

Precarious Migrancy, Community, and Resilience in Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam*

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Abstract

Literary narrative provides a new perspective of looking at the historical past, often questioning the credibility of representation. Interrogating what Hayden White calls history's tropic prefiguration, the prominence given to key historical figures, the erasure of subaltern individuals or communities, literature foregrounds the role of narrative in constructing the way one understands the world, meaning, and truth. A postcolonial writer, in their critical re-interpretation of the historical archive, creates a hybrid text that combines historical evidences and imaginative reconstructions, and historical as well as invented characters. With this interplay, history is stripped of its objective quality. This article seeks to explore how Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam* presents the precarious condition of the migrant Burmese Indian peasants during World War II and the manner in which they establish a community during their historically forgotten long march to Assam. What Acharya attempts to reconcile in *Jangam* are the "analytical" histories through utilising the rational categories of modern historical thought and the "affective" histories which account for the plural ways of being-in-the-world.

Keywords: Precarity and precariousness, migrant labour, subaltern, narrative reconstructions, community building

There has since the beginning of human existence always been movement, migration and settlement in new areas; for as long as is known and in most parts of the world, individual places have been open to, and partly constituted by, their contacts with "outside". Interconnection is not new, and diasporas are certainly not only a feature of the recent past. (Massey and Jess 2)

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The greatest single fact of the past three decades has been, I believe, the vast human migration attendant upon war, colonialism and decolonisation, economic and political revolution, and such devastating occurrences as famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations. (Said xiv)

Introduction: Contextualising Precarity

Precarity, as Lewis and Waite explain, “describes the rise of casual, flexible, sub-contracted, temporary, contingent and part-time work in a neoliberal economy” (51-52). Precariousness, they further argue, “is also understood as a condition or experience of (ontological) insecurity and as a platform to mobilize against insecurity” (51-52). The position of migrant workers is extremely insecure in Asia where they exist in a “largely disorganized and vulnerable state” (Chin 3). Chin adroitly analyzes the processes by which the lives of these migrant labourers become precarious. First, they are denied citizenship and permanent residency and thereby disempowered; second, they are not allowed to enter the stage of political participation and representation. Consequently, they remain powerless to challenge their labour conditions through collective means. The concept of precarity, contends Susan Banki, “describes the condition of being vulnerable to exploitation because of a lack of security” (451). Thus, precarious work is not the fact of consistent unemployment, but its looming threat. “Precarity of residence does not suggest imminent deportation from a country,” asserts Banki, “but its very real possibility” (451). Banki conceptualises a subset of the precariat: that of “non-citizens, who experience ‘precarity of place’” (452). The material place of existence, argues Banki, determines the way an individual’s world is shaped and coloured, as does the physical removal of persons. Hence the permission to remain in one’s physical place lies at the core of a concept of national assignment of privileges and benefits. “Precarity of place,” contends Banki, “describes the absence of such permission and can be defined as *vulnerability to removal or deportation from one’s physical location*” (453, italics original).

While the globe has witnessed a phenomenal rise in precarious work, there are fundamental differences in the histories of work, and of workers, in the Global North and the Global South. In his insightful article “Precarity North and South,” Ben Scully cautions against viewing precarity as a universal phenomenon. Scully devotes particular attention to Guy Standing’s book *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* and argues against the author’s simplistic assumptions of global convergence: “by ignoring the much longer history of precarious work in the Global South, Standing and others blind themselves to important lessons from and examples of anti-precarity labour politics among Southern workers” (161). Standing considers precarious work as a product of the era of globalisation; hence, most of the examples he cites range from the 1980s to the present.

However, Scully admits that, for workers in the erstwhile colonised Global South, precarity is not a novel phenomenon but “has been a defining feature of work throughout the colonial past and into the present era of national independence” (162). Colonial work regimes were more “despotic and repressive than secure and stable” and “this repression was not limited to the workplace” (163). Consequently, the politics of labour that emerged in the colonial world was always broader and less focused on the workplace than the “old” working class politics that Standing describes.

“Precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon,” assert Neilson and Rossiter, “only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm” (54). But if capitalism is evaluated from a wider historical and geographical perspective, “it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization” (Neilson and Rossiter 54). Not only was most labor precarious in the South historically, even during the Keynesian era of developmental states, but today precarious conditions are especially widespread in the South. It is not difficult to find a sense of historical continuity between the vulnerability of these 19th century migrants and the labourers of the oil industry a century later who are “present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future” (Badiou 56). The fictional lives of a peasant community in Debendranath Acharya’s *Jangam* (originally published in Assamese in 1982) are embedded in the historical backdrop of the Long March from Burma to India during World War II, an unrecognised exodus in South Asian history which witnessed the deaths of thousands of Burmese Indian migrants. As a counter narrative to Eurocentric history, *Jangam* reclaims the Burmese rural space as a site full of history of cultural exchanges, conflict, and contestation. The narrative explores the plight of migrant labourers on the move, their strategies of survival and efforts to construct and represent themselves as a community against an imperial machinery. The perspective of precarity provides the potential to link actions to tackle forced labour with the broader struggle for (migrant) workers’ rights.

The Long March: Precarious Migrancy in *Jangam*

Jangam has received a diverse critical reception. In the Preface to the novel, Debendranath Acharya describes the novel as “the story of a group of ordinary people” (n.p). Sailen Bharali believes that the “journey conducted with unimaginable physical and mental agony seems to be a symbol for the endless, forward-moving journey of human life” (cited in Baishya 20). In a similar vein, Prafulla Kotoky reads the novel as a universal allegory of human predicament in conflict with nature: “It is as if [...] (*Jangam*) is a priceless history of humankind that, in every age, conquers thousands of unsurmountable obstacles and emerges victorious over nature” (cited in Baishya 20). Arguing against the idea that “the melodramatic familial narrative of *Jangam* is predicated on an idea of universal

'human condition,'" Amit R. Baishya claims that "this impulse towards universality is undercut by the ambivalent figurations of forms of non-human otherness that proliferate in this text" (21). This article seeks to explore the precarious nature of this hitherto unexplored, unrepresented forced migration of ordinary lives in the Long March, the complicity between the coloniser and the greedy businessmen in Burma and the forms of community formation and their ultimate conflagration as depicted in *Jangam*.

The inextricable connection between European colonialism, very much a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise, and the machinery of capitalism is now an established phenomenon. Exploring the relationship between the ideology of imperialism and its functioning through the practice of colonialism, Denis Judd argues that "no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure" (3). Amitav Ghosh concedes that "capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality" but asserts that the "relationship between them" has never been "a simple one" (117). Disagreeing with Naomi Klein, Ghosh argues that it is not capitalism *per se* but rather the unequal operations of empire that have driven global dysfunction. *Jangam* traces the dynamics of collaboration and complicity of these local capitalists and their meticulous rise. After the British had annexed Burma to their empire and made the hills and low-lying lands arable, they transported Indian labourers to cultivate the pure and verdant Burmese lands. For the Indian peasants Burma was an alluring world where one "could strike gold in [...] fertile lands. Great quantities of gold were strewn in the pathways of Burma; clusters of pearls apparently hung on the trees and bushes" (Acharya 25). They cultivated few farm lands and worked as labourers in the islands near Rangoon. A group of businessmen, called the Chettiars, took full advantage of the situation and with their capital began to control the Burmese economy. The Chettiars, the moneylenders who charged exorbitant rates of interest from the local people, ascended the economic hierarchy and colluding with the British had transplanted the Burmese as the richest class in the land. With the outbreak of the Second World War they sensed the outbreak of Burmese insurrections and were the first to flee along with the officers and employees of British companies. The bitter truth of this colonial mission is uttered by a dying British soldier, his body charred after a Japanese bomb attack, a tool of the empire, when he screams in unbearable pain: "Why did we come here to die? To save the oil companies or the teak tycoons? [...] Who began this damned war? For whom?" (Acharya 289). The omniscient narrator's wry observation that "another insignificant life had been sacrificed in this carnival of destruction" (*Jangam* 289) assumes immense significance in a narrative which articulates the grievable conditions of the destitute.

