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# Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience

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# Coerced and migrant labourers in India: the colonial experience

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## Introduction: 'new international labour studies' and the historiography of migration

Traditionally, the historical literature on nineteenth century labour movements has been polarised, often under the influence of colonial sources which tend to describe labour movements as being either coerced or voluntary - reproducing as they do the classical post-enlightenment dichotomy between 'freedom' and 'unfreedom', and the colonial regimes' juridical approach to issues involving capital and requiring (or otherwise) legislative intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Classics of the coercive school include Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*, an account of the migration of rural Bengalis to the Tea Plantations of Assam, and more recently Jan Breman's *Taming the Coolie Beast* (a study of colonial migration in Indonesia).<sup>2</sup> The view has achieved a far wider currency than this however, partly because of the force of romantic and nationalist critics, including Mahatma Gandhi himself who wrote that 'the blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifices of the cities are built'

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<sup>1</sup> The typical nineteenth century, post enlightenment discourse on 'freedom' and 'unfreedom' is reproduced in much contemporary writing and in subsequent historical accounts. The cultural specificities of these ideas however are effectively critiqued by G. Prakash in 'Terms of servitude: the colonial discourse on slavery and Bondage in India' in M.A. Klein (ed.), Breaking the Chains: slavery, bondage and emancipation in modern Africa and Asia, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). The inconsistencies of this approach were apparent of course even in the nineteenth century. Thus Marx wrote of the 'veiled slavery' of wage earners in Europe, and contemporary authors defended the comparative liberties of chattel slavery in the southern U.S.A. See Marcus Cunliffe, Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: the anglo-american context, (Athens, U.S.A.: University of Georgia Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> H. Tinker, A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920, Oxford, 1974; J. Breman, Taming the Coolie Beast : plantation society and the colonial order in Southeast Asia, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). Similar views are to be found in a number of the contributions to E.Valentine Daniel, H. Bernstein and T. Brass (eds.), Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia, (London: Frank Cass, 1992); and M. Twaddle (ed.), The Wages of Slavery: from chattel slavery to wage labour in Africa, the Caribbean and England, (London: Frank Cass, 1993).

Other authors, including those writing quite recently such as Anand Yang, in *The Limited Raj*, a study of Saran district in North Bihar, have tended to turn this argument on its head, interpreting migration as a largely voluntary activity, a simple means of betterment and of escape from the social and economic oppression of rural life.<sup>3</sup> At its extreme, this perspective has been employed by Brij V. Lal and Peter Emmer to suggest that even migration overseas of indentured labourers to sugar plantation colonies such as Mauritius and Fiji was entirely a voluntary process, the exercising of 'choice' within the context of an emerging labour market that was mobile and competitive - the end result being the betterment of nearly all those involved.<sup>4</sup> Positions which perhaps enshrine the post-colonial idealism of mobile middle classes and the entrepreneurial spirit of the 1980's rather better than they give voice to the real conditions of nineteenth century migrants, which in reality were highly variable and complex.

Purely theoretical studies, such as Guy Standing's 'Migration and modes of exploitation' (an influential article published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1981) have apparently justified labour mobility as a natural consequence of capitalist development - as opposed to the feudal economic order, where labour, he argues, is invariably static.<sup>5</sup> Neatly inverting this argument, neo-Marxist authors such as Robert Miles in *Capitalism and Unfree Labour* have argued that labour control and the restriction of mobility by direct coercion or the use of contracts such as the indenture contract (which prevent the free operation of market forces) is actually a fundamental characteristic of capitalist labour relations, especially in societies undergoing the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist system of production - an insight which matches well with the historical record.<sup>6</sup> The means to this end in India, it has been argued (by authors such as Gail Omvedt), was the perpetuation of semi-feudalism by the colonial state - which by depriving them of adequate remuneration forced the rural labourers to be both wage slaves in the city and share-croppers in the village, experiencing the worst of both worlds. The idea of semi-feudalism has been popular since it has allowed historians to accept

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<sup>3</sup> A. Yang, *The Limited Raj: agrarian relations in colonial India, Saran district, 1793-1920*, (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1989)

<sup>4</sup> P.C. Emmer, 'The Great Escape: The migration of female indentured servants from British India to Surinam, 1873-1916' in D. Richardson, *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context 1790-1916*, London, 1986; B.V. Lal, 'Approaches to the study of Indian indentured emigration with special reference to Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History*, xv, nos. 1-2 (1980). In more recent writings though Lal has rather switched back to the opposite approach, emphasising the oppression and exploitation of migrants: Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro, and Edward D. Beechert (eds.), *Plantation workers : resistance and accommodation*, (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, c1993).

<sup>5</sup> Guy Standing, 'Migration and modes of exploitation', *Journal of Peasant Studies* (1981)

<sup>6</sup> Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: anomaly or necessity?*, (London: Tavistock, 1987)

such arguments as those of both Standing and Miles, and because its descriptive power is very appealing. Analytically however it explains little because of its extremely general nature - and it is contestable on a number of counts.

