

FROM A BLOG BY AMITAV GHOSH (<http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?cat=30&paged=2>)

Regarding the account of Capt. Nadir Tyabji's experiences in Burma during the Japanese invasion.

The typescript of **The Burma Story, 1941 – 1942**, by Captain Nadir Salahuddin Tyabji, (Hashim's father) arrived in my mailbox shortly afterwards.

The roughly 30,000 word memoir was composed over many years. Hashim writes: '[My father] was born on 13 July 1913 and died on 13 Oct 1996. He had just turned 29 at the end of the memoir. Father had kept a rather patchy diary through this period but many pages had disappeared or were too badly water damaged to read. He did also consult bits of his official report – again I only saw fragments (when the National Archive people came to take all my grandfather's papers in the 1980's I think they took some of father's papers as well). He actually dictated the first draft some time in the mid-1980's on the insistence of his maternal cousin Saad Ali. He then took several years as I recall in finalising the memoir. I was working away from home all this time and sadly didn't take enough interest in his diaries.



Lt Nadir S. Tyabji, training

Both Saad and I were also keen that he write the next chapter of the Burma story. This was his service with the navy when he volunteered for the beach commandos. But he died before that.'

In researching my books I have read many wartime memoirs. Captain Tyabji's is without a doubt, among the best of them. I know of no better account of the evacuation of refugees from Burma in the initial phases of the war. Richly textured and remarkably well-written, **The Burma Story** also brings vividly to life a milieu that vanished almost overnight after the Japanese invasion of Burma: the urbane, cosmopolitan world of pre-war Rangoon.

Captain Tyabji was born into a family of unusual distinction. His grand uncle, [Badruddin Tyabji](#), was the first Indian [Chief Justice of the Bombay](#) (now Mumbai) Supreme Court and was famously progressive in his views, [especially where it concerned the rights of women](#). He was also one of the founding members of the Indian National Congress and was elected president of the party in 1887. His grandfather Abbas Tyabji was Chief Justice of the Baroda High Court when, in disgust over the Jalianwallah Bagh massacre, he left to join Gandhiji. He and many other members of the family were ardent Gandhians and close personal friends of Mahatma Gandhi. Indeed Abbas Tyabji was designated his deputy on the Dandi Salt March and took over after Gandhiji was arrested.

As Sulaimani Bohra Muslims from Surat, in Gujarat, the Tyabjis belonged to one of the Indian subcontinent's most successful mercantile communities. They were perhaps somewhat unusual in

that they were primarily a family of lawyers and jurists, but they also had extensive business interests. At one time they owned half of Bombay's Malabar Hill; their palatial residence is now the campus of Sophia College. A Mumbai street and several institutions still bear the Tyabji name.

Like many South Asian mercantile families the Tyabjis also had commercial interests in Burma. Captain Tyabji's father, Salahuddin Abbas Shamsuddin Tyabji, owned rice mills and was deeply involved in Rangoon's civic affairs. Captain Tyabji writes of him: 'Father was variously involved as member of the Burmese Legislative Assembly, Member of the Rangoon Electricity Board, Member, Railway Board, Member Exec. Committee, Indian Chamber of Commerce etc. etc. His work schedule covered a minimum of 12 – 14 hours per day but I can never remember him losing his jaunty alert carriage and general briskness.'



Salahuddin & Akhtar Tyabji at a Govt House reception, Rangoon, January 24, 1940

Captain Tyabji's mother, Akhtar Tyabji, was also active in Rangoon's social circles.

She founded and presided over the Zeenat ul-Islam school for girls and



Needlework class Zeenat ul Islam school Rangoon

various other charitable institutions endowed by the family.



Boys Home Trust, Rangoon, Boxing 1940

One of Akhtar Tyabji's most successful ventures was aimed at bringing together Burmese, Indian and British women.



Farewell party Monday Afternoon Club, February 1942

It was the Monday Afternoon Club, which also assisted her in some of her other initiatives.

Captain Nadir Tyabji, however, chose not to enter the family business. In 1941, when this memoir begins, he was the Sales Representative in Burma for Tata Oil Mills Co. (TOMCO). He writes: 'Being basically responsible for Promotion and Marketing I had an invaluable opportunity of visiting the remotest corners of the country for detailed market surveys which led to my acquiring, willy nilly, deep insights into the distribution pattern of Indian communities... The Indians and Chinese constituted between them, the most efficient distributive agency in the country and were, literally, all pervasive, even at the hamlet and village level.'