The Indian peasants had come to Burma with the hope of alleviating their poverty and rising in the ranks of society. Their Burmese counterparts, once the landowners, had squandered their money by gambling and merrymaking and were reduced to penury after mortgaging their lands to the Indian moneylenders. Consequently, they surrendered the ownership of their land and transferred the responsibility of cultivation to the Indian peasants. Years of existence in Burma had provided the Indian peasants a sense of attachment with and ownership of the land as sharecroppers. The outbreak of WWII turned the situation upside down. Japanese attacks compelled the British to flee with the Indian comprador class — the traders, landlords, office bearers, and workers — on their trails. Burmese nationalists joined hands with the Japanese to vent their grievances against the Indians because they had inflicted heavy losses on the autochthonous population. In Acharya's novel, the poor Ramgobinda's complaint is not simply his individual one but that of the lakhs of Indian peasants who had migrated to Burma: "We are citizens of Burma. We were born here, everything we possess is here. We belong here, just like you. Isn't there anyone in this country who can explain this simple fact to the Burmese rebels?" (Acharya 46-47)? The Second World War has provided Burmese nationalists with the prized opportunity to regain possession of their lost land and drive the Indians out by decimating them and also the Burmese families if they provided them refuge. The nationalist Nungnao proclaims to his fellow villagers the gospel of their insurrectionist group: "You can only set up your ideal kingdom by throwing out these poor Indian farmers" (Acharya 69)? The zeal of parochial nationalism and the "tremendous surge of the revolution" (Acharya 70) would not even spare the fellow Burmese who converted to Christianity and upset the orders of caste and community. They considered these converts as detestable hybrids who offer their Sunday prayers and "swelling their chests, identify themselves as Anglo-Burmese" (Acharya 42). The mode in which the native Burmese internalised European cultural practices made them occupy a hybrid in-between position and rendered them aliens in their own land.

In his collection of prose pieces *Dancing in Cambodia; At Large in Burma*, Amitav Ghosh dismantles the exclusivist ideology of the nation-state thus: "In a region as heterogeneous as South-East Asia, any boundary is sure to be arbitrary. On balance, Burma's best hopes for peace lie in maintaining intact the larger and more inclusive entity that history, albeit absent-mindedly, bequeathed to its population almost half a century ago" (100). Nationalism was the ideological glue which bound South Asians to the physical space of the state after the nations achieved independence. But post-independent states witnessed the fragmentation of the idea of a unified nation triggered by subnational discourses and secessionist ideologies based on discriminatory exclusions. While the nation validates its legitimacy in the international order, counter discourse or such

discourses taken together agitate and controvert the idea of the existing nation within its border. *Jangam* explores the conflict between inclusive and exclusive nationalism through the clash of nationalist discourses between the two generations of Burmese people. The older generation Burmese natives strongly disapprove of the ideology of exclusivist nationalism of the Burmese rebels and cite incidents from Assamese history which split the nation into fragments and paved the path for British domination: “The British, Japanese or Indians aren’t our enemies; our most formidable enemy is ourselves” (Acharya 223). The sagacious Jayanao, mourning the brutal killing of his son Nungnao who helped the Indian peasants to escape at the hands of his own fellow nationalists, lament the failure of the aspirations of the post-colonial nation state because of “the poisonous weeds of division” which will “splinter the country into tiny, tiny pieces” (Acharya 223). In a scathing critique of the nationalists, the old man describes them as “young men with no conscience” and disparages them as “a bunch of bloodthirsty vampires, a group of barbaric demons deranged by the intoxications of nationalist sentiment” (*Jangam* 219). Nation-building, quite predictably, became a conflict-prone exercise; it turned to demonising enemies both within and without, “especially in situations where a majoritarian view began to assert ‘ownership’ of a polity in the name of a ‘core’ ethnoculturally defined ‘nation’ and then tried to redefine the state as one that belonged exclusively to that core group (Baruah 187). For Guibernau the secessionist subnational units of a nation-state form a “nation without state” dissociating from the state based on “common culture, history, attachment to a particular territory, and the explicit wish to rule themselves” (16). Xenophobia, thus, “bestows on this narrowly constructed social other (as the stranger or foreigner) a legibility — either as extreme negativity (which turns the other an erroneous anti-self) or as passing difference (which turns the other into just a retarded or delayed self-same) — which is by definition not possible in the self’s encounter with the other” (Khair 172). Exclusivist nationalism renders people vulnerable and abject and thrives on the dehumanisation of the other. The fleeting Indian peasants in Burma are not considered human beings, but rather as pre-human or inhuman persons, to which the regime of human rights does not apply. Such “wasted lives” are excluded by the insurrectionists and treated as human waste, disposable lives that are superfluous, they are “the waste of order-building combined into the main preoccupation and metafunction of the state, as well as providing the foundation for its claim to authority” (Bauman 33).

