tamil Nadu erected fifteen
transit camps for repatriates—many of which would later serve to take in Tamil returnees from Sri Lanka during the 1970s (Kanapathipillai 2009). Among these camps, Gummidipoondi—40 km to the north of Madras—was the major transit one, from where most Burma repatriates would be dispatched throughout Tamil Nadu, or beyond if they had requested another destination for resettlement (see Fig. 1). Three other prominent camps were constructed in Sholavaram and Padianallur (near Madras) and in Kottapattu in the district of Trichy (Tamil Nadu State Government 1981: 358). State administrations, via their respective Ministries of Rehabilitation, provided food ration and a concrete shelter to the repatriates, usually until at least one member of each repatriated family found a job and could sustain the rest of the family, or until the family simply left the camp to relocate.

Mr. K. Gurumurthy, born in 1944 in Kamayut (a township in northern Rangoon), recalls his arrival at Gummidipoondi camp on August 8, 1965. A 3-day ration of food was provided to each family member, right upon entry in the camp. Then, he continues in English:

Every three days there were flows of people, there in the camps […] For fifteen days, [we] were given shelter and food, and after fifteen days, [the authorities] gave us cash. Later on, they asked us to leave […] our family refused to leave the camp and demanded for assignment of land since we are agricultural families.

After a strong lobbying, his family and a few others were each granted five acres of land near the town of Arambakkam, 20 km north of Gummidipoondi. The place, now a peri-urban settlement, has since been known as “Burma Nagar”. In 1971, Mr. N. Rangasam and his family followed the same repatriation route from Rangoon to Gummidipoondi. They remained in the camp for about three months. Mr. Rangasam, a freedom fighter who had joined in 1943 Subhas Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army while in Burma, has since received a meager pension from the Indian government. This helped sustain the family in the early years of their repatriation. Another Indian returnee from Rangoon, Mr. Irudhayamani, re-migrated to Madras in July 1964. He was sent to the camp in Sholavaram, some 20 km to the northwest of Madras, where his family spent one month. The local government had ordered companies, factories and mills established in the surroundings of the camp to specifically hire repatriates, he remembers. He thus found a job at B.N.C. Mills, and a few months later, with enough money he moved his family out of the camp to rent a newly-built house in Vyasarpadi, then a peri-urban area well connected by suburban trains to both Gummidipoondi and the growing “Burma Bazaar,” in downtown Madras. They were followed by dozens of families. Vyasarpadi has since become the biggest “Burma Colony” in the northern fringes of Madras.

In Bihar were dispatched by the central government mostly Bhojpuri-speaking Burma repatriates. In the 1950s, a temporary evacuee camp was erected in the town of Bettiah, in Champaran district (see Fig. 1), to accommodate Hindu evacuees from East Pakistan. From the late 1960s, sections of this camp were assigned to house a few hundred Burmese Indian repatriates of Bihari origin. Mr. Kesho Prasad belongs to a family whose origins can be traced to the village of Dumraon in the Arrah district of Bihar, some 100 km west of Patna. Bihar provided large communities of unskilled migrants and rural laborers to British Burma from the early 1890s until the 1920s
(Mahajani 1960; Chakravarti 1971—including Mr. Prasad’s grandparents and parents. He himself was born in Zeyawadi district, Central Burma, in 1941. After much hesitation, he and his immediate relatives decided to repatriate to India in 1974, more than a decade after New Delhi had started its rehabilitation programmes for Burmese Indians. The family arrived in Madras in June 1974, but was immediately given train tickets to reach Patna, and then dispatched to Bettiah camp. They stayed there, along with 150 other families, for one full year.

In West Bengal, in addition to temporary refugee camps already housing East Pakistan returnees (Hasnabad and Petrapole camp in Bangaon for instance) and the former war prisoners camp of Kamarhati, 10 km north of Calcutta, several “Burmese Evacuee Centers” were set up by the West Bengal government near Calcutta to welcome back Bengali-speaking repatriates. The peri-urban sites of Barasat and Madhyamgram (around 15 km north of Calcutta) as well as Subhashgram (25 km east of Calcutta) received in the 1970s many uprooted Burmese Hindu Bengalis, who originated from pre-Partition East Bengal (from the port city of Chittagong in particular, see Mehrotra & Basistha 2011: 95). Born in 1943 to a Bengali family from Chittagong, Mr. Debrata Chakraborty lived in Akyab (Sittwe) and then Rangoon until he and his wife decided to repatriate to Calcutta where they arrived in February 1978. They were sent directly to Kamarhati. He still lives there. Lastly, in Andhra Pradesh, Kancharapalem camp was the main transit camp for Burmese Telugu-speakers, as well as the smaller camps of Atchutapuram, Kanithi, and Dairy Farm. From 1964, more than 7,500 Burmese repatriated families of Andhra origin transited through these four camps.

