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Forced Migration as Inheritance: Identity, Memory, and the 1942 Burma Exodus

Ashwathi SHARMA

Abstract. The 1942 exodus of Indian families from Burma to India marked a moment of forced migration shaped by war, racialized violence, and an abrupt rupture. While this movement has often been narrated as a bounded historical event, the paper approaches it as an ongoing condition that continues to unfold within families across generations. Drawing on oral histories and intergenerational narratives, the paper examines how fear, loss, and uncertainty experienced during flight persist as postmemory and shape descendants who come to inhabit ideas of displacement and belonging. The paper foregrounds displacement as a lived and inherited dimension of migrant identity rather than a completed act of movement. The work contributes to migration studies by showing how forced migration endures not only in place but in memory and everyday forms.

Keywords: migration, forced displacement, oral histories, intergenerational memories.

Introduction

Migration The 1942 exodus of Indians from Burma[1] to India constituted one of the most significant episodes of wartime forced migration in South and Southeast Asia. Following Japan's invasion of Burma and the rapid collapse of British colonial administration, nearly half a million Indian civilians returned to India under conditions of acute precarity. Many families undertook arduous journeys on foot across mountainous terrain toward the Indian border, while others came by the sea route. What had been a nation of settlement, livelihood, and intergenerational continuity suddenly became a space of chaos and uncertainty. There is limited documentation and scholarship of the exodus, both as a humanitarian crisis and a logistical failure of the colonial administration. The implications (both short and long term) of the sudden forced evacuation and displacement for the civilians, who, for migrant identity, remain comparatively underexamined, have not been investigated (Tinker, 1975, and Ramamurthy, 1994).

During the Second World War (1939-1945), over two million Indian soldiers served in the British Indian Army, making it the largest volunteer force in the world at the time (Tinker, 1975). The British transported many Indians to work on plantations and in other labor-intensive industries in Southeast Asia, such as Burma and Malaya. By the 1830s, Indians were sent as laborers to

[1] I use colonial-era names such as Burma to reflect the historical context the period under study. I choose to retain the names that were commonly used at the time to maintain historical accuracy and to remain consistent with the language found in primary sources, archival materials, and oral histories. Using these terms, I acknowledge the power structures that shaped the events and experiences I am examining. I am aware of the political and ethical complexities of using colonial nomenclature and have made this decision consciously, rather than uncritically. Some examples are Burma (Myanmar), Rangoon (Yangon), Arakan (Rakhine), Akyab (Sittwe), Moulmein (Mawlamyine), Prome Road (Pyay Road), Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

colonies such as Kenya, Guyana, Fiji, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. Large-scale Indian migration to Burma began after the annexation of Lower Burma in 1885 (particularly for infrastructure projects, such as railways and docks). By the 1920s, around 2 lakh Indians entered Burma annually, and by 1931, they comprised 59.5% of the population. Indians also occupied positions in legal, administrative, and financial capacities, owned businesses, thereby transforming Burmese cities into hubs of commerce and influence (Chakravarti, 1971).

The paper approaches the forced displacement not only as a historical rupture but as a formative and sudden movement, the effects of which continue to pass down the generations. Drawing on oral narratives of second and third generation descendants of the displaced families, the paper examines how displacement persists as an intergenerational circumstance, rather than a once completed event. It underscores the enduring ways in which the forced movement shapes our understanding of belonging and identity. Migration is not treated as a singular transition from one national territory to another, but as a framework through which identity is negotiated over times.

The paper is anchored on two interrelated questions: How does the 1942 forced migration from Burma to India continue to structure identity across the later generations of the displaced families? What does an intergenerational, postmemory-driven approach reveal about the persistence of displacement long after physical movement has stopped? By foregrounding the two questions, the paper hopes to contribute to migration and identity studies by reframing forced migration as an ongoing social process rather than a one-off historical episode.

The dispersed settlement of the families across different regions of India confounds the narratives of return. Arrival in India did not produce a seamless recovery of belonging and assimilation. On the contrary, many families entered social contexts that were marked by economic instability, altered status, and the immediate need to reconstruct livelihoods and a sense of community. For the later generations, the history of rupture is not expressed as a unique inherited trauma. It expresses as a subtle and omnipresent awareness of contingency, of an understanding that home can be fragile. Such positionings indicate that forced migration endures not only in memory but also in everyday forms of belonging.