This background is important, I think, in situating Captain Tyabji's wartime experiences. He belonged to Rangoon's elite, mixing easily with the city's officialdom, visiting the Race Course, frequenting exclusive clubs, and so on.



Nadir S. Tyabji & Salahuddin A. S. Tyabji at the races, Rangoon

Yet, as a member of a small but wealthy minority community, he occupied an interstitial position in the complex social web of colonial Burma.



Rangoon dinner party, February 1940

He was thus able to look upon his world with unusually clear eyes, as for example in this striking passage: 'There is little point in hovering over this heart-rending aspect of a war which held no meaning for the vast majority of the population – Burmese, Indian or Chinese. There was neither sympathy nor understanding for the British. They dominated the administration and economy of this country but were seen as a transient element with which the common people had no point of contact at any level. The Japanese advance into Burma further destroyed the myth of western invincibility

and with it whatever tenuous links may have survived the hundred odd years of exploitation and mindless domination at all levels.'

But it is clear also that this story was moulded and mellowed by the circumstances of its telling, which came about after the passage of many years: it is hard to believe that Captain Tyabji could have maintained so equable a tone had he been writing in the immediate aftermath of the events he had witnessed. Yet every now and again something of the raw horror of those experiences does break through, as for example in this passage: 'I dared not lift my head but tried to take a quick look from the corner of my eyes at the scene around me. Even in that limited field of vision I could make out the extent of devastation and death; bodies and limbs scattered close to me with the smell of blood mixed with that of cordite, impossible to keep from penetrating my nostrils.'

Every survivor of that terrible ordeal must have witnessed similar scenes; they must all have been haunted, through the rest of their days, by images like this one. Sadly, only a handful recorded their experiences. We are fortunate that Captain Tyabji was among the few who did.

I am grateful to Hashim Tyabji and his family for giving me permission to post the memoir, and the accompanying pictures, on this site. Captain Tyabji's memoir will appear here in a series of twelve instalments, through the month of December.

The first instalment is below.

The Burma Story

(Dec 1941 to July 1942)

by



Lt. Nadir S. Tyabji, 1943

Captain Nadir Salahuddin Tyabji

(Indian Navy Retd.)

What follows is the story of my last four months in Burma at the tail-end of a thirty year sojourn which I remember as the happiest, most carefree years of my life.

These 41 months covered the period December '41 to April-May '42 during which I became a part of the giant Evacuation exercise entailing the migration of hundreds of thousands of Indian settlers in Burma the number involved has been variously estimated at between 10 – 20 lakh using three major routes e.g. Prome – Taung-Up in the rain shadow of the Arakan Yomas; Mandalay-Kalewa-Tamu-Palel-Imphal-Dimapur route through Manipur and the Mandalay-Myithykina route mostly confined to the retreating British Indian Army for re-grouping in India.

The Japanese Army occupied Malaysia end 1941 and made no secret of its intention of making a dash for India through Burma without loss of time. However, the Government of Burma seemed to be supremely confident of its ability to deal with the Japanese if and when they moved up; this confidence did not extend to the citizenry at large for it was increasingly evident that neither the Army nor the Air Force were either qualitatively or quantitatively equipped to stem the Japanese tide.

My last trip down south to Moulmein, Yem, Tavoy & Mergui was made in October '41 in connection with my work as TOMCO representative in Burma, and it was then that I became fully alerted to the extent and intensity of Japanese probing and intelligence operations in the Tenasserim archipelago contiguous to Siam. I was told that Japanese patrols were blatantly driving up to Mergui Tavoy and even Ye on probing and intelligence missions and in the process had been terrorising, molesting and literally looting the villagers along their axis of operations. It was on these trips that I acquired a clearer idea of the implications of any turmoil created by a Japanese advance, on the small Indian population in the area (mostly small shopkeepers and agricultural labour). I also got the feeling that the Burmese were just waiting for an opportunity to drive the Indians out and take their place in the scheme of thing, however ill-equipped to do so. Until then the Indians were a vital element in the Burmese economy – urban and rural – providing a hardworking and cheap labour force for the vital sectors of Burmese economy – agriculture, rice milling, saw milling and transport. On the other hand it was the Indian trader, small or big, who provided the vast distribution and collection network in the rural areas and dominated trade and commerce in the urban centres. These people had begun to get restive and from odd bits of gossip which I picked up at Ye, it became evident that any Japanese advance from the south would result in a massive movement of Indians towards Rangoon as a take-off point for the run to India mainly by the sea routes as the quickest and cheapest. With the reduction of steamer services, these people would have no alternative but to take the overland routes of which at the time, I was myself woefully ignorant but which obviously would be a hazardous alternative.