Creating Peri-Urban “Burma Colonies”

Fieldwork has revealed that most Burma repatriates were resettled (or relocated on their own, i.e. illegally) in “peri-urban” areas. There were the notable exceptions of Burmese Bihari, Oriya and Andhra farmers, who once populated the rural districts of Zeyawadi and Kyauktaga, located between the cities of Bago (former Pegu) and Toungoo in Central Burma. Upon returning to India, those communities were rather sent to rural lands in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh so they could pursue there an agricultural life similar to the one they lived in the Burmese countryside. However, other repatriates were raised and have lived in various urban and peri-urban environments in Burma. Among them were clerks, traders, lawyers, teachers, and former public servants of the British colonial administration. They were gradually barred from the late 1940s from most of the skilled jobs in which they had previously excelled; traders saw their shops and enterprises nationalized and youngsters were commonly barred from attending Burmese universities after 1964. Those urban communities had therefore to be resettled—as it was seemingly acknowledged by Indian authorities—near cities and urban spaces where adequate jobs could be provided, especially government-sponsored ones. Seat reservations policies in state-owned companies or local administrations were indeed a key measure of India’s rehabilitation programmes. As for repatriated groups of traders, they needed thriving market places to start a business again. Therefore, camps and colonies were constructed in peri-urban sites well connected to the downtown areas of Madras, Calcutta, Vishakapatnam, Vellore, Madurai or New Delhi; anywhere in fact where transportation infrastructure was developed enough to enable the returnees to reach bustling city centres.
Besides, since the early 1950s, camps sheltering evacuees and repatriates from East and West Pakistan, and later Burma, Sri Lanka, and Africa, had been intended to remain temporary centers. But with the passing of time and the rapid industrialization of India, most were transformed into permanent colonies and concrete urban or peri-urban settlements. Most particularly, the sprawling expansion of the megalopolis of Calcutta, Madras (Chennai after 1996) and New Delhi has gradually swallowed peri-urban places. This has for instance been the case of Kamarhati Camp, near Agarpara railway station some 10 km north of Calcutta (Fig. 2). Ajoy Banerjee was 21 years old when he repatriated from Rangoon to West Bengal in June 1974. His family was immediately sent to Kamarhati, and assigned to a flat in one of the buildings—the Uday Villas—which had been constructed sometime in the late 1940s, he recalls. In the 1950s, the place received scores of Hindu refugees from East Bengal. They revived there a local weaver industry, mainly thanks to the creation of a state-sponsored handicraft rehabilitation center, local journalists pointed out. The Uday Villas and Kamarhati were then turned into a prisoner camp during the 1962 Sino-Indian war, and then again during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, lodging Indian Chinese and Pakistani prisoners. From 1967, it started to house Burmese Indian repatriates, as if the place was meant to continuously received populations affected by conflicts and social disturbances.

“The villas were dilapidated,” recollects Mr. Banerjee, adding with a smile: “there were still Chinese writings on the walls, carved by Chinese prisoners from 1962”.

Fig. 2: Uday Villas, Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, ©Renaud Egreteau.

Mrs. Sangita Mandal is one of the last Burmese Indian returnees to have been resettled in one of the apartments of the villas at Kamarhati Camp. Born in Rangoon, where her grandfather used to work as a goldsmith, she was sixteen when her family even-
that was in 1987, a few months before India stopped its rehabilitation programmes for Burmese Indians. Twenty five years later she is still lodged with her son in the cramped flat to which she was originally assigned. She much resented still not having been relocated elsewhere by the West Bengal rehabilitation authorities: “Up to now we are still waiting for the government: when they are going to provide a house for us? […] you see: all the buildings are damaged.”

Many Burma repatriates indeed quickly moved away from transit camps after their arrival, appalled at the insalubrious conditions there. They also denounced the daily corruption and indifference of the authorities as well as the keepers of the camps. Many complained about the lack of empathy showed by fellow Indians and locals. After few months spent at Bettiah camp in Bihar, Mr. Keshod Prasad’s family decided to relocate—at their own expenses and along with a hundred other Burmese Bihari repatriated families—to a small rural village further east, Samastipur. About 80 km to the northeast of Bihar’s capital, Patna, Samastipur is now sheltering some 600 families, most of them with a Burmese Bihari background. Fifteen years later in 1989, a handful of these families—including that of Mr. Prasad—moved again to another (peri-urban this time) settlement, closer to New Delhi where it was easier to find better job opportunities, Mr. Prasad underlines. They took over agricultural land parcels in Ranhola, a township dominated by Jat landlords to the southwest of the Indian capital. It soon formed Ranhola’s “Burma Colony”, an hour drive away from Connaught Place, New Delhi’s bustling center. The first building they erected was a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva.

Beside temporary camps turned permanent settlements, many an urban colony of Burma repatriates in the suburbs of Madras or New Delhi was established as illegal squat or occupied without the legal consent of the local township authorities.

