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Empire and locality: a global dimension to the 1857 Indian Uprising*

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Abstract

The Indian Uprising of 1857–59, during which thousands of Indian soldiers serving in the British army mutinied, joined by many civilians, led to the identification of a vast number of ‘rebels’ and discussions as to the most appropriate means of punishing them. The wholesale transportation of insurgents was considered a likely scenario in the charged atmosphere of late 1857. The uprising coincided with dramatic increases in the world market price for sugar, prompting British colonial producers to extend cultivation of cane and their political agents to suggest that the need for further plantation labour be met from among the likely Indian convict transportees. The empire-wide response to the events in India during 1857–59 is assessed in this article as an interesting case study of both reactions to a sensationalist news story and the manner in which British officials, keen to exploit the outcome of the revolt and to manipulate the labour market to the advantage of their respective colonies, competed with and contradicted one another. At the same time, the authors contend that arguably the more interesting aspects of the relationship between the Indian Uprising and the surge in numbers migrating to the sugar colonies were either neglected or carefully ignored by policy makers and commentators alike at the time, and have scarcely been investigated by historians since. The article suggests that many individuals who participated in the insurgency in India did indeed make their way overseas, quietly ignored, and only mentioned in subsequent decades when ‘scares’ about mutineer sepoys in their midst were raised in the colonial press as explanation for strikes and labour agitations on colonial sugar estates.

Introduction

The Indian mutiny years, 1857–59, raised the problem of how to deal with a large and potentially dangerous force of disaffected and disbanded Indian soldiers. The same years saw an exceptional hike in global sugar prices, prompting a surge in recruitment requests and a peak in emigration to the sugar colonies. This unprecedented convergence of push

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and pull factors suggested to both colonial lobbyists and senior politicians in London that an ideal solution would be to transport suspected mutineers or disbanded sepoys to those colonies that were clamouring for labour. The reactions of white settlers – from colonies including Australia, the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and St Vincent – to suggestions that mutineers might be distributed to employers in their midst, particularly in the wake of sensationalist reporting about the ‘atrocities’ committed by the rebel sepoys, were surprisingly diverse.

Ultimately, the British Indian government chose to send mutineers to a new penal settlement on the Andaman Islands rather than to pre-existing penal settlements in Burma and the Straits Settlements, or to Australia and the sugar colonies. The dissemination of information about the rebellion across the empire, and the interplay of various interest groups and governing institutions in the build-up to this decision, nevertheless provide fascinating insights into the relationship between empire and locality. The range of sentiments expressed by settlers in various colonial societies, moreover, offers a unique glimpse into changing attitudes in different places at a specific moment in time. Finally, in a discussion of the sugar colonies, and particularly Mauritius – which received the bulk of migrants in the post-mutiny years – we raise the question of how, ironically, questions about shifting the mutineers overseas were ultimately resolved by subaltern Indians themselves through a massive, ‘silent’ relocation, the full ramifications of which – due chiefly to the empire-wide opprobrium heaped on those involved in the uprising – may never be fully unearthed.

The vast army of Indian workers overseas was a mere echo of huge population movements within the subcontinent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ‘periphery’ was thus mobile and connected at a ‘subaltern’ level, quite independent of the efforts of white colonial elites. These mobile people were untaxed and rarely taxable, so they do not figure largely in colonial archives. They were nonetheless vital to most colonial industrial and plantation enterprises, and therefore the occasion of recurrent, often anxious, enquiries and official reports. This was especially true in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Uprising of 1857, which kicked off one of the largest surges of Indian migration overseas. Focussing on connections between the rebellion and the surge in emigration, thereby enlarging the debate about mutineer sepoys into an ‘imperial question’, can also mitigate the Indo-centric bias of much of the literature. Similarly, while studies of indenture typically devote an inordinate amount of space to the views of colonial officials and imperial producers’ demand for labour, they often neglect a more interesting historical process: the organization of migrant streams by ‘subaltern Indians’ themselves; 1857 forms an interesting chapter in that vast undertaking. This quiet organization from below stands in marked contrast to the feverish essentializations of British officials. The latter, however, produced an important trope – that of the fanatically rebellious sepoy, which appeared and disappeared as convenient over the next few decades.

India and empire in 1857: events and analyses

One result of 1857 was the incorporation of India as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the second British Empire. When the revolt began, however, India was still ruled by the East India Company, which controlled the subcontinent through a thinly stretched network of

bureaucrats and a large ‘native’ army. When the sepoy began to rebel, first at Meerut, in May 1857, and then at various cantonments across northern India, the small British enclaves quickly found themselves isolated, outnumbered, and under attack by ‘mobs’ composed of what would be described as ‘lumpen’ urban elements, ‘fanatical ghazis’, various ‘criminal tribes’, and runaway soldiers. Soon the newly installed telegraph lines carried stories of barbaric murders perpetrated against Europeans and Anglo-Indians and calls for massive retribution. Even in Calcutta and Madras, where larger British communities remained on the margins of the rebellion, daily life was disrupted for many months in 1857–58 and states of alarm arose and subsided according to the military reports received. Reinforcements were sent from elsewhere in the empire, but rebel movements were not finally quashed until 1859. During the long period of suppression, summary executions and wholesale firings of villages perceived to be rebel strongholds were frequent; such was the scale of suffering and devastation that the ‘Mutiny’ remains one of the most controversial episodes of the British Raj.¹

The 150th anniversary of the ‘Uprising’ – one of the preferred Indian terms for this momentous event – in 2007, saw an explosion of new research, building on the work carried out since the 1980s by the ‘subaltern studies’ collective. This work has emphasized the grass-roots motivations and experiences of the revolt, from a variety of standpoints.² The recent historical literature on these events has also been informed by the need to see the history of ‘home’ and of ‘colony’ as mutually constitutive.³ Concerns remain, however, that metropolitan sources continue to be privileged over indigenous perspectives.⁴ Meanwhile, the global impact of 1857 remains inadequately explored, despite several promising initiatives. Among these, Peter Putnis has shown how news of the events of 1857 in India travelled around the world, in the dawn of the new communications era, making it one of the first ‘global media events’.⁵ During this era of the ‘Great Game’, Russia and Persia both received emissaries from the Indian rebels while, in Europe, Napoleon III’s propagandists did their best to spread doubts about Britain’s prospects.⁶

Among the first to react outside India to news of the rebellion were the British settler populations in Indian Ocean colonies such as the Cape and Mauritius. They furnished

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- 1 See Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of empire: the figure of woman in the colonial text*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; and Don Randall, ‘Autumn 1857: the making of the Indian “Mutiny”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31, 1, 2003, p. 9.
 - 2 See, for example, Gautam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Alex Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British colonial discourse*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005; Daniel J. Rycroft, *Representing rebellion: visual aspects of counter-insurgency in colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Among collections published to coincide with the 150th anniversary are Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *Rethinking 1857*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007; and a special edition of *Economic and Political Weekly*.
 - 3 David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, London: Penguin, 2001, iv.
 - 4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp 3–23.
 - 5 P. Putnis, ‘The Indian insurgency of 1857 as a global media event’, in *IAMCR 25th Conference Proceedings*, Canberra: Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra, 2007, pp. 185–90.
 - 6 Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: the struggle for empire in central Asia*, New York: Kodansha International, 1992; Natalie Isser, *The second empire and the press. a study of government-inspired brochures on French foreign policy in their propaganda milieu*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.

troops, raised funds for the European victims of the revolt and offered a collective gasp of horror at the imagined spectacle of British women and children being cut down by revolting sepoys. The 1857 rebellion as experienced and debated in diverse colonies thus offered an opportunity for contemporaries to evaluate their place in the imperial world. The Governor of South Africa, Sir George Grey, believed that the crisis required individual colonies to ‘simultaneously stir themselves to meet the emergency . . . to increase [the empire’s] strength, unity, and stability’.⁷ Jill Bender has noted that the Indian Mutiny ‘was the Cape’s moment to shine. The violence provided the colony with an opportunity to play an integral role in protecting the Empire’.⁸