By situating the exodus within larger discourses on migration and displacement, the paper argues that forced migration produces subjectivities that extend beyond first-generation survivors[2]. The endurance of displacement across the generations to come challenges our understanding of migration studies that confine analysis to departure and settlement. The paper calls attention to how migration becomes embedded within familial cultures and intergenerational understanding. By examining the dynamics, the paper positions the exodus as a case through which to reconsider how identity is shaped by inherited experiences of movement and rebuilding, long after borders have been crossed.

[2] This becomes crucial given that communities continue to cope with the enduring effects of loss, displacement, and community fracture. By focusing on personal narratives, inherited memories, and the tangible remnants of life, the oral histories and life-history interview methods reveal experiences that are absent from official historical records. They provide insights on how history remains, not only in documented incidents but also in artefacts carried back, family narratives passed down, and the emotions that influence how people remember. They underscore the connection between personal and family histories, providing room for diverse interpretations of the past.

The figures and tables below show the distribution of the Indian population in Burma. The data is from the 1931 census. Cities like Rangoon, Pegu, and Arakan have larger Indian populations. In Rangoon, the Indian population is higher than that of the Burmese and other ethnic groups. People speaking Telugu, Tamil, Oriya, and Bengali constitute a higher percentage of the population.

Indigenous Races		*Other Races*	
Burmese	121,998	Indians	212,929
Karens	3,226	Chinese	30,626
Others	2,358	Indo-Burmans	12,560
		Europeans	4,426
Total	127,582	Anglo-Burmans	9,977
		Others	2,315
		Total	272,833

Fig.1- Population of Rangoon (from the 1931 census)

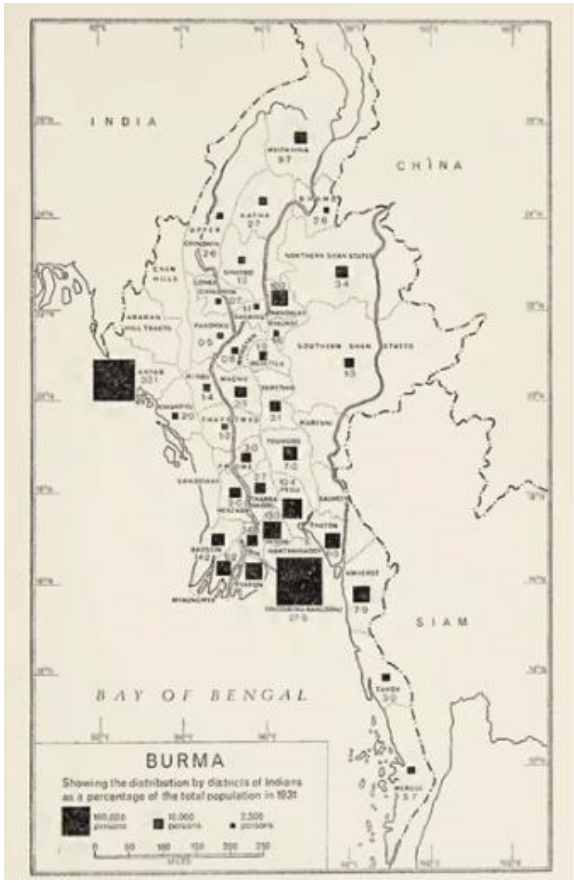

Fig.2 - Population distribution by districts
(Indians as a percentage of the total population in 1931)