But most sites were at first legally designated by different local governments to become “Burma Colonies.” In Tamil Nadu (known as Madras State until 1969), the Congress party was in power at the peak of the repatriation waves between 1963 and 1967. Then Chief Minister, Mr. Minjur K. Bhaktavatsalam, proved a politician sympathetic to the misfortunes of the Burmese Tamil repatriates and greatly facilitated their rehabilitation. He ordered local factories to hire repatriates and prepared lands for their peri-urban resettlement. A subsequent Burma Colony in northern Madras was even renamed after him, Bhaktavatsalam Colony (or B.V. Colony) in an area, Vyasarpadi, where thousands of Burmese Tamilians resettled during the 1960s and 1970s. 150 km further east, the city authorities of Vellore, also in Tamil Nadu, created in the early 1970s three adjacent colonies to welcome more specifically Burmese Tamilians of Muslim confession: Periyar Nagar, K. K. Nagar and Vasandha Puram.

In Uttar Pradesh as well, two colonies have been formed by the local government to more particularly resettle Burma repatriates with a farmer background in the 1970s: Rudrapur in the district of Nainital and Hastinapur, near Meerut, to the northeast of New Delhi. Anil Verma was four years old when his family of Bihari origin moved back from Zeyawadi (Central Burma) to Madras in November 1971. They were chartered to Hastinapur few days after. Three years later, they relocated to Betul district, 180 km south of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, where three rural Burma Colonies have also been formed.
ADVOCATING FOR LAND OWNERSHIP, URBAN HOUSING AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Urban resettled citizens and migrants (and therefore, returnees) commonly mobilize for rights related to their new conditions of residence, or “rights to inhabit” a city for instance, as underlined in recent scholarship (Holston & Appadurai 1996: 197-8; Mitchell 2003: 20). They face a wide range of urban housing issues, property ownership conflicts, and frequently risk expropriation or forced relocation from places they “squat” and dwell. Since ancient times ownership has commonly been associated with citizenship. Proving you own a land or a home is often perceived as a key to asserting your citizenship, and more globally your belonging to a local and/or national public realm, says the literature (Smith & Mcquarrie 2012). This was particularly observed in most Burma Colonies visited during the field research. Upon relocation, returnees have relentlessly lobbied local authorities and fought for the provisions of available lands as well as the legalization of the ones they have, step by step, illegally grabbed after moving out the transit camps.

In Tamil Nadu, the Burma Tamilar Munitra Sayalagam (BTMS, or Burma Tamil Development Association), was founded in Madras in 1965 by a few Burmese Tamil repatriates. It is still functioning today from its headquarters in Vyasarpadi, now a suburb to the north of Madras. One of its older founding members, Mr. Irudhayamani, was born in 1924 in Rangoon where he was working in a pharmacy store until his repatriation to Madras in July 1964. After transiting at Sholavaram camp, he led some 55 families occupying some swampy land parcels of the Vyasarpadi area:

[We] had the guts to take over the place and build houses, [our] homes. It was not an order of the government. [We] came over here in a group [of 55 families] and took over the place in January 1966. BNC Mills workers [BNC Mills was then the biggest local employer of Burma repatriates] started to put up tents here, clean up and dry the place up, and it became BV Colony [or Bhaktavatsalam Colony, named after the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, who let the squatters developed the place].

The squatters were indeed not much troubled by the local authorities thereafter, and de facto allowed to stay in the spaces they had rehabilitated, even if they technically remained “illegal squatters”. This was a common trend. Under the Urban Land Ceiling Act (India) of 1968, state governments throughout India were compelled to assigned available lands to overseas repatriates coming back to their erstwhile homeland. Yet, red tape, administrative inertia and corruption at all levels of the local bureaucracy have frequently slowed down the relocation of repatriated families out of the transit camps they were first assigned to. Furthermore, the legal provisions of land registration numbers (or patta) to the repatriated households who had the chance to be resettled in official “Burma Colonies,” were also very slow to materialize. For instance, the legalization of BV Colony and the adjacent peri-urban settlements in the Vyasarpadi area (Sastri Nagar, Binny Gardens and Indira Nagar) was granted only in 2008, after 43 years of endless petitions, meetings and negotiations led by the Burma Tamilar Munitra Sayalagam. Land registration numbers were eventually allotted to each family. In 2012, BV Colony sheltered around 3,000 families, and only 10 per cent of them were yet to be given their official “patta.”
Likewise, Ranhola, about 20 km to the west of Delhi, was a mere hamlet surrounded by agricultural lands when in 1989 about thirty Burmese Indian repatriated families swiftly took possession of the place. They had come from the state of Bihar where they had in the first place been resettled by the Indian central government, back in 1975, explains one of the leading member of these repatriated families, Mr. Kesho Prasad. But getting closer to the dynamic Indian capital was essential for them to acquire better job positions and education opportunities, notably for the second generation of repatriates who was not eligible for state university and college seat reservations—unlike the first generation of returnees. Moving to New Delhi and its peri-urban spaces, they grabbed land parcels then owned by farmers from the powerful Jat community, recalls Mr. Prasad. And they began to cultivate these lands, subsequently forming an illegal “Burma Colony” in the outskirts of the Indian capital. The Burma Repatriates Welfare Society (BRWS)—or Burma Vishtapit Shamjini (or Parivar) Kalyan Sangh (or Samiti)—was instrumental in assisting their relocation in 1989, and maintaining thereafter the illegal colony in place. The association had been registered in December 1974 by late Chandra P. Prabhakar, also known as U Maw Thiri (his Burmese pen name). Mr. Prabhakar repatriated with his family from Lashio, Shan States, to New Delhi in May 1965. He emerged during the 1970s as a leading figure of the Burmese Indian returnees in northern India. His charismatic widow remembers how he then started mobilizing resources to defend the rights of the repatriates in and around New Delhi, where he soon acquired prestige among the community as an employee, and later chief supervisor, of All India Radio’s Burmese language services. He became president of the Burma Repatriates Welfare Society, with Mrs. Usha Narayanan, the Burma-born wife of the former Indian president K. R. Narayanan (1997-2002) made honorary president. It was him who advised a handful of Burmese Bihari families to relocate to Ranhola in 1989. He besides funded the construction of the Shiva temple, thus making it harder for the dominant Jat local landlords—the themselves Hindus—to summarily tear down the illegal colony and its buildings.

