

## Preface

The tempest that was the Second World War cut right through the heart of Assam nearly four decades ago. But hardly any signs of this massive calamity that faced humankind has registered in our literature.

This is the story of a group of ordinary people.

A group of extremely ordinary people who were dislocated by the devastation caused by the great war—they are universal symbols for suffering humanity. This novel is the poignant tale of people who embarked on a great, unknown journey with the fervent desire for survival burning in their hearts, but whose goals were thwarted as they succumbed, with their wishes unfulfilled, to the cold embrace of death.

All the characters in this book, albeit unacknowledged by history, are imaginary. Any resemblance to persons dead or alive is entirely unintentional.

—The Author



Dedicated to the cherished memory of  
Sailajananda Baruah

—The Author



## In Memoriam

*Jangam* is the third novel authored by my husband Debendranath Acharya (1937-1981). Debendranath had planned to write this novel for a long time. While he was pursuing his M Sc in Engineering from Imperial College, London, he would visit the British Museum Library in his free time, read various books and articles on World War II, cull information from them, and note these facts and stories in his diary. He also procured a few books on Burmese history and studied those carefully. He was very dedicated to any task that he undertook.

Debendranath began writing *Jangam* when he joined the Assam Gas Company in Duliajan. Whenever he finished a major section or chapter, he would request me to read it aloud. If he wasn't satisfied with a segment, he would mark and rework it later.

Debendranath had no set time for his writing. He wrote whenever he had time. When he had to travel to Guwahati, Delhi or Kolkata to represent the Assam Gas Company, he arranged his notes and materials in his handbag beforehand so that he could write whenever he was free. At that time, he was also associated with the Duliajan branch of the Xahitya Xabha. He was busy performing numerous tasks for the Xabha, besides working assiduously for his company. He was also frequently being invited to deliver public lectures. People from the rural areas adjoining Duliajan often paid him a visit and sought his advice. Our four daughters, my mother-in-law also lived with us at that time. Members of our extended family came and stayed with us occasionally. I still find it surprising that he had the energy to complete *Jangam* despite his numerous activities and obligations. The fact that he was composing the deeply-affecting, tragic story of *Jangam*, while performing his numerous duties in the private and public realms, and its relevance was something I couldn't quite fathom at that time.

I believe that *Jangam* has a universal appeal. Since it was written in a local language, this fact limited its readership. This is what inspired us to go ahead with the translation of this work, and when Amit Rahul

Baishya approached us we were more than happy to let him proceed with the English translation.

I extend my heartfelt thanks and wish Amit a bright future ahead.

Mahashweta Acharya  
April 2018



## Translator's Introduction

### I

Although massive tomes on numerous events occurring during World War II (1940s) abound, the 'forgotten long march' is one of the least documented events of this period.<sup>1</sup> During this march an estimated 450,000-500,000 Burmese Indians walked to British India fleeing from the Japanese advance and also from escalating ethnic violence in Burma. The forgotten long march was a culmination of a series of anti-Indian riots that had been raging since the 1930s.<sup>2&2a</sup>

---

1 Hugh Tinker, 'A Forgotten Long March: the Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942.' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.6, No.1 (Mar. 1975).

2 For an account of these conflicts, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 43-44.

Burma was finally incorporated into the British Indian state in 1885 after a prolonged spell of wars between the British and the Burmese. Although contact between the Burmese kingdoms and the Indian subcontinent existed during the precolonial period, a lot of Indians migrated to Burma during the colonial era. The Indian migrants, some of whom went voluntarily and others coercively taken as indentured labourers, were of mixed socio-economic status. While the *Chettiar* moneylenders from Tamil Nadu were despised by the Burmese for gaining control of 'over 3 million acres of paddy fields in the lowlands of Irrawaddy delta',<sup>3</sup> a lot of Indian settlers were poor farmers, labourers or petty traders. However, 'Indian migrants and settlers were the most visible faces of the colonial domination of Burma'.<sup>4</sup> While many Indians stayed behind in Burma after the Japanese attack, the spectacular fall of the British colonial state impelled others to flee towards India in panic. An estimated 10,000-50,000 people died during the journey.