Others within the British Empire quickly came to view the uprising less as an ‘opportunity to protect’ than as an opportunity to profit. This was, after all, a world still dazzled by grandiose schemes of ‘systematic colonization’ – as evolved by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, enlarged upon by Jeremy Bentham, and enthusiastically supported by J. S. Mill – to ‘remove’ paupers from depressed damp climes to foster the economic progress of new, virgin settlements.⁹ Within India itself, the great colonization debate pitted local *zamindars* (landowners) and British capitalists against the agents of the sugar colonies – mercantile houses in the great ports of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay who employed a host of intermediaries to entice away the landowner’s *kamia* (debt-bonded servant) from perpetual bondage, and the indigo planter’s migrant workers towards more distant but possibly more lucrative prospects. The East India Company’s officials were strictly enjoined towards a ‘benevolent neutrality’ in the matter, neither forbidding nor encouraging emigration, but instead, from 1842, attempting to oversee and regulate the health and safety of the thousands who annually made their way onto the ‘coolie ships’ heading for Mauritius, the Caribbean, and later Fiji and South Africa. This regulation sometimes extended to temporary bans on emigration to certain colonies.¹⁰ In principle, however, many British Indian officials were increasingly supportive of emigration – strikingly so after 1857 – and tended to portray *zamindari* objections as feudal anachronisms designed to keep labour artificially cheap.¹¹ If, indeed, the average official believed it was part of the ‘civilizing, modernizing mission’ of the British to give the Indians a kick-start into new lives in the sugar colonies, it is no surprise to

7 The National Archives, Colonial Office (henceforth TNA CO) 48/383, Grey to Henry Labouchere, 7 August 1857.

8 Jill Bender, ‘Sir George Grey and the 1857 Indian Rebellion: the unmaking and making of an imperial career’, in Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, eds., *Mutiny at the margins: global perspectives on 1857*, Delhi: Sage, forthcoming.

9 See Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *A view of the art of colonisation, in letters between a statesman and a colonist*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1849. Wakefield influenced the thinking of Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill with his ideas of ‘systematic colonization’, and was read and commented on by Marx. These theories have been discussed and critiqued in H. J. M. Johnston, *British emigration policy 1815–1830: shovelling out paupers*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972; and W. P. Morrell, *British colonial policy in the age of Peel and Russell*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930, pp. 154–5.

10 For a fuller discussion of the role of the Indian government in emigration, see Basedo Mangru, *Benevolent neutrality: Indian government policy and labour migration to British Guiana, 1854–1884*, London: Hansib, 1987. For temporary suspensions of migration, see Marina Carter, *Servants, sirdars and settlers in Mauritius, 1834–1874*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 199.

11 See, for instance, George Grierson’s ‘Colonial emigration from India’, in British Library, India Office Records (henceforth IOR) V/27/820/35, George A. Grierson, ‘Report on colonial emigration from the presidency’, p. 15.

find them supporting the notion of transporting rebel sepoys in order to transform them into imperial convict labour.

The disposal of disbanded and rebel sepoys: an imperial opportunity or an Indian problem?

With the mutiny just a few weeks old, British Indian officials began considering what to do with disarmed sepoys, particularly those who had shown no proclivity to join the original mutineers. Eager eyes elsewhere had also been scanning the news reports of the events in India and, virtually simultaneously with the preparation of memoranda by British officials in India, letters covering the same topic from a different angle began to arrive at the Colonial Office and at the East India Company's London headquarters.

Neville Warren, agent of the Scinde (Sindh) railway was one of the first officials in India to look upon the disbanded sepoys as potential labourers. He suggested that

such regiments be employed locally to execute earth works on the railway for 2 years, with the condition that if during that time they have behaved in a manner to be approved of, they shall be restored to their rank in the army, and their length of service for pension. They may then be drafted into other regiments, or otherwise dealt with as Govt may see fit.¹²

The Commissioner of Scinde considered this proposal worth the attention of Lord Elphinstone (the Governor of Bombay), and expanded it to include convicted mutineers, whom he thought should be temporarily transported to one of the Kooria Moorina islands¹³ as 'they would hardly attempt escape to so inhospitable a coast as the neighbouring mainland, very few guards would be required and they might be fed from a Store Hulk moored at some distance'.¹⁴ He proposed that ultimately such men could be placed under guard and employed on harbour works and fortifications within India itself or at another place where they would be useful – he suggested Aden.

Governor Elphinstone offered the opinion that disbanded sepoys would be better employed at Perim (an island near Yemen) 'in building, levelling, and constructing reservoirs'. For those individuals convicted of a crime and sentenced to transportation, Elphinstone recommended

that the opportunity should be taken to establish a settlement on the north coast of Australia. The climate of this coast is unsuited for European colonization, and for this very reason it is well adapted for the occupation of settlers from India. I believe that a sepoy colony might be established on some points of this coast, and that it might be made the nucleus of a penal settlement for India. Penang and Singapore

12 IOR P/188/58, J. Neville Warren, 'Memorandum as to native infantry regiments and Indian Railways', enclosed in H. B. E. Frere, Commissioner in Scinde, to Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay, 9 September 1857.

13 These are now known as the Kuria Muria group, and comprise five rocky islands in the Arabian Sea, located off the south coast of Oman.

14 Frere to Elphinstone, 9 September 1857.

would not lose, I imagine, by this arrangement, which would develop the resources of tropical Australia, and extend the limits of our colonial empire in the east.¹⁵

In making these suggestions, Elphinstone was clearly considering wider imperial interests, rather than a simple solution to a local Indian problem. He was no doubt conscious of the importance of Indian labour to the expanding cash-crop colonies, but he was unlikely at that stage to have been aware of the pressure building up in Britain for measures to effect the wholesale transportation of rebels from India to distant parts of the empire.

In September 1857, Henry Light, a former Governor of British Guiana (modern Guyana), was one of several individuals who sought to put the case for transportation of mutineers to provide labour for various imperial causes before the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Henry Labouchere. He wrote: 'The present troubles in India afford an opportunity of reversing the conditions of product and labor . . . I now venture to suggest, with all submission a wholesale transportation of every mutineer.' Written at a time when the 'atrocities of Cawnpore' were on all lips and when the British press and pulpits alike resounded with calls for vengeance, Light's scheme was draconian. He suggested that their families should be forced to travel with them, and if the transportees, averse to plantation labour, should commit suicide, he proposed:

hang their dead bodies, headless, in chains, and plant the head in a conspicuous quarter, near the habitations of the living – the fashion will soon cease . . . Chains and fetters may be necessary in some of the islands . . . the hair should be cut in a particular fashion and the dress, of such a pattern, as to distinguish those under transportation from the free natives.¹⁶

The India Board in London received similar proposals to transport mutineers from representatives of West India interests.¹⁷ Henry Labouchere accordingly asked Sir Philip Wodehouse (Governor of British Guiana, 1854–61), who was in London in August 1857, to report on the question. The memorandum that Wodehouse drew up was strongly favourable. He argued that removing mutineers – not convicted criminals but those 'against whom the fact of their having been in certain regiments at a certain time can be readily proved' – to the West Indies, was a necessary act of punishment. He proposed that they should be sent as felons to the West Indies, although with their families, because 'every man in these regiments has rendered himself liable to the heaviest punishment, if not for murder and robbery, at any rate for mutiny and desertion'.¹⁸

The proponents of colonization schemes for Australia were equally quick to see the sepooy question as an opportunity. In November 1857, John Hutt, representing a group interested in the development of western Australia wrote directly from London to the various presidency governments in India, proposing that colony as a possible destination for

15 IOR P/188/58, 'Minute by the Governor', 6 October 1857.

16 TNA CO 318/216, Henry Light to Henry Labouchere, 15 September 1857. Light remarked that his attention to the question had been sparked by a letter published 'in a Demerara newspaper Royal Gazette of the beginning of August'. This was no doubt the letter of 'Guianensis' that is discussed below.

17 See for example IOR E/4/849, 'Correspondence respecting transportation to West Indies of persons connected with mutiny', London, 19 January 1858.

18 TNA CO 885/1, Memorandum of P. E. Wodehouse, London, 28 August 1857.

perpetrators of ‘outrages’ during the mutiny, who would be sentenced to transportation.¹⁹ Hutt’s letter explained that western Australia ‘offers peculiar advantages for the reception and safe keeping of this class of prisoners’. These advantages were described as follows:

The Community of that Colony are already accustomed to the presence among them of English Convicts . . . The shortness of the voyage between the Colony and India will greatly facilitate the conveyance thither of prisoners. The climate is good, and . . . the position of the settlement surrounded, as it is to the South and West by the ocean, and to the North and East by a perfectly wild and in many places desert and uninhabitable country insures the safe custody of prisoners rendering their escape almost impossible.²⁰

Hutt qualified support for the transportation of mutineers with the proviso that only life transportees would be acceptable, and that the costs of the penal settlement should be met by the Indian government.