Mr. Keshod Prasad, who himself was born in Zeyawadi (Central Burma) in 1941 now presides over the BRWS. He details the key role the society had in gradually bringing water pipes and electricity to Ranhola, and recalled the endless discussions with the local urban administration. Local residents were mobilized under U Maw Thiri’s leadership, and encouraged to prepare petitions. They sent dozens of letters with the BRWS letterhead (a more effective instrument than if you merely try to send a letter under your sole individual name, underlines Mr. Prasad) to local administration offices, including the Union Home Ministry. Finally after a 20 year-long struggle, the Burma Colony of Ranhola was legalized in 2011, and recognized as a regular urban colony within a larger administrative tehsil under New Delhi’s local government authority.

In Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, the Burma repatriates were far less successful in mobilizing their community around housing rights and land allocation beyond the dilapidated transit camp of the Uday Villas—which was gradually transformed as a “Burma Colony.” A Burma Repatriates Society (BRS) was founded there in 1970 (Fig. 3). Debabrata Chakraborty, now 69 and who repatriated from Rangoon in 1978, was one of the BRS first presidents. But after an initial impetus given by fresh
Burmese Bengali returnees, the association crumbled. The reasons are unclear. Unlike their Bihari and Tamil counterparts, the 70 Burmese Bengali families (and one Marwari household) now dwelling Kamarhati Camp have indeed never decided to move away on their own, confront local authorities or grab lands. Most are still waiting for a hypothetical relocation out of the place, which was promised by the state government of West Bengal, laments Mrs. Sangita Mandal, also a BRS member. She grumbles about the fatalistic lack of enthusiasm of her neighbours, themselves also all Burmese Bengali returnees. A resignation well noticed too by the local officials of West Bengal’s Relief and Rehabilitation Department:
“[They’re] telling me to motivate [my] people,” grieves Mrs. Mandal, “I say: I’m really really sorry for that. If you give me some more [and provide new places to resettle in the city], I can do it; but until then, to motivate my people to go out [of Kamarhati Camp] all together, that I can’t.”

The reasons behind these regional asymmetries remain uncertain. The presence of a charismatic and educated individual able to lead and mobilize one’s community might explain the bold decisions of the Bihari and Tamil returnees. U Maw Thiri and Mr. Irudhayamani—a freedom fighter who joined the Indian National Army Subhas Chandra Bose at 18 years old—were revered by their respective entourages. Local patterns in and around Calcutta might also explicate the gradual demobilization of the second generation of Burmese Bengalis, well integrated into local society now. After all, Kamarhati was a peri-urban site well-connected to downtown Calcutta by train (a mere half-an-hour ride) and the rest of the West Bengal state through a
busy motorway. Many factories have been set up in the vicinity, and they have long employed (by law) the repatriates. Why move elsewhere and grab illegal and unsecured land parcels of your own in that case? As Handelman (1975) has pointed out using the example of Latin American peri-urban slums, once settlements dwellers, squatters and newcomers have achieved their initial development objectives in their newly-found urban space, the atrophy of their original mobilization and decline in community efforts become inevitable over time.

ORGANIZING BUSINESS INTERESTS IN THE CITY

Indian repatriates from Sri Lanka have long offered the best illustration of a returnee community to have been able to successfully defend its economic interests, at the state level in particular (Dodge & Wiebe 1981, Kanapathipillai 2009). Tamil returnees from Sri Lanka indeed formed in the 1960s the United Front Federation for the Repatriates (ibid.: 159-162). The association is still based in Madurai (Tamil Nadu) and defends throughout India their socioeconomic rights. But whilst the Sri Lankan returnees opted for nation-wide sociopolitical mobilization, the Indian repatriates from Burma appeared to have been more locally involved, especially in Tamil Nadu. They rather systematized their mobilization at the level of their local urban and peri-urban spaces.