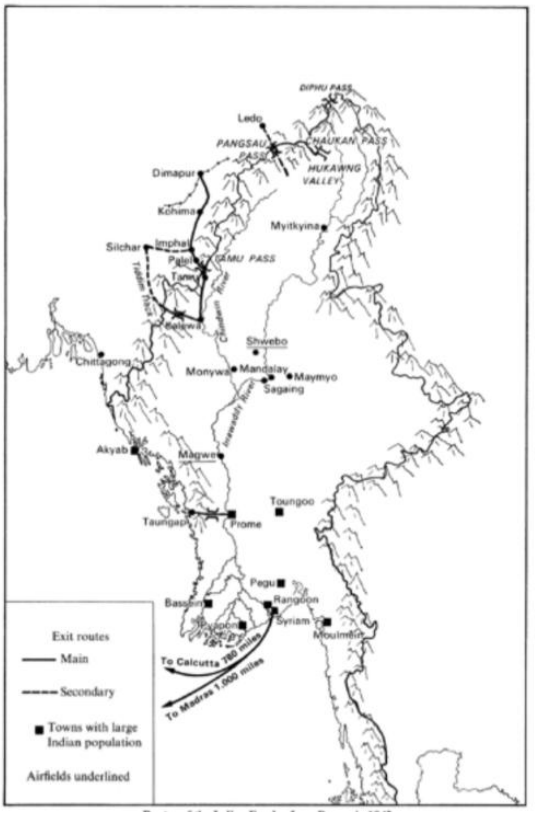

Fig. 3- Routes of evacuation

Conceptual Framework: Identity And Postmemory

The paper approaches the event under investigation through the lens of memory studies by situating forced migration within the transmission of experience down the generations. While scholarship on migration has conventionally prioritized settlement and integration, memory studies foreground how the events persist beyond their historical moment through narrative and inheritance. In this framework, displacement is not only a geographical or political rupture. It is a memory that circulates within families and reshapes identity over time.

The concept of postmemory offers a unique lens for examining the intergenerational processes. Postmemory describes the relationship of the 'generation after' to experiences that preceded their birth, but affect and shape their existence. These inherited memories are mediated through stories, silences, gestures, and familial atmospheres. They are not direct recollections, but neither are they distant historical facts; rather, they operate in the space between lived experience and imaginative reconstruction. In contexts of forced migration, postmemory enables an understanding of how displacement becomes embedded within the identities of those who did not themselves cross borders.

The construct of postmemory, elucidated by Marianne Hirsch, provides a crucial lens for analysis. Hirsch's formulation of postmemory describes how later generations inherit, internalize, and live with the experiences of those who endured traumatic events firsthand. Among the

descendants of the exodus under investigation here, stories of hunger, starvation, uncertainty, abrupt departure, and loss circulate within families as narratives that are brought to remembrance. The narratives and recollections do not just bring to light the past. They shape emotional tendencies toward risk, mobility, and stability. Even among those born decades after the event, displacement functions as a configuring memory, by orienting how they understand their place and space within their relationship to a homeland they did not physically inhabit (Hirch, 2012).

The narratives highlight ways in which migration goes beyond the boundaries of departure and arrival. For second- and third-generation descendants, the event serves as an orienting narrative. It is a point of departure that explains struggles (social and economic) and a persistent sense of insecurity. Stories of walking for days without food, starvation, of loss, leaving loved ones and belongings behind circulate in the recollected accounts. When narrated, the stories produce affective residues: caution, resilience, instability, and a heightened value placed on education and financial security. In this sense, migration is remembered not only as movement but as vulnerability.

In any event, postmemory does not suggest a seamless transmission of trauma. Intergenerational memory is mediated, shaped, and reshaped with new social contexts. The dispersal of the families across India complicates the process. While descendants grow up within distinct regional, linguistic, and social environments, the memory of displacement continues to operate as a shared reference point. The act of migration and displacement becomes both particular and portable, in that they are anchored in a specific event while also being adaptable to diverse settings.

Maurice Halbwachs coined the term *collective memory* to describe how communities, families, and nations construct shared memories that shape their social identities. Halbwachs emphasized that memory is not individual but socially shaped and sustained by group interactions and environments. His work significantly influences how we understand the transmission of histories and identities within societies. Halbwachs argues that collective memory is an active, socially constructed process (selective and shaped by the present), to help communities process events. His work is anchored on how shared memories shape cultural narratives and group identity over time. Halbwachs' framework is crucial for examining how personal and community narratives are constructed and transmitted across generations. The memory of distressing journeys transcends individual grief, becoming part of a shared experience of displacement. It helps explain how personal memories evolve within families and communities into collective memory (Halbwachs, 1952).