What was not addressed in Hutt’s correspondence from London was how the prospect of importing mutineers would have been received by residents of Australia. Certainly, Australians had, like other literate European populations across the empire, read sensationalist news reports about the mutiny in the summer and autumn of 1857. For example, one particularly lurid account, copied from the *Ceylon Times*, was published in the Melbourne *Argus* of 5 September 1857:

Children shut up in a box and burnt alive: ladies, without a particle of clothing, strapped together and paraded in a cart through the streets of Delhi, subjected to every horror: another flayed alive . . . every British soldier in India knows of the atrocities and we may well imagine the deep curse which he will mutter through his lips over the murderer.²¹

Colonial responses to events in India and rebel transportation projects

The reactions to the Indian mutiny of the government and colonists at the colonial settlement of Cape of Good Hope are relatively well documented, thanks to the publication of contemporary diaries and historical analysis of local press reports.²² Indeed, news of the rebellion in India reached the Cape within a few weeks, largely because a steamer was quickly dispatched to Mauritius and from there to South Africa in search of European troop reinforcements.²³ Analysis of reports in the local newspaper, the *Cape Argus*, reveal the

19 IOR F/4/2720196886, ‘Transport of mutineers to Andaman Islands and counter-proposals, 1856–8’, enclosing letter of John Hutt, Oriental Club, 26 November 1857. For other versions of the same letter see IOR E/4/849, ‘India & Bengal despatches Public Department’, 2 December 1857.

20 IOR IPP 188/49, John Hutt to Governor General in Council, London, 26 November 1857.

21 *Argus*, 5 September 1857.

22 Bender, ‘Sir George Grey; Donovan Williams, ‘The Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Cape Colony’, *Historia*, 32, 1, May 1987, pp. 55–69, and 32, 2, September 1987, pp. 56–67.

23 Peter Putnis, ‘The Indian Uprising of 1857 as a global media event’, unpublished paper for International Association for Media and Communication Research 25th conference, Cairo, July 2006.

extent to which family connections in India ensured the identification of the European settlers at the Cape with the victims of the mutineers.²⁴

Captain Griffith Jenkins of the Indian Navy, who, as Barbarina Grey's journal informs us, arrived in early August 1857 to elicit troops from Sir George Grey, pointed out to him that the Governor of Mauritius had already agreed to despatch troops from that island's garrison, voluntarily reducing it to only 200 men.²⁵ Grey quickly followed suit, sending troops and making plans to ensure the provision of reinforcements the following year.²⁶ At the Cape, as elsewhere across the empire, news of a relief fund set up in England for the sufferers of the mutiny led to an outpouring of cash contributions, much as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami fund prompted a similar global response.²⁷ The Cape Colony also offered more than 4,000 horses to British India.²⁸ This prompted *The Times* of London to praise colonial responses to news of the mutiny, especially the 'zeal and energy of the Governor and people' at the Cape Colony.²⁹

Reactions to the Mutiny seemed to show that the mid Victorian empire was united by a community of interest. On some levels, of course, this was true – the colonies were staffed and defended by men who shared a common education, history, and outlook. They also shared, in general, an unshakeable belief in their own superiority over the 'natives' in whose territories they sojourned – were they 'kafirs', 'hottentots', or 'aboriginals'. Thus it was that, in diverse locations in the summer and autumn of 1857, men stepped forward and, through the columns of local newspapers, professed to know India and the 'Bengal sepoy', to pronounce even the rebels preferable to the 'thievish, lazy, and drunken scoundrels' in their own colonies, and to support plans to import them for labour. One such 'spokesman' was J. H. Van Renen, who described himself as a former captain in the Bengal army, and who reassured the Cape residents, from the columns of the *Argus* on 30 August 1857, that 'From my knowledge of the Sepoy character, I have no hesitation in saying that they will be found most useful here, not only on the public works, but also in private service, considering that their cost is merely for food and clothing; and, of course, to be sent here at the expense of the Indian government.' His plan was for the introduction of 3,000 to 5,000 rebels, to be first 'employed at the harbour of refuge in Table Bay', and then allotted to private individuals. So great was his enthusiasm that he published his correspondence with the local government at the Cape on the subject, which revealed that they, far from rejecting his proposals, already had the matter of transported sepoy 'under consideration'.³⁰

An important lobby group for the West Indian planters was at work in London, endeavouring to ensure that those colonies would be speedily and well informed of the likely prospects of receiving transported mutineers. Stephen Cave, of the West India Committee,

24 *Cape Argus*, 8 and 26 August 1857, as quoted in Bender, 'Sir George Grey'.

25 Williams, 'The Indian Mutiny', p. 67.

26 NA Public Record Office (henceforth PRO) 30/12/9, Grey to Viscount Canning, 4 February and 3 March 1858.

27 IOR P/188/49, Grey to Canning, 11 November 1857.

28 Williams, 'The Indian Mutiny', p. 69.

29 *The Times*, 20 October 1857, quoted in Bender 'Sir George Grey'.

30 Correspondence between Van Renen and Rawson W. Rawson, Colonial Secretary, Cape Govt, as printed in the *Cape Argus*, 9 September 1857.

drafted a series of letters that were despatched to colonial governors in the autumn of 1857. To His Excellency William Walker, in British Guiana, Cave seemed to suggest that it was already agreed that the sugar colonies would receive transported mutineers, informing him that ‘the task of receiving and employing the exiles and of preventing their escape will necessarily fall upon the West Indies’. These individuals, he clarified, would consist of persons ‘whose offences have been most venial, who have in fact been led or forced away by others rather than active in the revolt’. Consequently, he wrote, ‘it is considered that . . . they should be regarded as exiles rather than convicts, and allowed to earn wages’. In response, he wished to be informed of the following: ‘How many Indians your colony is willing to take? What provision you can make for their reception, and what notice you will require?’³¹ Identical letters were despatched to the other islands.³²

Stephen Cave’s letters and the London debates were not, of course, the only news of the Indian uprising and its potential effects on the West Indies to reach the sugar islands – indeed the colonial press began to cover the story, and to consider local implications, from the summer of 1857 onwards.³³ As at the Cape, the official response (in this case to the confident approaches of the West India Committee) was swift and supportive. In British Guiana, the governor drafted a minute for the Court of Policy in which he asserted ‘it is perhaps, impossible to over-estimate the importance to this colony of an adequate supply of manual labour’ and provided a summary of the proposal to receive and employ ‘defeated mutineers of the Indian army and others’. To this the collective members confidently replied that ‘a large influx of such labourers will be generally beneficial, and tend to the improvement and good of all’.³⁴ It only remained to discuss the numbers that could be accommodated and the terms upon which they should be imported. The court opined that 30,000 transportees ‘might be safely and advantageously received into this colony with their wives and families’ on the understanding that their transportation would be paid by the East India Company, that they would be indentured to estates, that they would be paid wages at market rates, and that, if ‘misconducting themselves’, they should be liable to be employed as ‘convicts in penal gangs upon the public works of the colony’. Almost as an afterthought, the court also recommended that the ‘Colonial Garrison should be adequately strengthened with white troops’.

The small island of St Vincent responded later, since its governor was in England; but, when it did, the local legislature proved even more accommodating, offering to contribute to the cost of emigration of rebels’ families, and to the strengthening of the local garrison, if needed. St Vincent, the Colonial Office was informed, could ‘readily take a couple of

31 TNA CO 111/317, Henry Cave to William Walker, London, 16 October 1857.

32 See, for example, TNA CO 260/91, Governor Hincks’ despatch of 21 April 1858, enclosing a letter from the West India Committee, London, 16 October 1857.

33 Reports about the mutiny began to appear in the West Indies press in June 1857. Useful summaries of the debates that ensued are provided by George K. Alapatt, ‘The sepoy mutiny of 1857: Indian indentured labour and plantation politics in British Guiana’, *Journal of Indian History*, 59, 1981, pp. 295–314; and J. C. Jha, ‘The Indian mutiny-cum-revolt of 1857 and Trinidad’, *Indian Studies Past & Present*, 13, 4, 1972, pp. 419–30.

