

Life of a Little Magazine: Stories of the Bengalis in Burma

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Due to the ancient literary, cultural, and administrative associations between India and South-East Asia, Burma was viewed as the land of wealth and fortune in India's collective imagination. A substantial amount of pre-colonial Indian literature was produced in Burma, and Buddhism has spread throughout South-East Asia since ancient times. By means of trade and administration, epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata spread into many South-East Asian languages. During the colonial era, various European colonists, particularly the British, brought Indians to Burma and other countries to serve as coolies, indentured labourers, clerks, and officials. Numerous individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds migrated from India to Burma and Southeast Asia in search of livelihood. India, being an elder British colony, acted as colonial agents in these countries and was also granted socially and culturally hierarchical positions there. After Burma's independence from the British, a nationalist awakening began, and the Burmese were adamant about seizing administrative, economic, and social power from the foreigners. Due to Japanese bombing and Burmese nationalists, a large number of Indians returned to India during World War II, while many others remained and accepted their conditions. During the nationalisation of Burma in the 1960s, many returned to India as the expatriates. Bengalis, as Bhadrals of the middle class who rely heavily on government services and education, encountered significant difficulties when Indians were forced to acquire Burmese citizenship or permitted to remain as foreign residents without access to government facilities. 'Pragati', a Bengali magazine published in Rangoon between 1961 and 1963, chronicles the crisis of this turning point in history. This magazine described the strategy for survival, quest for identity, description of the past, and the then current situation of the Bengali community in Burma. This paper focuses on a close reading of the magazine and a critical analysis of the community's narrative during a moment of crisis in a diaspora, as well as how they engaged in the formation of their national identity.

Keywords: Pragati, Bengali Diaspora, Bengali magazine, Rangoon, Burma