---

2a The exodus during the world war was not the only instance when people of Indian origin were expelled from Burma. Large number of people of Indian origin were also driven out after Ne Win's coup in 1962. For an account of these later expulsions, see RK Ranjan Singh. 'Status of Burmese Refugees in Northeast India.' *Dimensions of Displaced People in Northeast India*. Ed. C Joshua Thomas. (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2002), 170-78. There is a substantial Tamil community in the border town of Moreh in Manipur.

3 Anand Pandian, *Ayya's Accounts: a Ledger of Hope in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2014), 182.

4 *Ibid*, 182.

After a few refugees managed to escape via air and sea, the rest took three successive overland routes: via the Arakan to Chittagong, via the Chindwin valley into Manipur, and through the hilly passes of Hukawng valley into Ledo (Lekhapani) in Assam (this third route is represented in Debendranath Acharya's *Jangam*). While the long march was a comparable humanitarian crisis like the migrations of 1947, very few works, literary or otherwise, have dealt with it. Amitav Ghosh's observation in a 2000 interview that there is a great silence about this catastrophe from the Indian side still holds largely true.<sup>5</sup> Consideration of Indian voices will help initiate the 'perspectival shift' where: '... no longer are we looking at devastated humanity through the horrified yet fascinated eyes of the imperial traveler, bureaucrat or novelist...we are now inside the minds and bodies of the dying millions who were the subjects of British empire's palliative attention.'<sup>6</sup> Instead of witnessing from a distance, the accent shifts to representations of survival in conditions of extreme duress.

Since the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), which treats the march in a brief segment,

---

5 <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/coming-under-burmese-fire-was-surreal/209696>.

6 Upamanyu P Chatterjee, *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers and the Literary Cultures of South Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 199-200.

there has been a slow but steady trickle of memoirs in English about this harrowing trek.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, films like the Hindi *Shabnam* (1949), the Tamil *Parasakthi* (1952) and the Assamese *Dhumuha* (1957) allude to the exodus of Indians from Burma, although they don't represent the contingencies faced by the refugees during the journey directly. To my knowledge, the 1984 Sahitya Academy award winning Assamese novel *Jangam* (The Movement) by the Assamese writer Debendranath Acharya is the only sustained fictional treatment of the long march, although brief allusions to the march are made in the embedded narrative of the troubled British soldier Jim, in Siddhartha Deb's *An Outline of the Republic* (2006), and more recently, in Charmaine Craig's novel *Miss Burma* (2017). In what follows, I provide a brief introduction to Acharya's life and works, place *Jangam* within particular trajectories in the history of modern Assamese literature, and finally evaluate both its limitations and power as a narrative.

---

7 For memoirs, see Yvonne Ezdani (ed.), *Songs of the Survivors* (Panjim: Goa 1556, 2007) and Bilal Raschid, *The Invisible Patriot: Reminiscences of Burma's Freedom Movement*, (Bethseda: Createspace Independent Publishing, 2015). *Ayya's Accounts*, Pandian's ethnography cum memoir of his grandfather, MP Mariappan, also discusses the march. Ghosh collects memoirs by survivors on his blog. There are memoirs in other Indian languages—in Assamese, see Purnakanta Buragohain, *Patkair Xipare Na Basar* (Dhemaji: Purbanchal Tai Xahitya Xabha, 1993).

Debendranath Acharya (1937-1981) is a renowned historical novelist in Assamese. Although he was also a poet, dramatist and humourist, his novels remain his most enduring legacy in Assamese literature. An engineer by profession, he also wrote three other noteworthy historical novels: *Onyo Jug*, *Onyo Purux* (1970), *Kaalpurux* (1976) and *Raktarag* (1982).<sup>8</sup> Like many other Assamese novels, *Jangam* was serialised in a magazine named *Prokax*. It was posthumously published in 1982. *Jangam*, I believe, is an interesting turning point in Acharya's brief, but compelling, oeuvre. His first two works (*Onyo Jug*, *Onyo Purux* and *Kaalpurux*) are fascinating historical novels with an ordinary person 'in the middle of things' being the simultaneous witness and storyteller of past events. Both novels follow a similar narrative pattern—the two main characters, Beng Bellester in *Onyo Jug*, *Onyo Purux* and Nodai Xojati in *Kaalpurux*—are wizened old men who narrate memories of times past to a captive audience. While *Onyo Jug* recounts the history of places near Jorhat town from the Burmese