34 TNA CO 111/317, Walker to Labouchere, 9 December 1857, enclosing ‘Minute of Governor and Minutes of the Proceedings of the Honorable the Court of Policy of the colony of British Guiana combined with the Financial Representatives of the Inhabitants of the said Colony at its Extraordinary Assembly held at the Guiana Public Buildings, Georgetown, Demerara, Thursday 26 Nov 1857’. See also TNA CO 318/216, despatches of 12 November and 19 December 1857.

thousand men, always supposing that they are of a class from which a reasonable amount of labor may be obtained'.³⁵ Jamaica also sought to claim a 'share' of the transported sepoys, as did the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Grenada.³⁶

Trinidad had its own lobbyist in London. He wrote directly to the Secretary of State from there, reporting that 'many of the Trinidad proprietors are desirous that the question of sending some of these people to that colony should receive the consideration of Her Majesty's Government'. He asserted that the colony could take 'ten thousand of them at once', on terms that were even more attractive: 'arrangements might be made between the authorities of India and Trinidad whereby the Indian Treasury should, out of the proceeds of their labor, be reimbursed the entire cost of their transport'.³⁷ The Governor of Trinidad, meantime, was conveying to the Colonial Office 'private intelligence' to the effect that 'the Court of Directors of the East India Company has received with some degree of favour' the proposition to deport 'mutinous sepoys' to the West Indies. The Immigration committee of the Legislative Council had voted, by the end of October 1857, to operate the scheme as a ten-year indenture and, in 'their zeal for the cause', had agreed to fund passage costs to an amount of £5 per person. To avoid any law and order problems, it was resolved that those deported should be selected 'from different regiments, or from the inhabitants of different parts of the country. On their arrival here they would be distributed in small allotments on different estates throughout the colony'.³⁸ Private and sometimes anonymous West Indians also supported transportation. On 8 August 1857, 'Guianensis' pointed out the 'inestimable service' that the sepoys might provide for the colony, which could 'readily receive and employ ten thousand'.³⁹

The 'wobble': rebel influxes and colonial concerns

Planter- and capitalist-dominated local colonial legislatures were not the only voices in this emerging global debate. Not all white settlers valued the prospect of cheap labour over that of security, even in the West Indies. While the colonial legislatures (dominated by planter interests) were keen to support proposals to transport mutineers, they were obliged to report dissenting opinions. One member of the St Vincent council duly recorded his opposition to the proposed immigration of mutineers, stating 'I have no hope that a cruel, infuriated and expatriated soldiery can be brought to become a peaceful industrious and contented peasantry – coerced into habits of labour they may be – but only by force of arms, or by converting the colony into a penal settlement'.⁴⁰

35 TNA CO 260/91, despatches from the Governor, St Vincent, 8 March and 7 May 1858.

36 TNA CO 318/220, despatches of 23 June and 8 July 1858, discussing a request for mutineers received from the Governor of Jamaica; TNA CO 318/218, 1858 Memorial from Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Grenada.

37 TNA CO 318/216, A. Elborough to Labouchere, 1 December 1857.

38 TNA CO 295/196, Governor Keate to Labouchere, 6 November 1857, no. 113, enclosing 'Report, Chairman of Standing Committee on immigration'.

39 *Royal Gazette*, British Guiana, 8 August 1857, Letter of Guianensis.

40 TNA CO 260/91, enclosure in despatch of 7 May 1858.

Many more protests were articulated in colonial newspapers. In British Guiana, the editor of *The Creole* criticized those who ‘would not give a fig for the security of the country’, while a lively exchange of letters ensued in the columns of *The Colonist* between ‘An Inhabitant’ who supported importing mutineers and ‘A Briton’ who did not.⁴¹ Discussions of the issue in the British press were keenly followed in Mauritius, and a debate ensued over a scheme to import rebels as convicts to the island. In this colony, the debate was given added piquancy by the presence of a large French settler class, and the divide over the rebel question followed the usual lines of friction between their press organs – *Le Cernéen* and *Le Mauricien* – and the English-language *Commercial Gazette*. An editorial in the latter, proposing that some rebel sepoys would be welcome in Mauritius for repairing the roads, was lambasted by the editor of the *Cernéen*, who contended that, while the 140,000-strong Indian immigrant population then on the island was generally considered ‘gentle and malleable’, they could be ‘easily radicalized; the lambs could from one day to another be transformed into ferocious beasts’.⁴² The editor also noted, with particular interest, an article that appeared in *The Times* in Britain, considering the benefits of exporting the rebels not to British colonies but to French colonies such as Réunion (the island neighbour of Mauritius), which already had a substantial Indian population.⁴³

At the Cape, Van Renen’s enthusiasm for importing rebels to be engaged on public works was not shared by most white settlers. Once the question of receiving mutineers at the Cape had been raised by him in the *Cape Argus*, other colonists soon expressed opposition to any such measures, objecting violently to importing ‘ten thousand sepoy cut-throats’. When the correspondence on this issue between Sir George Grey and the Colonial Secretary was publicly aired, Grey and his ‘precocious, but happily abortive, arrangement to bring about the cutting of the colonial throat’ were strongly condemned.⁴⁴

In the Straits Settlements, which had already received many Indian convicts, residents raised the strongest apprehensions about importing any mutineers.⁴⁵ Indeed, as early as summer 1857, fears were being expressed about the possibility of copycat risings among the existing 3,000-strong Indian convict population, exacerbated by ‘the discovery that Khurruck Singh, a Sikh political prisoner (then on parole), was engaged in treasonable correspondence with the convicts’, who, the local press noted, were ‘mostly natives of Bengal, akin to the wretches belonging to the Sepoy regiments, whose barbarities have shocked the whole civilised world.’ Singh was shipped to Penang, but this sparked a panic among European residents there, while those in Singapore continued to be ‘on the alert’, fearing a possible rising during the Muharram, when convicts were allowed to participate in processions.⁴⁶ Thus, when it was learnt that the Indian government was contemplating

41 *The Creole*, British Guiana, 14 September 1857, Editorial; *The Colonist*, 21, 26, and 30 October 1857, exchange of letters.

42 *Commercial Gazette*, 26 March 1858, Editorial; *Le Cernéen*, 31 March 1858, Editorial.

43 This article was reproduced in the *Commercial Gazette*, 16 September 1858.

44 *Cape Argus*, 24 March 1858. The full text of this correspondence is reproduced in Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, eds., *Source Book of 1857*, New Delhi: Sage, forthcoming.

45 The Straits Settlements was the name by which Singapore and adjacent territories, such as Penang, were then known. Penang – in present-day Malaysia – was also known at this time as Prince of Wales Island.

46 As reported by the Singapore correspondent of the *Daily News*, 20 August 1857.

transporting mutineer sepoy, the European residents took steps to ensure that they should not be the recipients. A memorial was drawn up, in which signatories expressed their ‘feelings of deep regret and alarm’ at the arrival of further ‘criminals’ of this kind.⁴⁷ This memorial was despatched to India in October 1857, along with a strongly worded minute from the Governor of the Straits Settlements himself, who opposed sending men ‘naturally entertaining the most deadly sentiments of hatred and revenge against us [and] to whom death would prove a release from the miseries they will endure here . . . To keep such men under control requires an amount of physical force not at our disposal.’⁴⁸ The governor hoped that the memorial would be favourably considered by the Governor General of India, on the grounds that ‘these quiet, peaceable Agricultural Stations’ should not be subjected to ‘the dangers arising from the presence of large numbers of men lately in arms against us, dangers the very idea and apprehension of which will interfere most materially with the prospects and progress of these Settlements’. He pointed out that, while the convict system had suited Singapore in its infancy, it was no longer suitable for a colonial city with annual trade figures of £10 million, a harbour crowded with shipping, and ‘a large population earnestly engaged in Mercantile and Tradal pursuits’.⁴⁹

A number of mutineers were shipped to Penang during 1857, leading to further remonstrations from the Governor of the Straits Settlements, who reiterated his arguments ‘against the transportation to these Settlements of men trained and disciplined as Soldiers, accustomed to act in a body, and having even their Native Officers with them . . . there is no further room for additional convicts at Penang’.⁵⁰ The Superintendent of Convicts also told the Indian authorities of ‘the great danger that exists of contamination of mind to the rest of the convict body, by the introduction into their midst, of such a poisonous material as so large a body of mutinous and seditious Sepoys – men too who are far more intelligent and full of intrigue than the ordinary run of Convicts’.⁵¹

The concerns expressed in colonial newspapers reflected a growing belief that the Indian government was actively seeking a means of disposing of its vast and now refractory sepoy army. Certainly, records of correspondence between the Colonial Office and the East India Company’s Board of Directors in London in late 1857 seem to indicate that the West India lobbyists had successfully laid claim to receive these disbanded corps, or even the convicted rebels. On 17 December 1857, the Court of Directors of the East India Company informed the India Board that

the Govt of India will probably be placed in considerable difficulty in regard to the disposal of the large number of prisoners who will no doubt be sentenced to transportation, unless relief is afforded by their removal to such of the British Colonies as may be willing to receive them, and to suggest that a Bill to legalise the measure,

47 IOR P/188/49, Governor, Straits Settlements to Secretary to Govt of India, 26 November 1857, enclosing ‘The memorial of the undersigned merchants and other inhabitants of Singapore’.