One of the most characteristic patterns of the socioeconomic mobilization of the Burmese Tamil repatriates was the creation in the 1960s of associations and trade unions looking after the welfare of traders gathered in various “Burma Bazaars” throughout Tamil Nadu. Beyond the transit camps and evacuee centers they were first resettled in, Burmese Tamil returnees gradually set up illegal markets and bazaars in the downtown city areas of Madras, Vellore, Trichy, Madurai, and a few other bustling commercial towns in South India. From the 1960s, thriving “Burma Bazaars” have therefore mushroomed on sidewalks, port jetties and railway stations throughout the region. K. Gurumurthy, who arrived from Rangoon at Madras port in 1965, summons up:

The story is that initially [in 1964] the Burma repatriates settled in their camps, in other parts of the cities […] they took the foreign goods which they [manage to] bring from Burma and went to sell them at the Beach Station [in Georgetown area, downtown Madras, near the port of arrival of the repatriates], because there it was the main junction; lakhs of people came through the junction every day. […] When they exhausted all their personal belongings, they started buying off stuff from the new arrivals from Burma, right on the platform, putting a towel [on the ground] and starting their business.

After a few months of this daily routine, shops were progressively erected in concrete along North Beach Road and consequently, without waiting for the sanctioning of the local urban administration, the “Burma Bazaar” of Madras was born (Fig. 4). It is still one of the city’s most bustling market places, where foreign goods, pirated DVDs, mobile phones and TV screens—are readily available.
In 1966, the Tamil repatriates organized themselves in congregations and trade unions to look after their specific interests and support the emergence of the Madrassi Burma Bazaar, which rapidly transformed into a significant trading place of foreign commodities. Logically, this raised much concern among the local custom departments and state fiscal administration at a time—the 1960s—when India was much reluctant to open its domestic economy to foreign international trade (and thus, smuggling). Mr. Lourdusamy, born into a Burmese Tamilian family of farmers from Pyapon township, deep in the Irrawaddy delta, was sixteen years old when he reached Madras in August 1965. He is now a committee member of the Burma Tamizhar Marumalarchi Sangam, the association founded in 1966 to protect the interests of the Burma Bazaar’s shopkeepers. Initially, he recounts, the main objective of this trade union-style association of Burma repatriates was to resist the pressure from the Customs Department and negotiate with the local urban administration the right to sell freely the commodities imported from Burma—and later on, from elsewhere in Asia. As observed by Manuel Castells in his seminal work on urban social movements, poor households and new migrants commonly push the boundaries of public restrictions in the urban spaces they have recently moved to, challenge city regulations and set up informal—and therefore illegal—trading spots to earn a living (Castells 1983). This is a political act in itself, as the urban dwellers, knowing the illegality of their actions, organize nonetheless themselves to counter the urban administrations attempting to regulate.

The Burma repatriates, upon disembarkation in Madras, often had no cash or liquidities—especially after the 1964 demonetization of the Burmese kyat ordered by Ne Win’s government, which deprived them from most of their savings. Yet upon
arrival, as they still possessed a few fancy clothes, casual jewels and watches, as well as cosmetics, sunglasses, and even small radio transistors and coffee percolators, they could sell off those products on sidewalks to earn a few Indian rupees to start off their new life. Grippingly, the Burma Bazaar would later on become an epicenter for all types of smuggled commodities from Asia, and beyond. Whenever a ship from East Asia docked in Madras port in the 1960s and 1970s, the activity of the bazaar would increase tenfold with shopkeepers replenishing their stocks of imported (or smuggled) foreign goods. These patterns have continued until today; Madras’ Burma Bazaar still lives up to the reputation of an ill-disciplined market selling forbidden and undeclared goods.

Mr. Lourdusamy remembers the struggles of the very early days of repatriation in the 1960s and 1970s: the tough negotiations with the local bureaucracy and corrupt police, the estrangement from the rest of the local Tamil society, and the difficulties to get proper housing. But now, he proudly claims, the second generation of returnees is quite well-off, provided with good education and jobs. The Burma Bazaar nowadays shelters around 1,000 shops and boasts about 10,000 informal employees. As the sole trade union of the place, the Burma Tamizhar Marumalarchi Sangam is still much concerned with their welfare. It often clashes with the authorities during crackdown on trafficking and piracy, in regular attempts to curb the lucrative underground activities of the open market.