---

8 Acharya also wrote another humorous 'social' novel titled *Bekar Niketan*. He also wrote poetry, short stories and tales for children. However, his reputation in the world of Assamese literature is based largely on his four historical novels. For a compendium of his works, see *Debendranath Acharya Rosona Xomogro*, Ed. Mahasweta Acharya (Guwahati: Jyoti Prokaxon, 2011).

invasions to the Second World War, *Kaalpurux* takes us further back into the past. Encompassing the years 1639-73, *Kaalpurux* narrates a witness's account of a segment of Ahom history culminating in the Battle of Saraighat (1671). Both narratives foreground the accounts of *buronjir dwara aswikrito soritro* (characters unacknowledged by history, 'Preface' to *Kaalpurux*).

*Jangam* too foregrounds the history of 'unacknowledged' people; in this, there is a clear continuity between this novel and Acharya's earlier body of work. But there are two significant departures between this novel and the earlier two. First, in *Jangam*, Acharya abandons the relay of stories from an ordinary witness to a captive audience and instead adopts an omniscient third person viewpoint. Second, although the author says that the events of World War II have hardly left any imprint on Assamese literature despite the historical significance of the event for the region, *Jangam* is not really a novel about Assam or any aspect of the Assamese national formation. These two departures from his earlier oeuvre are also evident in his last, and also posthumously published novel *Raktarag*. Narrated in the third person and set in the ancient kingdom of Magadh, *Raktarag* is a unique novel whose historical verisimilitude is enhanced by the fusion of Pali and Prakrit with Assamese. Acharya died tragically young at the age of forty-four. One is left to wonder how his work would have changed and evolved in later years.

### III

Let me return to a point that I made earlier about *Jangam* not really being a novel about Assam or the Assamese national formation. The Assamese literary critic, Sailen Bharali, suggests that the historical novel in Assamese had its heyday in the pre-independence period.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with the fledgling efforts of Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Padmanath Gohainbaruah, the Assamese historical novel reached its early high point with Rajanikanta Bordoloi's work. In works such as *Nirmal Bhakat* (1927), *Manomati* (1900), *Rohdoi Ligiri* (1930), *Tamreswarir Mandir* (1926), *Rangili* (1925) and *Dandua Droh* (1909), Bordoloi tried to imagine a sense of Assamese identity by exploring the period of the decline of the Ahom dynasty, the three Burmese invasions of Assam (1816-26) and the arrival of the British. The concluding chapters of *Nirmal Bhakat*, for instance, represent some of the clearest passages where a certain version of Assamese Hindu identity is concretised. Although Bharali's historical narrative is too neat and schematic, we can take his suggestion that while the anticolonial nationalist desire in instilling pride in history was a driving force behind the rise of the historical

---

9 Sailen Bharali, *Axomiya Oithihaxik Upanyax* (Guwahati: Chandra Prokax, 1996).

novel in the pre-independence era, the subsequent disappointment with the promise of independence lead to a gradual shift away from the mode in the immediate post-independence period.

In the immediate post-independence period, the historical novel ceded its predominant position to the 'social novel'. Bharali also argues that the rise of the 'social' novel can be attributed to socio-cultural changes in the post-independence period: the gradual shift from the country to the city as a result of urbanisation, the increasing emphasis on the exploration of interiority in the wake of Freudian psychoanalysis and existentialism, and a gradual diminution of anticolonial nationalist consciousness after independence. Although writers like Dandinath Kalita, Padma Barkataki and Trailokyanath Bhattacharjya (among others) wrote a number of historical novels in the post-1947 period up to the 1970s, the genre got a new orientation in the late 1970s and '80s as writers increasingly began to turn to representations of unexplored aspects of history in Assam.