48 IOR E/4/852, Minute by the Governor, Straits Settlements, 6 October 1857.

49 Ibid. See also NA PRO 30/29/21/7, Leveson-Gower Papers, including a petition of October 1857 from the European inhabitants of Singapore asking for direct British rule in place of the East India Company.

50 IOR P/188/50, Governor, Straits Settlements, letters of 17 December 1857 and 11 February 1858.

51 Ibid., enclosure from Lt. G. T. Hilliard, Superintendent of Convicts to Resident Councillor, Prince of Wales Island, 14 December 1857.

be at once submitted to Parliament . . . the question of the proportions in which the expence [*sic*] of removing the convicts and their families should be borne by the East India Company and the Colony, may be left to future adjustment between the Indian and Colonial Governments.⁵²

On receipt of this letter, the India Board contacted the Secretary of State for the Colonies and asked ‘whether Mr Labouchere thinks it advisable to introduce any bill into Parliament for the purpose of giving this additional supply of labor to certain of Her Majesty’s Colonies’. The reply, dated 4 January 1858, came back that the British government had ‘no objection to the introduction of a bill for the removal of natives convicted of having been concerned in the mutiny in India to certain of the British colonies’.⁵³ The stage was set for the transportation of convicted mutineers. It remained to be decided, however, where they would be sent. Certainly, cash-crop colonies, both old and new, were vying to derive benefit from the unpaid labour of transported mutineer sepoys. And whereas the experienced hacks in the West Indies were aware that it would show poor taste ‘to obtrude our speculations upon the grief and bitter indignation of the English nation’ so that ‘the mere semblance of turning the East Indian disaster to advantage should of course be avoided’, upstart colonies such as the miniscule Seychelles, then scarcely developed, had fewer inhibitions. There, in July 1858, Charles Telfair, a newly appointed magistrate, enthused about the ‘perfectly new country like what Australia was [*sic*] some years ago. It requires labor to regenerate it – new faces – even the rebels of India – to instill [*sic*] new life, energy and industry’.⁵⁴

It seems that, all over the empire, schemes to import rebel sepoys were exercising the minds of local British officials and settlers. Why then did the British Indian government choose to send migrants to the Andaman Islands rather than meeting the requests of so many of their confreres in the broader imperial setting?

The Andaman proposition

If lobbyists for the sugar islands saw rebel transportees as a chance to acquire cheap labour, officials within India also viewed the question of sepoy punishment as an opportunity: both to provide a long-term solution to the question of where to locate a future penal settlement and to solve the problem of a refractory community not far from its borders.

By the mid 1850s, several acts of piracy affecting the Indian ocean trade, coupled with instances of ‘outrages’ committed against shipwrecked sailors by natives of the Andamans, had made the directors of the East India Company desirous of bringing the islands under some form of control,⁵⁵ and a plan to survey them was devised. However, the cost and uncertainty of establishing the necessary penal infrastructure on the archipelago was a subject of some dispute. In March 1856, Canning declared himself decidedly against the idea,

52 TNA CO 318/216, Court of Directors, East India Company to India Board, 17 December 1857.

53 TNA CO 318/216, India Board to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 December 1857, and reply, 4 January 1858.

54 *Port of Spain Gazette*, 14 October 1857, Editorial; Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute, Royal Society Archives, Letter of Charles Telfair, Mahé, Seychelles, 3 July 1858.

55 IOR P/188/56, J. W. Dalrymple to W. Grey, 28 November 1858.

minuting: 'We are in no need of a new penal settlement, planted in an unsubdued climate, with all its first risks, and a sure expenditure of life and money'.⁵⁶

By May 1857, widespread mutiny in the Indian army had broken out and, as the trickle of rebel transportees threatened to lead to a flood, resolving where they and other convicts should be sent became an urgent matter. In October 1857, F. J. Mouat, a British inspector of prisons in India, opined,

if speedy steps be not taken to form a Convict Settlement on the Andaman Islands, the best means of disposing of them would probably be to send them to the West Indies as compulsory labourers. There they would be removed from all Indian Associations, and would have no inducement in a population who have no sympathy with them, to plot mischief, or commit crime.⁵⁷

Mouat was evidently motivated chiefly by a desire to isolate the mutineers, rather than to use their labour for maximum imperial gain.

By December 1857, officials in India had decided to prohibit further 'transportation of mutineers, deserters and rebels to the Straits Settlements'. The governor there was informed, 'it is in contemplation to establish a Penal Settlement for all India on the Andaman Islands'.⁵⁸ In fact, the decision was taken very shortly thereafter in favour of the Andamans over the West Indies because, on the Indian government learning that the government of Bombay was making arrangements to ship a contingent of Punjabi convicts newly arrived from Karachi to the Straits, a telegram was sent on 12 January 1858, saying that 'the Mutineer and Rebel Convicts must not be sent to the Straits. They may be sent at once direct to the Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal'.⁵⁹ A few days later, Mr Hutt, representing the interests of Australian planters, was also informed that it had been decided to send transportees to the Andamans.⁶⁰

Turning to the question of what to do with the disarmed sepoy who were committing 'no outward and visible act of mutiny or disobedience', officials in Fort William continued to debate quiet dispersal versus complete banishment. The President in Council favoured their discharge, believing that they would 'soon merge into the ordinary mass of the population'.⁶¹ J. P. Grant also favoured a 'quiet' solution, explaining,

What we have now to guard against is no longer the hope of success and dominion, but the insanity of fear and desperation – It is said and I believe truly, that the disarmed, but organised bodies of men at Barrackpore are in dread of some sudden stroke such as transportation en masse . . . I am still of opinion that whilst an organised body of Hindoostanee Sepoys in these times is an element of great danger, the

56 IOR P/188/56, Minute of Canning, 15 March 1856.

57 IOR P/188/49, Secretary to Govt of Bengal to Secretary to Govt of India, 2 November 1857, enclosing letter of F. J. Mouat to Secretary to Govt of Bengal, 24 October 1857.

58 IOR P/188/49, Secretary to the Govt of India to Governor, Straits Settlements, 23 December 1857.

59 IOR P/188/49, Telegraphic message to Secretary to Govt of Bombay, 12 January 1858.

60 IOR F/4/2720, Beadon to Hutt, 21 January 1858.

61 IOR F/4/2724 197966, 'Disposal of men of disarmed native regiments, March–May 1858', Extract of military letter from Fort William, 17 May 1858, no 80; Minute by the Hon. J. Douin, President in Council, 9 March 1858.

individual men composing it, when separated and dispersed, are not dangerous at all; or at the worst are not more dangerous than many of their village brothers.

However, another official, B. Peacock, warned against simple disbandment and dispersal of the native regiments, contending that to ‘set loose all over the country from 16 to 20,000 disaffected men, trained to arms and without the means of gaining an honest livelihood would be most dangerous’. He suggested that they should instead be sent to the West Indies, under terms very similar to those offered to indentured labourers, believing it ‘justifiable to remove them from this country where their presence would be dangerous to society and would be likely to impede the restoration of peace and tranquillity’. He opined that, after ten years in the West Indies, their return would be gradual, and their characters sufficiently ‘altered’. Peacock also proposed that, if it was impossible to send them directly to the West Indies, they could go to the Andamans ‘in the first instance’ and ‘allow such of them to emigrate therefrom to the West Indies as could induce their families to accompany them’.⁶²

J. P. Grant responded to anxieties about discharged sepoy by asserting that there was no evidence that they had been ‘banding together to commit outrages’. He was, however, concerned about the prospect of mass forced emigration: ‘I fear if we were to transport 20,000 men who have committed no offence our reputation for fairness and justice which has been no immaterial element of strength to us even in the late terrible times, would hardly survive’. For Grant, it seemed, the prestige of the empire and the need to uphold ‘fair play’ outweighed narrow economic and political considerations. Another of his objections focussed on batches of sepoy already sent to fight elsewhere. He noted that ‘It would be inconsistent with the line taken in sending some of these disarmed regiments to fight Her Majesty’s battles in China’.⁶³ Certainly, Grant was correct that the native regiments sent there – to replace European troops diverted to India after the mutiny broke out – were not treated as convicts; they were armed and played their part in British operations in that country, afterwards returning to India.