Another “Burma Bazaar” was created in 1981 in Vellore, 150 km to the west of Madras. During the 1970s, a greater number of Tamil Muslim communities repatriated from Burma. Unwilling, or unable, to resettle in the already crowded areas of the Burma Colonies of Vyasarpadi, many have moved deeper inside Tamil Nadu. Between 1969 and 1971, local authorities created three Burmese colonies around the city of Vellore: Vasandha Puram, K. K. Nagar and Periyar Nagar. Today about 500 repatriated families are dwelling these Muslim-dominated colonies, asserts Peer Mohamed, a Burmese Tamil Muslim who relocated to Madras in July 1965 at the age of 14, but migrated five years later to Vellore with his family. He now owns a small garment shop in the middle of the locally known “Burma Bazaar”. The bazaar expanded through the 1970s, and in 1981, the local traders gathered around the Vellore Burma Bazaar Maruvazhvu Merchants Association. The association is now run by Mr. Sitaraman, and still looks after the fortunes of about 60 shop owners and their numerous employees (Fig. 5). One trader there, Mr. Farook, born in Vellore in 1971 from Burmese Tamil parents repatriated in 1967, admits however that the second generation of repatriates is however not much preoccupied by the “Burma” component of the association’s name, but rather by the “merchant” one. “We’re all Indians now,” he smiles. The association indeed now serves as a mere trade union, well-established and influential locally; but it does not look after the specific interests of the Burma repatriates. Most have now retired, and the substantial majority of the shopkeepers and employees are Tamilians born in India, completely disconnected by the Burmese background of the elders who repatriated four or five decades ago.
Besides the mobilization for their economic, urban housing and property rights—and the diversity of their achievements—the Burmese Indian returnees have attempted to cultivate a certain sense of community and assist each other in their new resettlement spaces. This has proved particularly challenging. Many repatriates felt strongly at odds with the Indian local societies and urban cultures they discovered upon their arrival, despite their Indian origins. Various forms of community-based solidarities therefore emerged in the urban and peri-urban settlements they formed.

One aimed for instance to provide educational opportunities. Mr. V. R. Ganeshan, a 70 year-old Chettiar born in Pyawbwe, 200 km to the south of Mandalay, is a member of the Burma 24 Manai Telugu-Chettiar Educational Trust. This charity was founded in 1972 by Burmese Tamil and Telugu repatriates to provide basic education to their poorest families living in and around Madras. Interestingly, not all Chettiars returned well-off from Burma, especially those—especially those rare cases who remained—who remained in independent Burma until the 1960s. After collecting funds, this Telugu-Chettiar Educational Trust built a primary and nursery school in the northern suburbs of Madras, in the Old Washermenpet area: the Sri Kamatchi Amman School (named after Kamakshi, a South Indian form of the goddess Parvati, wife of Shiva). The Chettiar-run association has also spread its activities to religious causes (around the Kamatchi Amman temple V. R. Ganeshan also looks after) and matrimonial ones. It indeed assists the poorer members of their community in arranging marriages and securing loans for the still indispensable women dowry. The Chettiar remain an
extremely endogamous caste in contemporary India, and hardly wed beyond their community (Adas 1974; Mahadevan 1978).

In BV Colony further west in the Vyasarpadi area, the Burma Tamilar Munitra Sayalagam (BTMS) has also focused its activities on educational projects to maintain cohesion among the Burma repatriates. It aims to offer “inspiring community leadership,” recalls Mr. Irudhayamani who was one of the founders of the association in 1966. For instance, the latter helped implement a rehabilitation programme funded by the Work Bank in 1978 to build in the area eight kindergartens, one primary school and one secondary school. All use Tamil as the medium of instruction, facilitating the integration of the second generation of repatriates into the Indian wider cultural environment. In Kamarhati Camp in West Bengal, the Burmese Bengali returnees founded the Naba Chetana Club in 1977 (Fig. 6). They for a while organised festivals, cultural and Burma-related cooking activities in the Uday Villas. But there is not much enthusiasm left today among the ageing community, laments Ajoy Banerjee, one of the long-time dwellers of the place. Now that the second generation or returnees seems well assimilated to their new Indian home, there is no push to strengthen the Burmese identity and customs of the forefathers, he points out.

Fig. 6: Naba Chetana Club, Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, ©Renaud Egreteau.
DISCUSSION: URBAN MOBILIZATION AND THE RETURNEE’S QUEST FOR CITIZENSHIP

In rapidly expanding industrial cities, newly created urban and peri-urban spaces are favorable grounds for the emergence of social and political movements, says the literature on urban studies (Handelman 1975, Castells 1983). Sprawling metropolises receive new migrants with fresh ideas and innovative strategies. In that respect, the newcomers tend to shape new forms of social and political mobilization in the urban environments they populate (Fisher & Kling 1993; Mitchell 2003). As Holston & Appadurai have stressed (1996: 196), thereafter is created a new type of urban citizens who engage each other, and with the authorities, in struggles over resources, rights, identity and belonging. In the end, they redefine the notion of citizenship in urban and peri-urban landscapes, beyond classic nation-state frameworks. Mobilization of urban citizens can include the lobbying of local politicians and urban administrators, the organization of street demonstrations, and the creation of social, media (and increasingly, cyber) networks, NGOs and associations collecting funds and discussing strategies—therefore the mobilization of a wider urban civil society, and this often informally (Roychowdhury 2008). New forms of urban “democratic” practices subsequently emerge (Appadurai 2002; Tawa Lama-Rewal & Zérah 2011).

