

The Burmese Exodus of 1942: Towards Evolving Policy Protocols for a Refugee Archive

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Abstract : The Burmese Exodus of 1942, which left more than 4 lakh as refugees and thousands dead, is one of the worst forced migrations in recorded history. Adding to the woes of the refugees is the lack of credible documentation of their lived experiences, trauma, and stories and their erasure from recorded history. Media reports, national records, and mainstream narratives that have registered the exodus provide sanitized versions which have reduced the refugees to a nameless, faceless mass of travelers and obliterated their lived experiences, trauma, and sufferings. This attitudinal problem compels the need to stem the insensitivity that accompanies institutional memory by making a case for a more humanistically evolved policy that puts in place protocols for the way the humanities would voice the concern for the refugee. A definite step in this direction and a far more relevant project in our times is the need to build a comprehensive refugee archive that can be a repository of the refugee experiences and perspectives. The paper draws on Hannah Arendt's position on the Jewish refugee crisis, Agamben's work on statelessness and citizenship, Foucault's notion of governmentality and biopolitics, Edward Said's concepts on Exile, Fanon's work on the dispossessed, Derrida's work on 'the foreigner and hospitality' in order to conceptualize the refugee condition which will form the theoretical framework for the paper. It also refers to the existing scholarship in the field of refugee studies such as Roger Zetter's work on the 'refugee label', Philip Marfleet's work on 'refugees and history', Lisa Malkki's research on the anthropological discourse of the refugee and refugee studies. The paper is also informed by the work that has been done by the international organizations to address the refugee crisis. The emphasis is on building a strong argument for the establishment of the refugee archive that finds but a passing and a none too convincing reference in refugee studies in order to enable a multi-dimensional understanding of the refugee crisis. Some of the old questions cannot be dismissed as outdated as the continuing travails of the refugees in different parts of the world only remind us that they are still, largely, unanswered. The questions are -What is the nature of a Refugee Archive? How is it different from the existing historical and political archives? What are the implications of the refugee archive? What is its contribution to refugee studies? The paper draws on Diana Taylor's concept of the archive and the repertoire to theorize the refugee archive as a repository that has the documentary function of the 'archive' and the 'agency' function of the repertoire. It then reads Ayya's Accounts- a memoir by Anand Pandian -in the light of Hannah Arendt's concepts of the 'refugee as vanguard' and 'story telling as political action'- to illustrate how the memoir contributes to the refugee archive that provides the refugee a place and agency in history. The paper argues for a refugee archive that has implications for the formulation of inclusive refugee policies.

Keywords : Ayya's Accounts, Burmese Exodus, policy protocol, refugee archive

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