The Japanese advance into Burma commenced Nov-Dec '41 and was preceded by mounting air activity on the Moulmein, Thaton, Pegu and Rangoon not so much to inflict damage as to create a sense of terror and panic among the labour concentrations (all Indian), leading to their taking to the major road systems, running in a North-South axis and thus creating a critical problem for the movement of essential military and government traffic. These Indian streams were joined by an outpouring of Indian communities settled in the interior and this mighty tide started making its way north by every available or affordable means – Road transport, river steamers and boats and the railway. This inexorable tide took almost a month to reach its peak, end December 1941 and it was at that stage that I became a part and parcel of the organisation which was being set up in order to ensure that this mighty surge of humanity driven by almost primordial forces away from the Eye of the Wind did not destroy itself by the very dynamics of an upheaval of such vast proportions.

As already mentioned almost daily bombing raids by the Japanese and the growing public realisation of the pathetic inadequacy of defence preparedness both in the air and on the ground had led to a growing certainty that the British were on their way out. The dilemma for the majority of Indians and other foreigners concerned the grim options offered by the situation, whether to stay back and make their peace with the Japanese or risk the hazards of a trek of some hundreds of miles with wives and children, braving all the horrors inherent in such a journey – shelter, food and disease compounded by the continuous Japanese air attacks on the three moving columns as also Burmese brigandage along the hill tracks further north. And of course, above everything else was the clear realisation that a decision to move out would mean the end of a relatively comfortable life style and abandoning not only a well established source of livelihood but also the various assets created or gathered during

the sojourn in Burma. It would also mean starting a new life at the end of the road in India – a nebulous question mark in itself.

However, for many the Day of Decision arrived sooner than anticipated in the shape of massive Japanese bombing raids on Rangoon on 23rd and 25th December 1941. Although 23rd was bad enough the 25th proved critical. At 0800 hrs. that morning Home Guard Volunteers of which I was one had been called for their normal parade including various Air Raid Drills. A slight tension at the Police Station soon erupted into a Red Alert indicating Bomber formations moving towards Rangoon.

The estimated number of aircraft was about 150 in three boxes of 50 each (light bombers with their fighter escort. The Home Guards were held firmly inside the Police Station and then round about 9 a.m. all hell broke loose. Most of the ack-ack guns were sited on roof tops together with Light and Medium Machine guns as morale boosters. However the Japanese pressed home their raid on various areas of the City using mostly Anti-personnel and incendiary bombs which created havoc and panic particularly in the Indian labour colonies around the Port area and Rice & Saw Mill complexes in suburbs like Kemmendine, Mahlwagon, Puzundaung and Botatung.



Downtown Rangoon, wartime destruction

The Japanese did lose some aircraft but pushed home their attack relentlessly succeeding beyond any doubt in inflicting major damage to life and property in the heart of the City and disrupting the City's excellent Public services like Power, Water, road transport and telephones.

On the 'All Clear' being sounded the Home Guard Volunteers moved into their designated areas to ensure rescue, first aid and protection at the primary level and shift the homeless to appropriate Refugee Camps which had been set up in safer areas. It must be mentioned here that the Labour Colonies had received the severest treatment – all of them had been set ablaze and the inhabitants trying to get away had been literally mowed down by A.P. anti-personnel Bombs leaving the areas looking more like open-air butcheries than human habitations.

My 'beat' was in the Puzundaung area but in trying to get there on my bicycle I witnessed for the first time (not, unfortunately the last) the sheer scale of devastation in terms of property and human lives which such meticulously planned raids could achieve. Though we had taken every precaution to inform and educate the population on the absolute need not to be caught out of doors during a raid it was obvious that curiosity and an utter lack of comprehension of a totally new concept of terror as a strategic weapon had been responsible for the population – men, women and children – being caught out in the open and mowed down by the merciless accuracy of low level A.P. bombing.

In the result the streets were strewn with severed limbs, torsos sliced in half by shrapnel and bits and pieces of flesh and bone which had not so long ago been part of a moving thinking and handsome man or woman.