Therefore, foregrounding memory within migration studies requires attention to structure. The event under investigation unfolded within the social and racial hierarchies of colonial Burma, where the Indian community occupied a complex and insecure position within the colonial administration. The sudden transformation of the hierarchies during the Second World War intensified vulnerability and contributed to the scale and urgency of flight. While the paper does not enumerate the entire political history of the period, acknowledging the structural conditions is essential for understanding why the forced displacement occurred and how it was experienced. In this context, postmemory is not devoid of history. It is, in fact, bound to the configurations of colonial rule and the war that shaped both the event and the years that followed.

By integrating postmemory into the analysis, the paper complements models that restrict the act of migration to a linear sequence of departure and settlement. On the other hand, it

proposes that forced migration can persist as an intergenerational condition, thereby structuring identity, even after the physical movement has ended. Thus, the act of displacement becomes not only something that happened, but something that is continually lived through memories and narratives. This perspective invites scholarship on migration to engage with the relational and mnemonic dimensions of identity formation.

Methodology

The paper draws on semi-structured conversations conducted with second and third-generation descendants of families displaced in 1942. The exchanges situate the exodus within a longer migratory trajectory, focusing on narratives of the families moving to Burma. The broader framing allowed displacement to emerge not as a single event, but as part of a history of mobility shaped by colonial rule. The conversations allowed participants to guide the direction while ensuring attention to the intergenerational transmission. Questions invited reflection not only on remembered stories, but also on how the stories circulated within the families, who narrated them, when they were told, what details were emphasized, and what emotional resonances lingered.

Many accounts of displacement emerged, embedded within discussions of education, work, financial positions, and more. Displacement appeared not as a singular dramatic narrative but as a quiet presence. Working across the generations required attentiveness to relationships to memory. For some, stories were vivid and frequently recounted. For others, knowledge was fragmentary and transmitted through partial anecdotes and indirect references. Listening highlighted how forced migration can be inherited through storytelling, but through dispositions toward stability, mobility, and belonging.

My positionality shapes the process of listening. As a third-generation member of a family that experienced displacement, I approach the narratives as a scholar and an inheritor. The insider location facilitated trust and recognition in interviews, often allowing conversations to move beyond formal recounting into spaces of shared reflection. It required sustained reflexivity regarding identification and the interpretive weight of familial memory. Rather than claiming neutrality, the paper acknowledges that intergenerational research on displacement unfolds within the proximity of relationality. I argue that this method foregrounds the ethical and affective dimensions that are inherent in studying inherited migration, instead of diminishing analytical rigor[3].

Participants are in different regional and socio-economic contexts, yet are linked by familial histories in Burma. The dispersion allows the analysis to trace how postmemory adapts

[3] My study is grounded in both academic research and personal experience. My great-grandparents were one of the many families who left for Burma in 1942, leaving behind not only a home but also a way of life, and hence I approach this topic with a familial connection. Their narratives, which has been passed down through the generations, serves as a foundation for my research on material culture, intergenerational memory and displacement.
As a researcher, I find myself in a liminal space, neither fully an insider nor entirely an outsider to the participants that I aim to interact with. My personal connection to the topic grants me accesses to familial narratives which in invaluable. However, this connection also poses challenges, particularly the risk of over-empathy, which may influence my interpretation of participants' narratives. By acknowledging the emotional value of the narratives, I understand that my family's history enriches my research by bringing a personal and empathetic lens to the participants who I interview.

across contemporary environments, highlighting both convergence and divergence in how displacement is remembered. Therefore, the methodological approach positions listening as central to understanding migration. By attending to narrative texture, intergenerational mediation, and researcher positionality, the study hopes to illuminate how forced migration persists within family worlds, not just as historical knowledge.

Narratives

The narratives are based on findings from a pilot study that examined patterns and conceptual frameworks. The themes that emerged (those related to displacement and intergenerational memory) suggest processes that are appropriate for a larger population impacted by comparable historical circumstances. The study provides a methodological and heuristic basis, enabling cautious extrapolation to a larger number of participants and guiding the structure of later, more comprehensive research. Participants were silent about life before the departure, but they often recalled the journey with vivid sensory details, such as heat, starvation, loss of family members, separation, and illness. Participants recall narratives of difficult decision-making, separation, and loss. Traumatic events take center stage in the recollections, overriding the more stable, everyday memories.