Writers of historical fiction from the '70s and '80s began to focus on communities or social groups which were thought to be at the margins of 'mainstream' Assamese society. If the works prior to the 1970s demonstrated a largely nationalist bent, the historical fictions in Indira Goswami's large fictional oeuvre such as *Thengpakhri Tahsildar* (2009), Acharya's *Jangam*, Dhruvajyoti Bora's

*Loha* (1990), Anuradha Sarma Pujari's *Mereng* (2010), Rita Chowdhury's *Makam* (2010) and *Deo Langkhui* (2005)—just to name a very few works—are examples of a different category suffused with a postnationalist sensibility. My use of the term 'postnationalist' here is an application of one of Ella Shohat's suggestions that while most texts from the anticolonial era 'assumed the fundamental coherence of national identity, with the expulsion of the colonial intruder fully completing the process of national becoming,... postnationalist [texts/films]... call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile'.<sup>10</sup> These tendencies are evident in the major foci of these novels: the histories of important, but virtually forgotten, women (the eponymous heroine in *Thengpakhri*, Indira Miri in *Mereng*), accounts of underrepresented regions and kingdoms in Assam (Bijni in *Thengpakhri*, the Tiwa kingdom in *Deo Langkhui*), and exile (exile from Burma in *Jangam*, the expulsion and exile of the Indian-Chinese in *Makam* during the war of 1962).

Within these postnationalist works, *Jangam* occupies a singular position. Almost all the postnationalist works I mentioned above are still focused on aspects of the histories

---

10 Ella H Shohat, 'Post Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation and the Cinema', *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Ed. Chandra T Mohanty and M Jacqui Alexander (London: Routledge, 1996), 196.

of underexplored regions and the various populations inhabiting Assam. But while a stream of refugees from Burma passed through Assam, *Jangam*'s focus is on the journey of the travellers to Ledo and not on the effects that this migration had on the later history of the State. The refugees depicted in the novel also have no historical connection to Assam. Other than a few warnings about the dangers of *jatiyataabaad* (ethnic identification) at the beginning of the novel, probably significant because the novel was published at the height of the Assam Agitation (1979-85), no direct connection can be drawn between the plot and contemporary sociopolitical events in the Assamese context.

The uniqueness of *Jangam* within the trajectory of the Assamese postnationalist historical novel becomes clear if we compare it to its spiritual successor: Rita Chowdhury's immensely popular novel *Makam* (2010). The subject matters of the two texts are quite similar: the expulsion of a group of people from the dying remains of the colonial state (*Jangam*) and the established post-colonial state (*Makam*). Both novels are structured around the narrative frame of familial separation and eventual reunification. But the two novels imagine the figure of the 'family'—a common metaphor used to imagine national communities—differently. *Jangam* begins with the Indians and Burmese in the fictional village of Manku living together like a *poriyal*

(family) with the Burmese being the *kokai* (elder brother) and the Indians figured as the *bhai* (younger brother). This idyllic vision of the national 'family' is irretrievably broken with the expulsion of the Indians. However, in keeping with *Jangam's* manifestly universalist ethics, the narrative engineers the formation of a universal-human family.

One of the primary foci of the novel is the peasant Ramgobinda and his family consisting of his aged mother, his pregnant wife, Lachhmi and their son Thanu. After their expulsion, Ramgobinda's mother dies on the way while Lachhmi disappears with their newly-born second son when she is taken away by British military officials for emergency medical treatment. Ramgobinda is left behind with his first-born, the seven-year-old Thanu. After Ramgobinda reaches Assam, he searches desperately for Lachhmi and the infant in the relief camps. The trauma of the journey and the despair Ramgobinda feels results in him losing his reason. Miraculously, Lachhmi and the infant son are eventually found in the relief camp after Ramgobinda goes mad. By this time, Lachhmi too has succumbed to madness. There is no scene of recognition—we are unclear about what eventually happens to the couple.

However, a surrogate family is formed on the way. The group from Manku meets a British pastor named Father Berry. Later, they come across an Anglo-Burmese girl named Ma-Pu (also known by the Christian name, Mary)

in the deserted town of Unthaw. One of the leaders of the Indian group, a young man named Chinti, develops a romantic attachment for Ma-Pu. In the last chapter, Ma-Pu stays back in the relief camp as a nurse and decides to take care of Ramgobinda's children. Chinti decides to stay with her as well. On the last page, Ma-Pu says that she considers Father Berry to be 'like her father', a role the pastor accepts. A surrogate 'universal' family constituted of a British subject, an Anglo-Burmese girl, a young Indian-Burmese peasant, and the children of Ramgobinda is formed. The novel closes with a scene of the infant smiling in his sleep, one that heralds a 'new age' replete with 'new hope'.