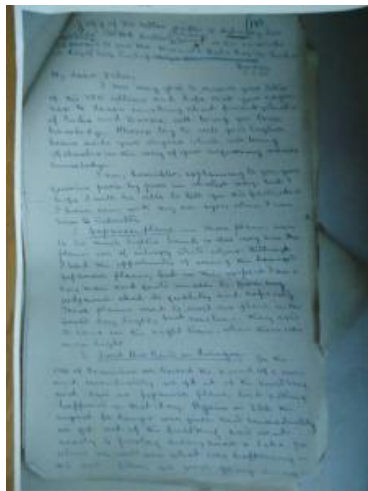
I eventually reached my Beat did what was expected mostly alas, in the shape of ensuring safety of property for the rightful owners, sending the injured to emergency centres for attention and trying to identify such of the corpses as were capable of being identified.

There is little point in hovering over this heart-rending aspect of a war which held no meaning for the vast majority of the population – Burmese, Indian or Chinese. There was neither sympathy nor understanding for the British. They dominated the administration and economy of this country but were seen as a transient element with which the common people had no point of contact at any level. The Japanese advance into Burma further destroyed the myth of western invincibility and with it whatever tenuous links may have survived the hundred odd years of exploitation and mindless domination at all levels.

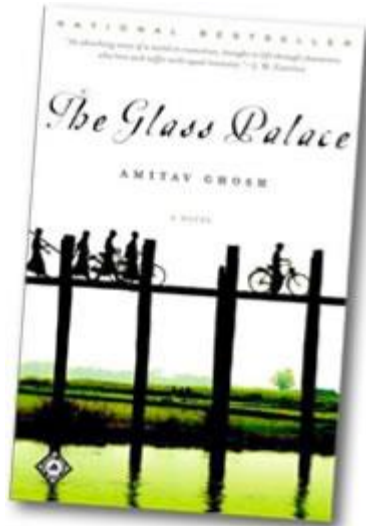
In the event, this was my last visit to Puzundaung but it could not have mattered. There was little left to salvage and none to solace. I have no idea when it was rehabilitated – if at all.

November 7, 2014 in [1942 Burma Exodus Archives](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

Below is a rare example of a letter written by an Indian survivor of the exodus out of Burma, following the Japanese invasion of 1941-42 (a photocopy of it came into my hands thanks to my wife, [Deborah Baker](#), who found it in the Special Branch Police Archive, Police Museum, Kolkata).



I have transcribed the letter exactly as it was written, keeping the original spellings etc.; a few indecipherable words are indicated by a question mark.



[Readers of [The Glass Palace](#) will recognize the air raids described in the fourth paragraph of the letter; they overlap with the events of Chapter 39 in the novel.]

This letter, which was written in Bombay, on July 4, 1942, was intercepted by censors from the Special Branch and may never have reached the addressee. This copy was made for the Special Branch in Calcutta.

The copyist's note is at the top of the page (it's quite possible that it was the copyist who was responsible for the peculiarities of the syntax, spelling etc.).

If anybody who reads this should happen to know of the writer and his family I would be glad to hear from them.

Copy of the letter written to Dulu by her Bardada (eldest brother) (Bombay) found in an envelope addressed to one Mrs Nirmala Bala Roy c/o A... [?] Ch. Roy of 348 Pratapaditya Rd.

Bombay 4.7.42

My dear Dulu

I am very glad to receive your letter of the 28th ultimo and hope that your eagerness to learn something about the recent situation of India and Burma will bring you true knowledge. Always try to write good English. Leave aside your shyness which will bring you debacles in the way of your acquiring outside knowledge.

I am hereafter, explaining to you, your queries para by para in shortest way, but I hope I will be able to tell you the facts, which I have seen with my own eyes, when I come to Calcutta.

1. Japanese plane – Their planes seem to be much lighter. Sound is also very low. The planes are of silvery white colour. Although I had the opportunity of seeing the damaged Japanese planes, but in this respect I am a layman and quite unable to form any judgement about its quality and capacity. Their planes used to visit our place in the broad day light, but sometimes they used to come in the night time, when there was moonlight.
2. First Air Raid in Rangoon.