Ultimately, the more moderate perspective of Grant and like-minded colleagues prevailed, and attention turned to amnesty and quiet dispersal, rather than mass transportation. Hundreds rather than the projected tens of thousands of ex-mutineers were ultimately transported, though the exact figure is unclear. Many were eventually repatriated to India, some with new families, and even new wealth.⁶⁴

The London-based directors of the East India Company – who had forwarded various proposals from parties seeking labourers – were accordingly informed

we should greatly prefer the scheme of a penal settlement in the Andamans to that suggested by Mr Hutt. The importance of occupying the Andamans has been fully

62 IOR F/4/2724 197966, Minutes of the Hon. J. P. Grant, 13 March 1858, and the Hon. B. Peacock, 2 April 1858.

63 Ibid., Minute of J. P. Grant, 5 April 1858.

64 See for example Satadru Sen, ‘Contexts, representation and the colonized convict: Maulana Thanasari in the Andaman Islands’ *Crime, History & Societies*, 8, 2, 2004, pp. 117–39; and Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: prisons, prisoners and rebellion*, London: Anthem Press, 2007. Anderson states (p. 144) that ‘In total during the 18 month period from March 1858 to October 1859, the government shipped 3,697 convicts to the [Andaman] Islands, including dozens of men convicted of jail-breaking’. But these may or may not all have been mutineers. Details of those sent to Penang and Singapore are discussed elsewhere in this article.

admitted. We have received your despatch on the subject of transporting mutineers to the West Indies, but we still think that the plan of founding a penal settlement for these convicts in the Andamans is to be preferred to any other.⁶⁵

Consequently, in March 1858, the Commissioners for the Affairs of India were requested to inform Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies that 'Imperial Legislation in regard to the transportation of convicts from India to any of Her Majesty's colonies, is at present unnecessary'.⁶⁶ So ended the flurry of activity on the part of various territories in the British Empire to either secure or avoid the arrival of transportees. The Board of Directors in London latched on to the Andamans scheme with little hesitation, no doubt aided by the prospect of further territorial expansion, since they noted, 'by taking possession of the Andaman Islands, we ipso facto take possession of the Cocos which are its geographical dependencies'.⁶⁷

The events of 1857, had certainly served, in the view of Indian officials, to greatly enhance the value of the Andaman Islands as a 'convenient place for the reception of convicts'.⁶⁸ The Andaman proposition had fulfilled a dual role: not only did it provide a solution to an ongoing question of where to send Indian convicts but it also offered an opportunity to subdue a 'nest of pirates' in the Bay of Bengal. The reaction in the sugar colonies was muted. 'A Briton', writing in the columns of a Guianese newspaper in September 1857, had never felt that a West Indian solution was likely. He believed that 'The British Government will not be inclined to deal so leniently with so rebellious a set of murderous miscreants, but will leave them to the tender mercies of Sir Colin Campbell and his gallant band of British soldiers'. By early 1858, the *Bengal Hurkaru's* take on the rumours of the likely final destination of rebel transportees was being digested in the Caribbean: 'We hear that . . . the Andamanese only kill and eat their prisoners . . . If this is true the reproach of measures being either insufficient or too late cannot be applied to this as it will be both a timely and a sufficient retribution'.⁶⁹ The editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette* lamented that West Indian 'immigration prospects are indeed very problematical'. It was feared that

the Indian Government will have enough to do to look after its own affairs to be able to pay much attention to the labor requirements of other places and Mauritius is the nearest for strays and fugitives. On the other hand, there is the notion that, owing to the suspension of public works and the general unsettlement, consequent upon the thorough disorganisation of the Indian community, there will be a vast amount of idle pauperism throughout Hindostan, which can only find relief by an extended

65 IOR F/4/2720 196886, 'Transport of mutineers to Andaman Islands and counter-proposals, 1856-8'.

66 IOR E/4/854, 'Transport of mutineers to western Australia and West Indies or any colonies', letter dated 10 March 1858.

67 IOR P/188/56, Board of Directors of East India Company, London, 18 May 1858.

68 IOR E/4/851, India Political Dept, 18 May 1858, 'Papers concerning effect of Mutiny, in enhancing value of Andaman Islands as convict settlement'.

69 *The Creole*, 16 September 1857, letter to the Editor from 'A Briton'; *Port of Spain Gazette*, 17 April 1858, incorporating the article in the *Bengal Hurkaru* entitled 'Banishment of mutineers'. The confirmation of rumours surrounding the decision to send transportees to the Andaman islands did not reach the West Indies until around September 1858. See *The Sentinel*, Trinidad, 9 September 1858.

emigration . . . By this we may perhaps profit to a degree far greater than anything we have yet experienced.⁷⁰

These extraordinary statements raise a series of questions that have so far escaped the attention of ‘mutiny historians’. Did disruption in the rebel heartlands of northern India lead to widespread ‘pauperism’? Where did all the likely ‘strays and fugitives’ who escaped internal repression end up? Which, if any, of the labour-hungry territories clamouring to receive convicts benefited from the traumatic events surrounding the Uprising?

Mutiny and migration: a conspiracy of silence?

Much remains to be elucidated about the impact of the months of disruption (years in the parts of Bihar that were not ‘pacified’ until 1860) on Indian villagers and townspeople in the regions affected by the mutiny, but some anecdotal evidence is available. During the course of the uprising and its suppression, months of plunder, looting, and reprisal burnings took an inevitable toll. To the suffering these events engendered among ordinary residents may be added the effects of the uprooting and impoverishing of the families of thousands of men hitherto gainfully employed in military service for the British. Reports trickling into the Indian government in 1858 and 1859 described the disbanded sepoy as being ‘in a state of desperation’ and destitution. The populous district of Shahabad, in Patna, Bihar, had furnished a particularly large contingent of sepoy to the Bengal army and, being also associated with a rebel force that had proved especially difficult to dislodge, was singled out in terms of the acuity of post mutiny distress in evidence.⁷¹

Imperial sugar planters and their lobbyists were adept at identifying crisis in India and seeking to profit from it. To give just one example, immediately before the mutiny, the rebellion of the Santhals (a tribal group in India) had attracted the attention of the ‘Mauritius Association’ – a London-based lobby group. Their Chairman, Mr Guthrie, had the ear of the Secretary of State for the Colonies. In June 1857, he apprised Labouchere that the Santhals were ‘labouring now under extreme destitution’ and urged an emigration scheme that would bring them wealth and enable returning migrants to ‘relieve their own people of the schroffs [moneylenders] who have driven them to rebellion and their present abject state of misery’. The Secretary of State, in turn, urged the attention of the Indian government to the matter.⁷² Thus, as soon as the extent of the 1857 uprising became known in Britain and her colonial world, the planter interests were speculating on the ‘possibility of great distress becoming prevalent in Bengal before long, and of large numbers of people being found without the means of subsistence’. As usual, the emigration agents at the Presidency ports were depicted in the guise of ‘aid-givers’ who could help to ‘relieve’ famine

70 *Port of Spain Gazette*, 23 January 1858, Editorial.

71 ‘Disposal of men of disarmed native regiments’; and Minute by the Hon. J. Douin. See also IOR P/188/56, Secretary to Govt of Bengal to Secretary to Govt of India, 23 July 1859, enclosing letter of Commissioner of Patna Division to Secretary to Govt of Bengal, 2 July 1859.

72 IOR/BEP/15/77, Guthrie, Chairman of the Mauritius Association to Henry Labouchere, 10 June 1857. The editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette* had also spotted the opportunity to employ both the ‘Santhals and misguided sepoy’: *Port of Spain Gazette*, 14 October 1857, Editorial.