The months of flight are defined, while the pre-war years become hazy. Instead of being formed by continuity, memory becomes a repository of vulnerability. The narratives underscore perseverance and resourcefulness and are consistent with narratives of resilience. Most participants recall being told about the rosy days in Burma while referring to the friendliness of Burmese neighbors, the lower cost of living, and the cleanliness of the neighborhoods. For the families, migration meant earning a better living, fulfilling family obligations, educating the children, and sending money back home.

One of the participants, Jaya, shared stories with her by her mother. Jaya's mother was a young girl when her family (her parents and 10 of her siblings) moved to Rangoon in the early 1920s. Their relatives had moved to Rangoon a few years earlier and set up a hotel there. The older children were compelled to work in the hotel after school due to the family's precarious financial situation. With the advancement of Japan into Burma, the families spent many nights in underground bunkers, constantly keeping an ear out for the air-raid siren. Noise from the bombings left some of the children disturbed and shocked for days. Reflecting on those days, Jaya adds that the immediate decision of her family was to leave Rangoon.

Another participant shares that his grandfather moved to Rangoon in the late 1870s and ran a hotel near a military camp. They were a large family. He shares, "My mother and my siblings returned to India in an earlier ship, along with relatives, and disembarked at Madras. My father returned a few months later, after locking up the hotel. Back in those days, older people did not deposit money in banks. My father locked our possessions in a metal trunk and handed the keys to our Burmese neighbours, hoping to return someday. He boarded the last ship to leave Rangoon. My father was disturbed for a few months (after his return to Madras) due to the shocks from the bombings. It took him a while to recover, both emotionally and psychologically."

When Jaya's family decided to return to India, they had to carefully consider their options. During the war, bribes were common. The Burmese officers took bribes to let passengers onto the steamers. Securing additional tickets for the ship required paying a hefty sum. This forced the family to make the tough decision to separate. The elder siblings took the land route (via the Ledo

Pass, Nagaland, and Assam), while the parents and younger siblings returned via a steamer. The terrain was treacherous, and the rain made the route extremely hazardous. Many who took the land route died due to cerebral malaria, lack of assistance, and access to treatment.

Another participant recalls his father's account of the laborious return to Calcutta. His father was a Reuters correspondent for Rangoon. He recalls, "People working for the press and those employed in government jobs were not allowed to leave Burma. When the war broke out, my father sent us, along with my mother and her father, on a steamer. The first place one could get off was Calcutta, and our family deboarded there. We had no idea what to do in this city, but somehow, we managed. He continues, "My father had not contacted us for close to a year. We had given him up for dead. In 1943, he took the land route and was emaciated by the end of the journey. He contracted malaria, which worsened his health. When he reached Kohima, he called us, and that was when we knew he had been alive all along. About ten months later, he joined us in Calcutta".

Across the conversations, the exodus emerged through family narratives that functioned as foundational stories. The accounts underscored the immediacy of departure, the loss of property (both movable and immovable), and long journeys of uncertain conditions. While there were nuances that set apart each conversation, there was a repetition of urgency, uncertainty, and resilience. For second-generation participants, the recollections were described as part of childhood memory. They were mostly retold during family gatherings, as an anchor to explain present circumstances and as lessons in resilience. The exodus became a starting point to explain shifts in economic positions, emphasis on education, and the importance of 'family' as a unit. When framed as stories of survival, they highlighted the necessity of perseverance and adaptability. The thematic repetition created a shared narrative. Migration is not remembered as geographic relocation. It is also a defining moment that anchors familial understanding.