“Burma Colonies” throughout India have long remained informal settlements sheltering dislocated families of repatriates and migrants. Confined to the fringes of sprawling cities such as Madras, Delhi or Calcutta, they first developed as peri-urban spaces ill-equipped to accommodate the growing flows of return migrants from Burma in the 1960s and 1970s. The repatriates had high expectations of their erstwhile homeland, where they were forced to return. Yet, the legalization and development of these urban and peri-urban settlements for repatriates often took years, if not decades, despite official national and state policies of rehabilitation targeting these returning overseas communities. With the restless social mobilization of some charismatic individuals among these repatriated communities, as this research has illustrated, many squatter colonies have nonetheless become legal municipalities. A handful of Burmese Indian repatriates have indeed been able to mobilize for common gain, against harm, in these urban residential areas and in-town bazaars. As the study suggests, three main areas of mobilization have emerged since the 1960s: (1) the struggle for land and property rights, which were, despite rehabilitation programmes, seldom granted to repatriates by local urban authorities, (2) the management and defense of re-emerging business interests of the repatriates in their new urban spaces, mostly in downtown “Burma Bazaars”, and (3) the safeguard of the welfare and identity of the returnees in their new urban environment. With contrasting success, community-based associations of returnees from Burma have been established to look after the legal, economic and education interests of their larger repatriated families.

In doing so, the returnees seemingly aimed to prove their belonging to the city, and much beyond, to the Indian state and society they were forced to return to. Exploring the South Asian post-Partition context, historian Joya Chatterji has rejected the idea that citizenship in India and Pakistan has been imposed from above, by the State (Chatterji 2012). Rather, she has demonstrated how minorities and refugee populations have consistently performed citizenship from below. This study affirms
her work. Beside the Indian postcolonial state, which organized the repatriation of Indians from Burma and formulated “affirmative action” policies for the returnees, the latter have mobilized themselves to “earn” their own citizenship and belonging to the community, and this from below, through a complex process initially (and most of the time solely) shaped at the urban level. They have struggled to expand their citizenship rights in their cities and peri-urban settlements, in which they were relocated right upon disembarkation from Burma, to then re-integrate the Indian wider national realm. Many repatriates felt quite uprooted upon arrival on Indian soil, interviews have highlighted. But through local mobilization and public contestation they have clearly formulated their willingness to belong to the city and, for most, the nation they had rejoined. They have engaged with local urban authorities as well as representatives of the state, often in highly conflictual ways, as the struggle initiated by the New Delhi-based Burma Repatriates Welfare Society underscores. In that respect, their construction as gradually recognized social and political urban actors securing their own “rights to the city” (Mitchell 2003; Smith & Mcquarrie 2012) has facilitated their re-integration into the society, as Indian citoyens.

The study has however revealed deep asymmetries. Not only has the sociopolitical mobilization been the matter of only a few educated—and ageing—Burma repatriates, who have founded business or cultural associations. But extreme disparities in the degrees of mobilization have also been observed with, for instance, the Burmese Tamil returnees proving far more successful in mobilizing their communities than the Burmese Bengalis. Tamilians have historically demonstrated better skills at organizing their trade and financial networks than Biharis (traditionally farmers and rural laborers) or Bengalis, who were primarily clerks, lawyers, teachers and public servants during the colonial era. More research needs to be done to explain further these regional and community disparities. Yet most informants have expressed, in spite of nostalgic memories of the Burmese world they left behind, their wish to be part of the broader Indian family and define themselves as Indian urban, and national, citizens.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: (DE)MOBILIZING RETURNEES

The dynamism showed by the first generation of Burma repatriates, who relocated to India between the 1960s and 1980s, has however faded away. Members of the second generation of repatriates logically seem far less mobilized and much acculturated to the Indian society in which they all were bred, whether in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, or New Delhi, this study concludes. Families of returnees have promptly been re-assimilated by the Indian homeland, once their citizenship and belonging to the community was acknowledged. Civic participation has undoubtedly declined among these Burma repatriates, with the exception of the activities upheld by local labor unions. The latter have however focused far more on business interests than on the formulation of new citizenship rights. With the fading of the first generation of returnees and the end of India’s official repatriation policies in the late 1980s, the struggle for citizenship has concomitantly vanished.