This formation of the 'universal-human' family, one that transcends national/regional particularities in a generalised picture of the 'human condition', is crucially absent in *Makam*. In Chowdhury's novel, the exiled Chinese families are finally brought together in Hong Kong through the efforts of Arunabh Bora, the narrator of the text. Arunabh himself is revealed to be the son of a Chinese father and an Assamese mother in the last chapter of the novel. Thus, the figurative use of familial separation and eventual reunification—this structure is the staple of the melodramatic familial narrative form that both *Jangam* and *Makam* utilise—is repeated here again and is provided further ballast by what Chowdhury writes in her afterword to the novel: 'The Chinese community that emerged as a

result of the conjugal relationships that sprang up between Chinese men and the women of different ethnicities are an inseparable element of the greater Assamese nationality (*brihotor axamiya jati*)...They are our kin (*atmiyo*).<sup>11</sup> Notice how in this statement, the affective charge of this act of reclaiming exiled populations emerges through a connection of the 'greater Assamese nationality' with that of an extended, expansive model of familial kinship (*atmiyo*). While *Jangam's* presentation of the family is through the lens of the universal-human, that of *Makam's* is through the optic of the national-particular.

Besides occupying an important place in the trajectory of the Assamese historical novel, *Jangam* must also be placed in the small, but significant, body of works that focus on World War II. Acharya's statement in the Preface that 'hardly any signs of this massive calamity that faced humankind (WWII) registered in our literature' is not exactly correct. Prior to *Jangam*, important works like Jogesh Das's novel *Dawar Aru Nai* (1955), Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya's novel *Yaruyingam* (1960) and short stories *Netaji aru Ingaijong* (1962) and *Agyat Japani Sainik* (1962), the first part of Nirupama Borgohain's novel *Xei Nodi Nirobodhi* (1963) and Jyotiprasad Agarwala's play *Lobhita* (1942) dealt with the war experience. However,

---

11 Rita Chowdhury, *Makam* (Guwahati: Jyoti Prokaxon, 2010), 605.

none of these works allude to the ‘forgotten long march’ and the fact that Assam had been one of the primary transit routes during this massive human exodus. *Dawar Aru Nai*, for instance, shows the tumultuous changes that the war wrought on people residing in the environs of a tea plantation. *Yaruyingam*’s focus is also on the impact of the war on a Naga village. But it begins with the Japanese defeat and evaluates the lingering impact of the war and also stages a conflict between the claims of Gandhian nationalism and burgeoning Naga independentist movement in the immediate post-war period. Published in 1942, *Lobhita* fuses an exploration of the effects of the war and the Quit India movement. Probably the novel that comes closest to the uniquely postnationalist spirit of *Jangam* is Purabi Barmudoi’s *Eta Alibatar Itikatha* (2010) which is about the construction of the Stilwell Road. Like *Jangam*, there is hardly any reference to the situation of people residing in Assam in *Eta Alibatar Itikatha*; instead, like recent popular historical works on the period and the region such as Donovan Webster’s *The Burma Road* (2004), Fergal Keane’s *Road of Bones* (2013) and Andrew Martin’s *Flight by Elephant* (2014), the epic-heroic mode is predominant in Barmudoi’s novel. Like these books, *Eta Alibatar Itikatha* deals both with the devastation caused by war and with the epic struggle of the ‘human’ against a hostile environment. I will suggest in the last section that while the struggle with

the hostile environment is definitely a dominant theme in *Jangam*, its focus on the lives of ordinary people, rather than larger than life figures like General Stilwell, provides a very ambivalent figuration of the theme of the ‘Human’ versus Nature.

#### IV

While *Jangam* is critical of the predatory power of particularist forms of nationalism, it draws on another long-running thematic trajectory within the oeuvre of Assamese literature: the concretisation of sense of the Assamese nationality against a negative portrayal of Burma and the Burmese.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, *Jangam* eliminates the first part of the equation (a sense of Assamese nationality) but draws upon the latter (the negative portrayal of the Burmese). The three Burmese invasions of Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still remembered as historical traumas for Assam and the Assamese. While older travelogues like Purnananda Buragohain’s *Patkair Xipare Na Basar* and contemporary ones like Tapan Sarma’s

---

12 In different ways, in *Jangam*, also in other books, population groups like the Chinese. The Chinese are portrayed as resorting to cannibalism, while the British soldiers resolutely desist from it. Portrayal of ethnicities like the Kachin also follow romanticised primitivist stereotypes (they are often referred to as simple and unsophisticated hill folk). A lot of Assamese writers often adopt colonial-era stereotypes about ‘hill’ peoples unproblematically—*Jangam* isn’t an exception in this regard.