There were also silences and fragmentation in the narratives. Some participants described knowing that their grandparents came from Burma, while possessing limited details about the journey. Details were fragmented and pieced together later to get a linear timeline. The fragmented nature of memories shapes the boundaries of postmemory. The absence of a detailed narrative produces a different mode of inheritance. This is characterized by curiosity and then awareness. In these situations, displacement is not fully articulated. The partial knowledge challenges postmemory that depends on explicit storytelling. Silences and gaps become a medium of inheritance by transmitting the weight of an experience that is not easy to retell. Jaya adds that her grandmother, who had sixteen children, had to make tough decisions about which children would take the land route, and which would take the steamer.

A consistent form of intergenerational transmission emerged in the everyday dispositions towards security and stability. Some participants described growing up in households that emphasized financial discipline and education. While the values were not always directly linked to the displacement, they were often framed as responses to an event of sudden loss. Thus, displacement became embedded within a realm of stability—the memory of having lost home and livelihood once translated into an acute awareness of contingency.

Most families returned with almost no material possessions. Families left behind their documents and other belongings. New employment opportunities were sought after their return to India. Children were sent to schools. Financial frugality and an increased emphasis on education took priority. Jaya counts, "There was an inner drive that compelled my aunts and uncles to pursue

education and secure employment. It was quiet, but a powerful determination pushed them. They thought it would help put the past behind them. The memories of starvation and acute hunger never left". This form of transmission brings to light how forced migration persists beyond just the recollection and remembrance of the narrative. It shapes how families approach finances, ownership, education, and mobility. The legacy of displacement is entwined into everyday practices, thus enduring the event as an inherited sensitivity to instability.

Conclusions

The paper approaches the 1942 exodus not merely as a historical episode of wartime displacement. It positions the exodus as an enduring intergenerational condition that continues to shape experiences. By placing the forced migration within the framework of postmemory, the paper argues that displacement persists through narratives, repetition, silences, and dispositions long after physical movement has ceased. In doing so, it shifts attention from migration as an event to migration as an inheritance.

For the later generations dispersed across India, 1942 is rarely encountered as a closed chapter of family history. Rather, it operates as a formative point of reference — sometimes vividly narrated, sometimes only partially known, yet consistently present as an explanatory backdrop to family values and self-understandings. Stories of abrupt departure and precarious arrival circulate alongside subtler inheritances: financial caution, emphasis on education, attentiveness to political uncertainty, and a quiet recognition that home can be fragile. Through these mechanisms, forced migration becomes embedded within everyday life, shaping how belonging and stability are imagined.

Foregrounding these processes complicates conventional temporal models within migration studies. Much scholarship continues to organize migration around departure, transit, and settlement, implicitly suggesting that mobility concludes once relocation is achieved. The case of the Burma–India exodus demonstrates instead that migration may endure as a structuring presence across generations. Even in the absence of ongoing cross-border movement, descendants live within the affective and relational afterlives of displacement. Migration, in this sense, is not only a demographic shift but a durable orientation toward the world - a sensitivity to contingency, a recalibration of security, and an inherited awareness of vulnerability.

At the same time, attending to subtle forms of transmission expands how forced migration is understood within memory studies. The intergenerational afterlives of the Burma exodus are not always marked by overt trauma or dramatic recollection. Rather, they often manifest through partial narratives, silences, and everyday practices. Such understated transmissions challenge assumptions that displacement must be preserved through vivid storytelling to exert influence. Instead, they reveal how migration can persist quietly within familial cultures, shaping identity without necessarily being foregrounded as trauma.

By positioning memory studies within migration scholarship, this paper contributes to broader efforts to rethink the relationship between movement and identity. It suggests that the legacies of forced migration are not confined to first-generation survivors nor exhausted by questions of integration or assimilation. Instead, they unfold across decades within the relational spaces of family and across dispersed geographies. The Burma-India exodus offers a lens for reconsidering migration as an ongoing social process, one that extends beyond borders and across time through the intimate channels of intergenerational memory.

Understanding migration as an inherited condition invites an expansive conception of identity. It recognizes that displacement does not simply relocate bodies; it reorients sensibilities, expectations, and attachments in ways that endure. For the descendants of those who fled Burma in 1942, migration remains present not as a continuous movement but as a remembered and reworked inheritance. To account for such afterlives is to acknowledge that the histories of forced migration do not conclude with arrival. They continue, quietly yet persistently, within the making of identity itself.

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