Similarly, the peri-urban spaces to which the returnees from Burma have been resettled to since the 1960s have progressively been absorbed by the wider Indian cultural environment. With the sprawling expansion of cities and industrialization in
India, many a peri-urban “Burma Colony” or “Barma Nagar” has fully merged with the India urban landscape. Very little now distinguishes them from other Indian urban spaces, and make them specifically “Burmesy,” as a traditional Chinatown or “Little Italy” in other countries would appear. They may therefore very soon only remain mere exotic historical references on India’s city maps.

**Notes**

1. For ease of linguistic simplicity, and without any political connotation, the author uses the English terms “Burma” and “Rangoon” and not the vernacular “Myanmar” and “Yangon”, just as “Munich, Germany” would be preferred to “München, Deutschland”.

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3. Interview with Eric Gonsalves, then First Secretary at India’s embassy in Rangoon (1962-65), Delhi, November 2009.

4. A company profile can be found at http://www.repcobank.com/, official website accessed on December 10, 2012. REPCO is still active today, with 40% of its employees still being repatriates from Burma, Sri Lanka and Africa.

5. Interview, Sastri Nagar, northern suburbs of Madras, August 20, 2012.


8. Interview, Ranhola Burma Colony, southwestern suburbs of New Delhi, August 15, 2012.


13. Interview, Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, India, November 3, 2011.


15. Interview, Ranhola Burma Colony, western suburbs of New Delhi, August 15, 2012.

16. A good trick, says Arvind Verma, who repatriated to India in 1971. Indeed, neither the local authorities nor the dominant landlords—the Jats are Hindus—would dare destroying a temple, even if built without legal authorization. Interview, Ranhola Burma Colony, August 15, 2012.


20. Ibid.


22. Interview with Mrs. K. Prabhakar, Vikas Puri, near New Delhi, August 16, 2012. After the 1988 up-rising in Burma, U Maw Thiri would also become a vocal leader of the Burmese pro-democracy movement in exile.


24. Interview, Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, November 5, 2011.


27. Interview, Sastri Nagar, northern suburbs of Madras, August 20, 2012.

34. Interview, Vyasarapadi, August 20, 2012.
35. Interview, Kamarhati Camp, West Bengal, November 5, 2011.

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TAMIL NADU STATE GOVERNMENT, 2005, Information Handbook under Right to Information Act 2005, Department of Rehabilitation: Chennai, India.


Abstract: This article examines the social and political mobilization of Burmese communities of Indian origins, who repatriated from Burma (Myanmar) back to India between the 1960s and 1980s. Drawing on recent fieldwork carried out in several Indian cities, this paper explores the sociopolitical world subsequently created by these repatriated communities within the urban and peri-urban spaces they were resettled in—spaces thereafter known throughout India as “Burma Colonies”. Interviews have revealed how the returnees have mobilized around issues of urban housing, land and property rights, and organized themselves to protect their emerging business interests in local “Burma Bazaars,” and to secure the welfare of their community. The research suggests that their struggle has proved a critical component of their search for urban, and subsequently national, citizenship rights in the erstwhile homeland they were returning to. Political activism and social mobilization using specific urban spaces have therefore greatly facilitated the (re)integration of these returnees into the wider Indian public realm. However, most Burmese repatriate settlements have progressively been absorbed by a sprawling “Indian” urban and political landscape. Furthermore, the second generation of returnees—now well integrated into India’s citizenry—has mostly demobilized. India’s “Burma Colonies” have therefore today lost much of their significance as specific sites of mobilization for citizenship, the article concludes.

Quand les colonies disparaissent : rapatriement, citoyenneté, urbanité et (dé)mobilisation des rapatriés indiens de Birmanie depuis les années 1960

Résumé: Cet article s’intéresse aux communautés indiennes rapatriées de Birmanie entre les années 1960 et 1980. À partir de terrains de recherche récemment effectués en Inde, il examine l’environnement sociopolitique créé par ces populations indo-birmanes dans les espaces urbains (appelés Burma Colonies), spécialement aménagées par les autorités indiennes, en particulier à Madras, Calcutta et New Delhi. Les interviews ont révélé que ces populations ont su se mobiliser autour d’enjeux urbains les concernant directement dans ces lieux qu’elles ont ainsi cherché à se réapproprier : droit au logement, accès à la propriété, assainissement des espaces d’habitations, et formation de syndicats et associations défendant leurs intérêts économiques émergents autour de marchés illégaux (Burma Bazaars). Par ce processus mobilisateur que cette étude décrypte, ces rapatriés indo-birmans ont ainsi affiché leur volonté d’appartenance à la communauté urbaine locale, mais aussi par extension, à retrouver une citoyenneté indienne qu’ils avaient perdue après plusieurs générations passées en Birmanie. Cependant, redevenue citoyenne, la seconde génération de rapatriés s’est fortement démobilisée et ces espaces urbains ont rapidement perdu leur fonction intégratrice pour se fondre dans le paysage indien.

Keywords: repatriation – return migration – resettlement – urban citizenship – city – mobilization – Indian diaspora – Burma/Myanmar.