'by providing passages to the West Indies'. It must be noted that the anxiety of planter interests to provide succour to the impoverished masses of India was not unrelated to the unprecedentedly high sugar prices then prevailing.⁷³

The fact that the hike in the market value of sugar coincided with an uprising and economic dislocation in India led to an extraordinary surge in migration in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Of these, the vast majority went to Mauritius (in the 1858–59 season alone, 21,273 emigrants embarked from India to Mauritius and 5,158 to the West Indies).⁷⁴ The dramatic increase in migration attracted the attention of the Governor General of India. Noting that the monthly figure of migrants leaving Calcutta to emigrate to Mauritius had risen from an average of 700 to double that number in 1858, and to three times as many in the first half of 1859, he requested his colleagues in Bengal to investigate the causes for the increase. The response indicated that a greater demand from the colony, coinciding with the disturbances associated with the mutiny, 'led the rural population, and more particularly that in Shahabad, to emigrate in much greater numbers than in former years'.⁷⁵ The regional breakdown of the figures was striking: in 1857–58, of 9,864 adults who embarked for Mauritius, 2,229 came from Shahabad, and 1,658 from Ghazipur. In 1858–59, of 20,166 adults who emigrated, 5,522 came from Shahabad, and 2,921 from Ghazipur.

The inference is clear: a region that was closely linked to heavy recruitment of sepoys was also sending emigrants in massive numbers to Mauritius. Yet it seems that no investigation was made at the time, either in Calcutta or in Mauritius, to check whether fugitive rebels were among the number. This was not for want of experienced colonial officials to undertake such enquiries. On the contrary, many of the senior police and magistrates serving in Mauritius at this time were former Indian army officers.⁷⁶ Instead, it is noteworthy that high-ranking officials took steps to discredit any notion that sepoys might have had a commonality of interest with the legions of 'coolies' departing for or already settled in the sugar colonies. Attempting to dispel any apprehension in Mauritius that 'our Indian laborers ... may become inoculated with the mutinous spirit which has broken out in the native army of Bengal', the governor of the island penned a minute in July 1857 in which he sought to distinguish between the 'mutineers' and the 'immigrants':

what common purpose, or what possible ties of interest and of empathy, can exist between the poor, low caste coolies who come here from Bengal and the Coast to till our soil and earn their bread, with the fanatical, haughty Mahomadan, the wily Brahmin, or the fearless, high-spirited Rajpoot, of whom the Bengal army is almost entirely composed, and who are principally recruited from Oude and Provinces of

73 TNA CO 885/1, Memorandum of Philip Wodehouse, London, 28 August 1857. A letter appeared in the press in Mauritius in January 1858, from a person signing himself 'Delta', that remarked upon the probable impending famine in northern India and speculating on the possibility of procuring such sufferers for emigration purposes: *Commercial Gazette*, 20 January 1858.

74 IOR/P/188/59, Letter from Secretary to Govt of Bengal, 3 June 1859.

75 IOR/P/188/60, Secy to Govt of India to Secy to Govt of Bengal, 9 September 1859; Secy to Govt of Bengal to Secy to Govt of India, 29 October 1859.

76 For example, in 1858, the appointment of Captain Ogilvie as a stipendiary magistrate in one of the northern sugar-planting districts of Mauritius was announced. He was described as 'a distinguished engineer officer who was wounded at the siege of Lucknow. Has a thorough knowledge of Indian character and language' (*Commercial Gazette*, 6 September 1858).

the Doab. In my opinion, the causes, whatever they are, that have produced that deplorable revolt, can find no place here, nor can the aspirations or views which may have operated upon sepoys in Hindoostan.⁷⁷

Was the governor's complacency really grounded in a stereotypical impression that the 'coolie' migrant had little in common with the revolutionary sepoy, or was there, in effect, a conspiracy of silence operating at the heart of the empire – one that would resolve at one and the same time the question of the refractory, untrustworthy 'Bengal sepoy' and the clamour for inexpensive, sugared tea in the drawing rooms of the ruling and middle classes of Britain?

The failure of the British officials at the ports of departure, and those who supervised reception and allotment to sugar estates and other employers on arrival, to investigate the status of Indian migrants in the years immediately following the mutiny renders it difficult to investigate the subject today. However, there is some anecdotal evidence from unofficial sources. For example, following the arrival of the *Bucephalus* from Calcutta in March 1858, a brief report appeared in the colonial press in British Guiana. Entitled 'The sepoys are come' the article reported: 'Among the Coolie Immigrants recently arrived from Calcutta in the *Bucephalus*, are several Sepoys, who have fled from India. They say that they were ordered to shoot their white officers, but that rather than do so, they ran away, and emigrated. One of the female immigrants was servant to a lady who was massacred at Cawnpore.'⁷⁸ A separate, official report of the arrival of the same ship, merely limits itself to remarking upon the low mortality during the voyage, which is attributed to the 'superior class of emigrants embarked at Calcutta'.⁷⁹ Only when serious incidents occurred – such as an alleged mutiny on board the *Clasmerden* taking Indian migrants to Guiana, which forced the ship to divert its course – did official sources report evidence of 'sepoy' involvement.⁸⁰

In the absence of official documentation recording the fates of the many who slipped away from the scene of rebellion, much can nevertheless be gleaned from the stories of those who do occasionally or accidentally resurface in the written British archive. We know from a petition of Kunchun Sing, for example, who complained that he had been 'unjustly ejected from his native village in Ranchee, Chota Nagpore, and his lands given to another simply upon rumour that his father had joined the mutineers', that he had resettled himself in Calcutta.⁸¹ A written protest made by the commissioner of police in that city in March 1861 reveals a further intriguing dimension to the mutiny story. He complained that almost 300 convicts brought back from the Andaman Islands on two ships had been 'turned loose in Calcutta', considering it an 'an improper course to send them adrift without any communication with me on the subject'.⁸² It is likely that some of the many displaced persons who wound up in Calcutta in the aftermath of the mutiny may have found a much-needed

77 TNA CO 167/387, J. M. Higginson to Labouchere, 30 July 1857, confidential. See also IOR P/188/49, Minute of J. M. Higginson, 27 July 1857.

78 *The Colonist*, British Guiana, 15 March 1858.

79 TNA CO 111/319 1858, Governor Walker despatch, 24 March 1858.

80 TNA CO 386/95, Murdoch to Rogers, 6 February, 24 June, and 24 July 1863.

81 IOR J/206/64, Petition of Kuchun Sing, 10 May 1861.

82 IOR J/206/64, S. Wauchope, Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, to W. S. Seton Karr, Secy to Govt of Bengal, no. 190, 5 March 1861.

meal and a welcome in one of the emigration depots that lined the Hughli river and that employed scores of persons precisely to scour the bazaars and streets for such individuals. Certainly, at the time of planning the ‘Andaman solution’, officials had discussed the possibility that the transportees might emigrate after serving out their sentences. Moreover, when arrangements were put in place to encourage the families of transportees to join them at the penal settlement of Port Blair on the Andamans, it was the ‘coolie emigration agent’ at Calcutta who was placed in charge of conducting ‘the family emigration of convicts’ in 1858. Five hundred transportees wrote letters to their families but, of these, the vast majority failed to be reunited because the family members either could not be found (some having left the district) or refused to go. One woman, named as Mussamut Oomeda, alias Sudhni, consented to travel to Port Blair, and it was the Mauritius emigration agent who was asked to arrange her conveyance from her home to his depot and onwards to the Andamans. Another woman – Mussamut Nuthee – and her son reached the Mauritius emigration depot but then, according to the agent, ‘refused to proceed’. They reportedly remained at Calcutta.⁸³ It is therefore not so extraordinary to find, in the Mauritius depot at Varanasi, a Punjabi Muslim who had been a convict at the Andamans, waiting to emigrate, later in the century.⁸⁴ For those who cared to investigate, there would have been many more such cases. Few, however, wanted to look closely at the connection between migrants and mutineers, at least not until much later.

Recasting the ‘rebel sepoy’ and the ‘coolie migrant’

The intertwined yet hitherto separate stories of the ‘rebel sepoy’ and the ‘coolie migrant’ are complex, and have not been successfully engaged within a mutiny historiography that remains resolutely ‘Indocentric’ and generally elite-bound. The arrogance of imperial rule helped to ensure that the sepoy migrant mutineer was not considered an object of undue anxiety; but it was the greed of colonial capitalists that kept the existence of any itinerant sepoys carefully under wraps. Ultimately, however, the global popular narrative of fiendish sepoys did seep into the colonial consciousness, and coloured impressions of plantation workers during subsequent moments of crisis.