*Maanor Dexot* portray a complicated picture of the social, political and economic transactions between the Assamese and the Burmese; a much more unflattering image of the Burmese as a form of the absolute 'other' has been in circulation in the Assamese cultural imagery for quite a while.<sup>13</sup> Once again, a return to Rajanikanta Bordoloi's historical novels is necessary here. In novels like *Manomati*, especially in the characterisation of the Burmese general, Mihimanga Bandula, Bordoloi consolidates a paradigm for the representation of the *nrisinxo* (cruel or bestial) Burmese against which an image of Assamese nationality is defined. Bordoloi, of course, is not the first person to use such characterisations and narrative frames in Assam; but his historical novels are some of the most noteworthy examples of this tendency in Assamese cultural production.

---

13 Buragohain was an Ahom entrepreneur who travelled through Burma between 1933-42. His primary intention was to recover documents and evidence of the connections between the Tai-Ahoms in Assam and the populations resident in Burma. In Burma, he made contact with quite a few Oitalis (the name for the descendants of people from Assam) in places like Bhamo and Mandalay. Buragohain escaped from Burma on an elephant during the Japanese advance through the route crossing Tamo. Sarma visited Myanmar for twenty days with two other friends—Satyakam Phukan and Binoy Sarma—in 2013. Their aim, as Sarma points out repeatedly in his book, was to follow the trail blazed by Buragohain. Like Buragohain, they also met the Oitalis in places like Bhamo and Mandalay. The Oitalis are descendants either of the Assamese who were sent along with Hemo Aideo, who was married to the Burmese king, or slaves captured and taken back to Burma during the three invasions. See Tapan Kumar Sarma, *Maanor Dexot* (Guwahati: Chandra Prokax, 2015).

The literary critic, Tilotama Misra writes:

Though there were plenty of paeans sung (by the Assamese intelligentsia in the colonial period like Bordoloi) in praise of the concept of a mighty Bharat, or of a more limited concept of one's own homeland, the blame for the loss of the glorious past was usually shifted to the Muslim rulers or, as in the case of Assam, to the Burmese invaders who had ravaged the region toward the end of Ahom rule. Gory tales of the unspeakable atrocities committed by the Burmese invaders filled the pages of many an early Assamese novel. But in contrast, British rule was generally perceived as benevolent and, except in a few rare instances, there was hardly any attempt to hold it responsible for the economic and social problems that confronted the region during colonial rule.<sup>14</sup>

While this dual thematic—the cruelty of the Burmese and the relatively benign presence of British colonialism—holds true for the analyses of Bordoloi's historical novels, they appear in a slightly indirect fashion in post-colonial

---

14 Tilotama Misra, 'The Emergence of the Modern Subject in Oriya and Assamese Literatures: Fakir Mohan Senapati and Hemchandra Barua', *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: a View from India*, Ed. Satya P Mohanty (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 115.

novels like *Jangam* as well. In *Jangam*, the Burmese are not depicted melodramatically as mustache-twirling, bloodthirsty marauders like Bordoloi's Mihimanga. The portrayal of figures like the youthful Burmese freedom fighter, Nungnao, is definitely more nuanced than that of Mihimanga. However, the depiction of the cycles of magnificence, decadence, cruelty and downfall in Burmese history as presented in *Jangam*'s initial 'Background' (*Patobhumi*) section, the fatalism associated with the Burmese, and the relatively simplified representation of the history of Burmese nationalism definitely draws on this long trajectory of the negative, unidimensional portrayal of *Maanor din* (the days of the Burmese) in Assamese cultural production. The latter point, especially, is connected to the trope of the family that I elaborated in one of the previous sections. Both Chapter V (the conversation between Nungnao and the aged Ba-Mao) and Chapter XV (the only chapter in the middle that breaks the relentless focus on the journey of the Indian refugees and returns to Manku to flesh out the aftermath of Nungnao's assassination by his Burmese comrades) of *Jangam* shows how the text simplifies the complexities of Burmese anticolonial nationalism to a binary clash between the older and the younger generations. Furthermore, if Manku is initially an idyllic picture of a unified national *poriyal* constituted of the *kokai* (Burmese) and the *bhai* (Indians) living together peacefully even though in conditions of penury, predatory Burmese nationalism,