The great contribution of Robert Miles and others was to bring an understanding of the dynamics of global capitalism to the study of 'ethnic' or race relations within the western developed world, and the manner in which this affected the labour market. Basing his approach on the insights into global capitalism offered by Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein, Miles' work presents a great advance over the dominant discourse of migration studies in the 1960's and early '70's. By shedding marginalist economic analysis and other earlier misconceptions and by introducing a new understanding of migration as the product of an international division of labour, a slow revolution has begun in the reinterpretation of Asian and African migration to Europe.

This interconnectedness between the labour markets of developing economies and those of the developed world has been the focus of continuing interest amongst both sociologists and historians of Africa, Asia and Latin America. A pioneer in what has since become known as the field of 'new' international labour studies has been Robin Cohen, whose book *Peasants and Proletarians: the struggles of Third World Workers*, co-authored with Gutkind and Brazier and published in 1979, set the trend for much of what was to follow. Broadly speaking the method was historicised sociology, heavily influenced by 'World Systems Theory' and the writing of neo-Trotskyists of the Latin American 'dependista school'. Whilst path-breaking in its linkage of contemporary class struggles in the third world with long-term historical trends, the focus was very much on the processes which have affected the mobility of capital and labour internationally, rather less on the ways in which workers participated actively in the shaping of their destinies.<sup>7</sup>

Initially the field was dominated by contemporary sociologists of labour in the developing world. Since then there has been a greater convergence between the two disciplines involved in this enterprise - history and sociology. A key text marking this transition was Cohen's *New Helots* (published in 1987). One of the more widely acclaimed general histories has been Lydia Potts' *The World Labour Market: a history of migration*, first published in English in 1990.<sup>8</sup> Still more recently, the *Cambridge Survey of World Migration* has shown the field to be increasingly dominated by the historians,

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<sup>7</sup> For a general overview of this developing field see Ronaldo Munck, *The New International Labour Studies, an introduction*, (London: Zed books, 1988); and Robin Cohen, *Contested domains: debates in international labour studies*, (London: Zed, c.1991).

<sup>8</sup> Lydia Potts, *The World Labour Market: a history of migration*, (London: Zed books, 1990).

with twelve out of the fifteen chapters in this important volume, contributed by various authors, being primarily historical in content.<sup>9</sup>

Partly under the influence of 'subalternist' perspectives within both history and anthropology, increasing emphasis is furthermore being placed upon the experiential aspects of migration. Thus historians and sociologists are beginning to look more closely at the ways in which people interpreted and adapted to the experience of migration, wherever possible meeting coercion with resistance or otherwise turning circumstances to their advantage. Conventional narratives are being overturned, sources critiqued, and rather less attention is now being paid to the theorisation of the production relations that determined migration, and rather more attention instead is being given to the role played by institutions, employers, politics and the inventiveness of migrants themselves in shaping the labour markets and diasporas that have come to characterise the world we now live in.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, whilst the great Afro-American migrations have previously preoccupied a majority of scholars, more consideration is now being paid to the many smaller, but equally significant migrations that took place within Africa and Asia. With this has come a realisation that these migrations are linked and have been so for far longer than previously imagined. Just as recent historical studies have stressed the pre-colonial roots of Indian capitalism and the trans-oceanic reach of Asian capitalism in the pre-colonial period, so a realisation has gradually dawned (as with African slavery) of the deep historical roots of Asian migration.<sup>11</sup> The prevalence of rural-rural migration in the pre-colonial period has thus become apparent, together with the interlinking of migration between villages, between rural areas and the great conurbations of Asia. It is also becoming clear that rural-rural and rural-urban migration in India is connected with the emergence of plantation labour, and the indenturing of labourers to destinations elsewhere in the world. Together with this there have developed migrant communities, migration cultures and a transmission of knowledge that has nourished subsequent migrations of Asiatic peoples throughout the world from the mid twentieth century up to the present day.

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<sup>9</sup> Robin Cohen, The New Helots: migrants in the international division of labour, (Aldershot: Gower, 1987); Robin Cohen (ed.), The Cambridge Survey of World Migration, (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995).