The manner in which the barbaric sepoy was recast in various less evil guises by those who sought to import his labour in the immediate aftermath of 1857 is startling, especially when compared to the lurid press accounts of the ‘Mutiny’ at this time. As early as 8 August 1857, ‘Guianensis’ was arguing in the *Royal Gazette* of British Guiana that the sepoys, ‘though exceedingly guilty, yet are uncontaminated by ordinary crime, and may be considered more as political offenders’. The letter also suggested that eventually the mutineer migrants would ‘shake off their caste prejudices and become good citizens’.⁸⁵ Van Renen asserted in the *Cape Argus* that the Bengal sepoys had ‘gone mad’ through fear of being

83 IOR P/188/62, ‘Abstract of the correspondence regarding convict family emigration to Port Blair, in the Andamans’.

84 IOR/P/2057, Major D. G. Pitcher, Judge, Small Cause Court, Lucknow to Secy to Govt of NWP & Oudh, 17 June 1882, p. 87.

85 *Royal Gazette*, British Guiana, 8 August 1857, Letter of Guianensis.

converted into Christians, and opined that ‘most of the murders of women and children at Meerut and Delhi were perpetrated by the Budmashes in the bazaars’. He looked forward to an idyllic pastoral future:

after a few years the poor Sepoys will be the most attached and faithful servants of any in the colony . . . The Sepoy is a smart, handy, intelligent, and robust fellow – very active; of sober temperament, and capable of being taught any trade or occupation, so long as it does not interfere with his caste, and in a short time, he will be found to be a most skilful and trustworthy wagon driver, as numbers do drive bullock carts in their villages, – as also capable of using their own light ploughs; and as they are all strong, athletic men, they will soon get into the habit of handling and using our ploughs also.⁸⁶

‘An Inhabitant’ asserted in the columns of another newspaper in British Guiana that the colonists had no more to fear from rebel sepoy than the residents of Australia who lived with European convicts in their midst: ‘The Sepoy convict in British Guiana would be like the European convict in New South Wales, a conquered, broken, altered individual’.⁸⁷ The editor of a Trinidadian newspaper was sure that when the ‘misguided sepoy’ found that ‘industry and quiet are sure roads to competence and independence they will pursue them’.⁸⁸

In seeking to convince its compatriots of the benefits of mutineer immigration, *The Colonist* reminded its readers in British Guiana that the Indian population on the island already included ‘many dismissed Sepoys, who did not leave their regiments on account of good conduct’.⁸⁹ However the colonial press debate, which largely reflected the divergent concerns of local interest groups, was given a new twist in Mauritius, where an editorial in *Le Cernéen* raised the question of what might be the views of the local Indian population on the mutiny. The article stated:

The 140,000 Indians we have here do not dream of following the example of their rebel confreres: well fed, well treated, well paid for moderate work, they are busy with adding to their savings in order to return home or to become entrepreneurs among us; but we should not believe that they are completely indifferent to what is happening in India; they often express concern about the events, and at times do not trouble to hide their sympathy for the rebels.⁹⁰

The colonial governments in Mauritius, the Cape, and elsewhere had responded favourably to the need for troops and, indeed, left themselves with a depleted force in so doing. However, not everyone in those colonies with sizeable Indian populations imported under the indenture system as plantation labourers was as inured to the possibility of copycat risings in their own territories as were the senior officials and planter lobbyists. The author

86 *Cape Argus*, 9 September 1857, Letter of Van Renen.

87 *The Creole*, British Guiana, 26 October 1857, Letter of ‘An Inhabitant’.

88 *Port of Spain Gazette*, 14 October 1857, Editorial.

89 *The Colonist*, reproduced in *Port of Spain Gazette*, 30 December 1857.

90 *Le Cernéen*, 31 March 1858, Editorial.

of a letter to *The Creole* newspaper in Guiana asked his fellow settlers: ‘What would be the feeling on many an estate now, if the coolies were as well acquainted with the recent transactions in India as the manager is? Would there not be a feeling of the greatest uneasiness lest they should attempt to imitate the deeds of their countrymen?’⁹¹ The prospect of further immigrants from India disturbed ‘Quietus’, whose letter to the same newspaper contended:

I am inclined to think the hindrances to a more extended immigration from India have been blessings rather than evils to our planters, for otherwise the country might have been filled with a fierce, idolatrous, rebellious population, quite disposed and fully able to give us, our wives and our children a taste of Meerut and Cawnpore atrocities.⁹²

Over succeeding years, whenever riots erupted on the sugar estates, the spectre of 1857 returned to haunt the columns of the colonial press. In 1869, following a number of incidents in British Guiana, a local correspondent reminded readers ‘on most of the Estates in this Colony, there are between 300 and 400 immigrants, . . . many of whom are sepoy, who even now remember with satisfaction and glory the parts they bore in the memorable tragedies of Cawnpore and Delhi’.⁹³ A letter in the *New Era* newspaper in Trinidad offered up a stark warning to colonists there: ‘the day is not far off when these Coolies . . . will break out in open rebellion, and reproduce here the barbarities of the great chief, Nana Sahib, in British India a few years ago’.⁹⁴

The presence of sepoy among rioters on estates was a regular aspect of reports on a number of serious incidents that occurred in Guiana well into the early 1870s. Investigations into the incidents generally revealed few salient facts about these individuals.⁹⁵ Indeed, it would not have been surprising to find sepoy among the estate workforce in the various plantation colonies. The emigration of ex-sepoy was recorded among documented cases of migrants from the inception of the indenture system.⁹⁶ The Rajput migrants from overpopulated and impoverished districts such as Shahabad furnished not only recruits for the Bengal army but also entire families for the sugar plantations of Mauritius, British Guiana, and elsewhere.⁹⁷ The challenge for the historian is to look beyond evolving stereotypes, in which barbaric sepoy are recast as malleable plantation fodder and where estate workers rioting against poor conditions and low wages are transformed into legions of Nana Sahibs waiting to massacre the white denizens of the sugar colonies. The subaltern mutiny narrative remains largely unwritten, its traces obscured by an archive founded on notions of racial superiority and subdividing its colonized subjects into immutable caste-bound categories. Further research is needed to recover the life histories of villagers and town-dwellers whose

91 *The Creole*, British Guiana, 17 November 1857, Letter by ‘Not A Sepoy’.

92 *The Creole*, British Guiana, 16 March 1858, Quietus, ‘The coolie sepoy’. This newspaper represented the interests of the ex-slave population and consequently viewed Indian immigrants as rivals to the existing Creole labour force: see Alapatt, ‘Sepoy mutiny’, p. 303.

93 *The Weekly Penny*, 9 October 1869, ‘Immigrant outbreaks’.

94 *New Era*, Trinidad, 3 April 1871, ‘Protection’.

95 See, for example, reports on the Essequibo riots in *The Colonist*, British Guiana, 1–10 October 1872.

96 Several examples were reported in TNA CO 167/261, Neave Report, July 1845.

97 Many instances are recounted in IOR V/27/820/35, George A. Grierson, ‘Report on colonial emigration from the Bengal presidency’.

lives were rocked by the tumult of 1857 and who were uprooted and began again in the bulging empire of mid Victorian Britain.

Conclusion

Analysis of the impact of a single dramatic event such as the Indian Uprising around the empire enables us to assess the relative influence of local interests over empire-wide concerns. It also reveals how evolving stereotypes are shared or diluted as a result of questions of distance, prejudice, and simple expediency. Did their paramount interest in labour importation cause Australian capitalists and Mauritian administrators simply to ignore the real or perceived threat of Indian copycat risings that might occur in existing or projected populations of labourers/sepoys? Were British settlers in Singapore more interested in raising the status of their adopted home from that of penal settlement to thriving port city than in protecting themselves from mutinous sepoy convicts? Whatever the real significance or underlying truth of colonial responses to the question of mutiny and transportation, superficial expressions of sympathy with British India's horror and rage at the onset of the rebellion were soon overshadowed by parochial and regional concerns. The British Empire has been seen as representing a monolithic face to the mutineers in 1857 – in fact, it was governed by very localized interests and imperatives. Colonial officials commonly deluded themselves with essentialist ideas about their 'local' people in a particular place, loyalty and immobility being combined as virtues among 'their' subject populations. Faced with the prospect of numerous turbulent Indians, however, there was very little commonality of purpose among British officials abroad. In the long run, those territories that profited most from the establishment of post-1857 migrant streams were probably those where there was the least agreement upon issues of 'policy', and where migration of (and investment in) indigenous hands ultimately gained the upper hand.

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