On the 13th of December, we heard the sound of a siren and immediately we got out of the building and saw one Japanese plane, but nothing happened that day. Again on 23rd the signal for danger was given and immediately we got out of the building and went nearly 4 furlong away near a lake, from where we could see what was happening in the air. When we were going away

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George Rodger: Rangoon, World War II. 'Indians and Burmans look in awed silence at the body of a Japanese airman shot down by the Flying Tigers. 1942'

in a car, we could see nearly 35 planes flying over our heads. Immediately we reached a certain place the bombing started. From the place where we were, we could see the smoke as well as we could hear the sound of bombs + Anti Aircraft guns.

Over our heads we could see the fighting of the planes. We could see planes shot down by our British air pilots. Nearly after two hours of this happening, we went to our office but could not see anybody there. Being very much afraid when we were about to return home, I was very eager to see the place which was bombed. Not very far away from the Railway Station where we could not get the trains, we could see the heaps of dead bodies lying scattered here and there. Thirty buildings sustained damage very severely, but a few building were levelled to the earth.



Downtown Rangoon in the aftermath of WW II

Fire started in the locality and the A.R.P.[i] volunteers were very busy removing the injured in the hospital or to the nearest shelter. Particularly one road where there were heavy casualties, was full of blood.

Some stairs leading to the first floor of the nearest buildings were stained with blood and human flesh. It was such a horrible scenery, that none could keep courage to see his own relatives whether

dead or alive. In the heaps of dead bodies, I tried to locate and find out whether there was any Bengali or not, but as my brother-in-law, who was with me, was afraid beyond imagination, I had to come home on foot as there was no conveyance available at that time. Again on 25th Dec 1941, bombing started but the damage and casualties were not so heavy as that

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of the previous day. § It so happened after a few days that there were air-raids six or eight times within 24 hours. Some nights we had to pass without sleeping and some days we had to pass without food. Nearly after a fortnight we were accustomed to bear all these difficulties. We were able to distinguish by sound the Japanese planes. In the month of February when it was quite impossible for us to stay there, we came to Mandalay, where also the place was first bombed on the 19th February.

Expecting the grave situation, we determined to come to India by overland route and proceeded immediately.



George Rodger; 'World War II; Indian refugees flee Burma before advancing Japanese army.'

We had to cross many hills and mountain. First we hired a country boat in which we were for 16 days continuously. This journey we took [started in] a place named Monywa. After 16 days journey we reached Kalewa. From Kalewa we came to Kyigon by country boat.

From Kyigon we hired a lorry for Rs 1000/- and came to Tamu which is about 96 miles away from Kyigon. From Tamu we got a bullock cart in which we could keep our office papers, but we had to walk all along and reached Mintha 36 miles away from Tamu. From Mintha we could engage 16 coolies who helped us in our safe arrival to Imphal, the capital of Manipur. This was the most hazardous journey when we started from Mintha, as we had to cross many hills which are over six thousand feet above sea level. Every fifth or tenth minute, we had to take rest, otherwise it would have been quite impossible to reach India. There was such a scarcity of water in these hill tracks

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we had to pass couple of days without water ... we have seen plenty of people in dying condition. From our company also we lost two. When we were above the hills, we were very eager to see the low land, as the continuous journey over the hills, which was most risky + made us more weaker. But through the grace of God, we could pass through the ordeal of journey + could reach Imphal and I could be my old self which I reached home.

I think I have not been able to give you the vivid description of what happened but if I be able to see you, I will explain to you personally everything point by point. When you are so interested to know all these things I will not keep you uninformed.

Nothing more today. My love to you, Bulu, Ranu, Sisir + Gaetry and my respect to Babu and Ma.

I am quite well, hoping you all to be the same. Your Boudi[iii] with all the children are quite alright.

Yours

[i] Air Raid Precautions

§ Posted on [this website](#) is an aerial photo of the bombing of Rangoon on Dec 23, 1941, taken from a Japanese plane. The picture is described as having been accompanied by a news flash from Japanese Imperial Army Headquarters, on Dec. 24, 1941, 5:10 PM: 'Severe Bombing of Rangoon: Yesterday, on December 23rd, the combined Imperial Army Air Force heavily bombed the Rangoon Airport; Spitfire fighters (along with possible Buffalos) engaged the bombers in violent aerial battle. Ten fighters were shot down with others (an accurate count could not be determined); also, four fighter planes on the ground plus two bombers were hit and burned. Four of our planes did not return.'

[ii] 'Sister-in-law', probably a reference to the writer's wife