instigated by Burmese people who don't reside in Manku, is represented as the 'plague' that afflicts and shatters this nostalgic picture of inter-community harmony.

Similarly, the question of the British colonial state's lack of care for its colonised subjects during the forgotten long march are sidelined in the text's move to work-through the trauma of being ejected from a national family via the compensation-formation of an undifferentiated 'human' family. Amitav Ghosh mentions the presence of 'white' and 'black' lines maintained during the march in his interviews. Numerous testimonies by Indian survivors and historical accounts attest to the fact that the colonial state's differential policies of care played a major role in the way British and Asian refugees were treated during the march.<sup>15</sup> Even allowing for the fact that acts of kindness occurred among races—a fact many British accounts emphasise—and that the British airdropped food and set up refugee camps in Assam, it seems odd that *Jangam* does not refer at all to the denial of care by the colonial state-apparatus to the fleeing Asian refugees. I can only speculate here as Acharya's notes on the composition of *Jangam* have not survived. However, in my interviews with the late Acharya's daughter, Vasavi Acharya, I learnt that the author composed the novel from childhood recollections of conversations with

---

15 Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: the Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), 181-90.

returning soldiers and the personal research he conducted, especially at the British Library when he attended a school for engineering in the UK. Given the relative paucity of accounts by Indian survivors, Acharya's views on the exodus may have been coloured by the material he had access to. However, the persistence of the dual thematic that Misra alludes to above may have also been a contributory factor for the relatively benign presentation of British colonialism in the text.

## V

Keeping these criticisms of *Jangam* aside, my personal view on the novel's power as a narrative differs slightly from the standard critical consensus. Standard interpretations of *Jangam*, probably influenced by the author's statements in the 'Preface', read it as a universal allegory of the 'human condition' where the 'human' and 'nature' are opposed to each other. For instance, Sailen Bharali writes that: 'The journey conducted with unimaginable physical and mental agony seems to be a symbol for the endless, forward-moving journey of human life.'<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Prafulla Kotoky says: It is as if... (*Jangam*) is a priceless history of humankind that, in every

---

16 Sailen Bharali, 'Axomiya Oitihaxik Uponyax' in *Exo Bosoror Axomiya Uponyax*, 30-39. Ed. Nagen Thakur (Guwahati: Jyoti Prokaxon 2000), 39. All translations from Assamese are mine.

age, conquers thousands of unsurmountable obstacles and emerges victorious over nature.<sup>17</sup>

While such readings are tenable if we concentrate only on the manifest level of the narrative, closer perusal of the text reveals that a far more tenuous, ambivalent and precarious image of the 'human' emerges when we consider the various nonhuman images of otherness that this metaphysical category is pitted against. These 'others' include metaphors of animals, insect life and machinic forms of being. In a recently published essay, I argue that while the melodramatic familial narrative of *Jangam* is predicated on an idea of a universal 'human condition', this impulse towards universality is undercut by the ambivalent figurations of forms of non-human otherness that proliferate in this text.<sup>18</sup> Neither will I belabour this point at length here nor comment extensively on *Jangam's* figurative herbiary and bestiary; rather, I will close my discussion of the novel here by citing one very interesting example of such ambivalent usage of non-human otherness in the text.

---

17 Prafulla Kotoky, 'Aagkotha'. *Debendranath Acharya Rosona Xomogro*, vii-x. Ed. Mahasweta Acharya. (Guwahati: Jyoti Prokaxon 2011), viii.

18 Amit R Baishya, 'Looking East: Melodramatic Narrative, Ecotheater and the Representation of the "Forgotten Long March" in *Jangam*'. *Revisiting India's Partition: Memory, Culture and Politics*, Ed. Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K Gairola (New York: Lexington Books, 2016, 177-94).