Capitalism, Empire, and the Resilience of the “men in the aggregate”

The intertwining forces of capitalism, empire, and the processes of decolonisation create refugees who transcend the territorial demarcations of the modern nation-state. The huddling together of refugees by forces beyond their

control creates a spirit of solidarity amongst them resulting in a sharing of singularities and establishment of a community.² Nancy suggests that fascism annihilates community by destroying difference but that there is always a resistance to this destruction. “[T]he fascist masses,” Nancy writes, “tend to annihilate community in the delirium of an incarnated communion... [C]ommunity never ceases to resist this will. Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence” (35). Being-in-common, he maintains in *The Inoperative Community*, “does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities” (Nancy 29). Nor does it obtain its genesis “from out of or as an effect of [...] a process that emerges from a ground [fond] or from a fund [fonds] of some kind [...]. It is a groundless ‘ground’, less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities” (29). A utopic community is neither an enforced, settled arrangement from above nor one from below. The trajectory of its organisation is horizontal and latitudinal and seeks cohesion in what Nancy identifies as a process of ‘compearance’. Compearance, asserts Nancy,

does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not emerge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us) — a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition. What is exposed in compearance is the following, and we must learn to read it in all its possible combinations: ‘you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I’ [...]. Or again, more simply: *you shares me* [...]. (29)

An open and hospitable community is a countermand against social exclusion. As the marker of direct affective singularity “between you *and* I” the ethics of compearance defiantly resists the instruments of power, colonial or otherwise, to orchestrate divisions and exclusions through its politics of immediate conjunction, conjuncture, coalition, and collaboration. Furthermore, as “the appearance of the *between* as such,” compearance impels its agents a qualifying ethico-existential capacity for the radical expropriation of identity in face of the other — a capacity for self-othering. Nancy is apposite again: “[S]ingular beings are themselves constituted by sharing; they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*” (Nancy 25). This creates the shape of what we might call an “affective cosmopolitanism.”

The celebration of the collective, the “men in the aggregate” (Ghosh 106) is a trope in *Jangam*.² The narrative presents the possibility of the emergence of new and different kinds of subjects and spaces that makes smooth space a space of potentiality, a space where a people and a nation yet to be known may emerge. It is on the journey that the old identities get dissolved and discarded; new identities are acquired, new relationships formed. Amidst a seething cauldron of hatred and ethnic cleansing, a group of Indian-Burmese peasants form a micro-community in a journey to “their motherland India, a place they did not know at all” (Acharya 108). The leader of the refugees, Nitu, pragmatically emphasises the vital need of solidarity: “Our courage will increase if we band together. We’ll be able to help each other” (Acharya 86). It is in this perilous journey that they form new associations with Father Berry, the convict turned priest, and the Anglo-Burmese girl Ma-Pu. Ramgobinda loses his mother; a sick refugee succumbs as well. In the midst of the forest where no one could think of the rituals of a Hindu cremation, Father Berry arranged to bury her and placed his cross on her. In his turn Ramgobinda placed his mother’s picture of the Hindu gods on top of the cross: “At the moment, it seemed as if all the different religions of the world mingled and transformed into the great religion of humanity!” (Acharya 151). Ramgobinda’s wife Lachhmi gave birth to their second son in a Kachin village, helped by the tribal women, young boys of the village rush desperately to get medicines from a nearby military camp. There is separation amidst their journey as well when the ailing Budhu’s mother, the wounded Ballabh, the convalescent Lachhmi and her day-old son are sent on a military jeep to a safe destination. The death of the sick man who was being carried had no impact on Nitu who was keen on continuing the journey without any disruption. Father Berry’s humanism and Ramgobinda’s communitarianism prevailed, however, and they provide the corpse a proper burial. Father Berry’s rhetoric of communitarianism is based on an “understanding of subjectivity, one that values mutual-dependency, reliance, appreciation, and trust between the Self and the Other” (Lin 11). This indeed is a “paradigmatic reconsideration of the status of the Other in our understanding of who we are – our self, identity, and individuality” (Lin 1). The self’s being “with” the other is an integral part of an ethical relationship. This “withness,” conceptualises Margaret Chatterjee, “covers up the essential difference that there is between people, although we are endowed with the capacity of bridging that distance by embarking on the project of being ‘towards’ the other” (220). This act of imagining a utopian community is an act of resistance, this spirit of solidarity in a community formed on a journey is the narrative’s positive in stark contrast to the destructive and violent ethnic cleansing in the name of nationalism practiced by the Burmese insurgents.

² For a detailed analysis of the processes of community formation see Roy.

The group is not without its own differences as well. Throughout the journey there are sarcastic references to the box of jewels and precious wealth that the businessman Ballabh was presumed to have been carrying. When the group meets Ma-Pu, alias Mary, the Anglo-Burmese girl, alone and helpless in the forest, it cannot be unanimous in a decision to take her along. It is Chinti who subdues Budhu's unwillingness to include Ma-Pu in the group and allows her to join them in their motion. These actions set into motion a chain of events that disrupt the expectations generated by place, empire, and caste. The budding love between Chinti and Ma-Pu leads them out of the traditional world of caste and class as they head to the border. Their mutual love for each other provides them with a positive energy to build and rebuild a community amidst a space of imperial destruction. Hence, they discover the need to articulate their potential intimacies in new terms. Indeed, the power of love, of romantic passion, suddenly reveals to Ma-Pu the extent of her connection to Chinti: "He was by her side almost all the while in the past few days.... However, today in this friendless, almost theatrical situation, she suddenly experienced an outpouring of love for this young man cradling the infant in his lap with his head bowed" (Acharya 359). The quintessence of the "human love" of the duo inheres in mutual recognition, acceptance, and fulfillment. Moreover, Ma-Pu also developed an affectionate relation with Ramgobinda's sick elder son Thanu who looked up to her as his mother. With Ramgobinda and his wife Lachhmi turning insane at the end of their journey, it is Ma-Pu and Chinti who take up the responsibility of looking after their two sons. Instead of losing family, new families are established in the hinterland of Assam, families based on shared experiences transcending the divisions of race, class, and caste.

The migrants get a sense of identity through their individual tales. The catalogue of tales is a record of their wretched lives — Ma-Pu's earlier life in a British family, Ramgobinda's reminiscence of an idyllic village life in India, Dr. Shimray's recollections of his patients. Each narrative crafts a self by being located in a material world; it also explores the socio-economic matrices that govern their lives. These discursive constructions of the past are their symbolic strategies to address their present predicament. Stories elucidate a community's understanding of itself. What is more, the act of narration invites the listener into a "matrix of ideas" (Merleau-Ponty 77) beyond his own sedimented notions of self. The world of the text and the world of the reader interpenetrate each other through a "fusion of horizons," through "refiguration": the "active re-organization of our being-in-the-world performed by the reader following the invitation of the text to become the reader of ourself" (Ricoeur 1995: 47). Reminiscent of Ricoeur's constant reference to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," Merleau-Ponty asserts that narrative/narration carries "the speaker and hearer into a common universe by drawing both toward a new signification through

their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition” (75). Narration, emplotment, and reading/listening are, therefore, mediums in quest for an answer to the elusive question “Who am I?” “Ethical readings analyze specific constellations, e.g., ethical questions raised by the story’s content or by the act of narration,” believes Roy Sommer, they “can also theorise more generally the limits of tellability and the problems inherent in speaking for, rather than with, somebody else” (9). The subaltern can speak if and only when they are provided access to a narrative.

Narrative for Ricoeur is mimetic of human action. Establishing a healthy hermeneutic circle between narrative and life, he demonstrates that not only history and fiction have things in common, but are also interweaved in the narrative experiences of life: “on the one hand, history in some way makes use of fiction to refigure time and, on the other hand, fiction makes use of history for the same ends” (Ricoeur 181). While history makes intense use of the narrative tradition of emplotment, it also involves something at the level of refiguration which Ricoeur calls “the representative function of the historical imagination” (186). Hence a given series of events can be observed as tragic or comic and so on which explains the equal appeal of history books as that of novels. Most importantly, history has the sanctimonious task of conveying the horror, typical of fiction, of epoch-making events. If fiction is thus interwoven in history, then, as a corollary, history is also interwoven in fiction. “Fictional narrative,” argues Ricoeur, “is quasi-historical to the extent that the unreal events that it relates are past facts for the narrative voice that addresses itself to the reader. It is in this that they resemble past events and that fiction resembles history” (Ricoeur 190). The past that the fictional world conjures is a “quasi-past,” a probable past, a past that “might have been.” The past, far from being a fixed monolith, is open-ended; consequently, there are multiple narratives about the same events, the same past. Persevering with this argument, Hayden White concludes that “there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but [...] there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation” (47).

Conclusion: Towards an Intersection of Fiction and History

Literary narrative provides a new perspective of looking at the historical past, often questioning the credibility of the historical representation. By way of questioning what Hayden White calls history’s tropic prefiguration, the prominence given to key historical figures, the erasure of subaltern individuals or communities, literature foregrounds the role of narrative in constructing one’s understanding of the world and meaning and truth. A postcolonial writer, in their critical re-interpretation of the historical archive, creates a hybrid text that combines historical evidences and imaginative reconstructions, historical as well

as invented characters. With this interplay, history is stripped of its objective quality. That literary texts have been widely recognised as essential materials for historical study is evident in Spivak's endorsement of Foucault's suggestion that "to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value" (27-28). Evidently what Debendranath Acharya attempts to reconcile in *Jangam* are the "analytical" histories utilising the rational categories of modern historical thought and the "affective" histories which account for the plural ways of being-in-the-world.

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