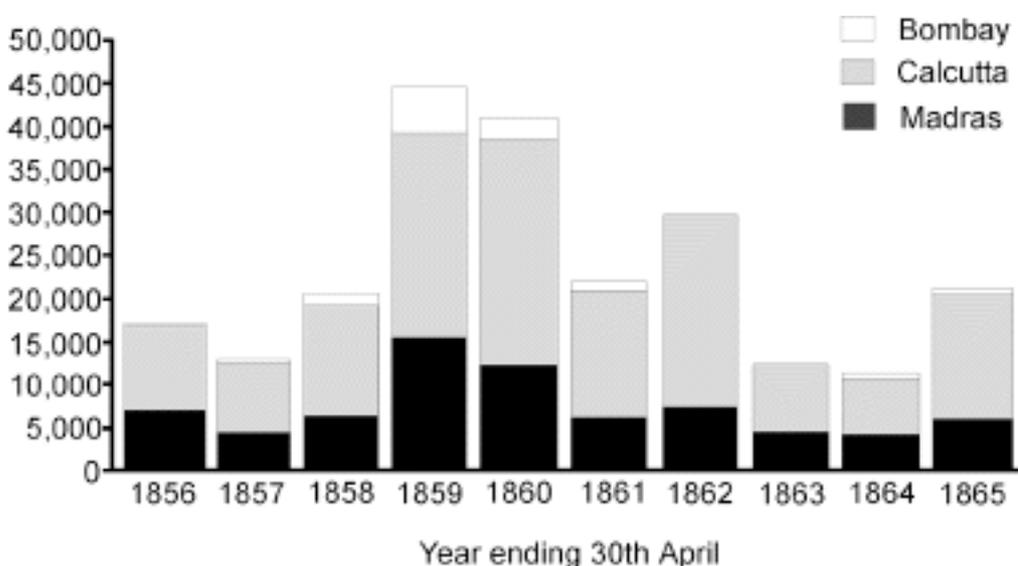
<sup>10</sup> E.G. Peter van der Veer (ed.), Nation and Migration: the politics of space in the South Asian diaspora, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). This is also the central theme of the series 'New Historical Perspectives on Migration', being published by Leicester University Press, for which the author and Dr. Marina Carter are series editors.

<sup>11</sup> See S.C. Bose (ed.), South Asia and World Capitalism, (New Delhi and Oxford: O.U.P., 1990; and C. Bates & M.D. Carter, 'Tribal migration in India and beyond' in G. Prakash (ed.), The World of the Rural Labourer in Colonial India, (O.U.P., New Delhi, 1992), pp. 205-247.

## Patterns of migration in colonial India

Labour migration was not a new phenomenon in India, but under British rule it assumed a variety of new shapes and forms as well as increasing enormously in scale. Earlier migrants often proceeded from village to village individually or in gangs to assist in harvesting or other agricultural operations. Warfare (of which there was great deal in the nineteenth century) threw up much larger bodies of people willing to migrate further in search of work. The repression and famine which followed the Santhal insurrection of 1855 generated one such large-scale movement of population, as also did British suppression of the Indian uprising of 1857 - trends clearly evinced in the statistics of emigration from British India in the period 1855-65 (see figure).<sup>12</sup>

The effects of the Santhal insurrection were reflected initially in a flood of migrants, mostly Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribal labourers into the north of Bengal, where they helped in the clearance of jungle. From here they went on to the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, or migrated to destinations overseas. Later on in the century famines, forest enclosures and population growth continually added to the ranks of migrants. The migration of nearly a million peasants from overcrowded lands in the east of Bengal to Assam during the first three decades of the twentieth century attested to the progressive exhaustion of the intensive margins of agriculture, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in the east of India, but also common elsewhere in the period 1860 to 1920.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Source: D. Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> S.C. Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: rural Bengal since 1770*, New Cambridge History of India, vol. III.2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 26-8.

Although the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh, eastern Madhya Pradesh and West Bihar constituted the largest and most important region of labour migration in India, and was the region from which a significant proportion of Calcutta's population was resourced, perhaps the most singular migration stream was that from Ratnagiri to Bombay. Some eighty-four per cent of Bombay's population was thus said to have been born outside of the city in 1920, the city's factories and cotton mills having a special relationship with the district of Ratnagiri and its environs. This involved a regular migration between the countryside and the city, in which families at home in the village provided vital support. The manner in which this family economy worked was described as follows:

Only a few members of a family migrate to the towns. The family itself remains domiciled in the mofussil and the centre of family life is there, so that the women folk return to it to bear their children; the men folk when age or disability comes to them, or when death causes a vacancy in the agricultural workers of the family.<sup>14</sup>

These migrants spent the bulk of the year in Bombay, but for at least two or three months they would return to their villages, especially at harvest time. The movements of populations that resulted were enormous, it being estimated that 500,000 seasonal migrants came to the city by coastal steamer alone in 1905, whilst in 1929 the seasonal migration from Satara district (adjacent to Ratnagiri) was estimated at 15 to 20 per cent of the population.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of the Maharashtra, the desperately impoverished arid zone of the southern Deccan provided a constant and sizeable pool of immiserised labour only too willing to supplement family incomes by working in the industries of Bombay. Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya in his case study of internal migration in Bengal, argues however that it was occasional 'push' factors such as famine and the failure of crops that drove the majority of migrants from their villages in rural Bengal. Even then he states that migrants in eastern India often preferred to move to the nearest towns, rather than the major conurbations.<sup>16</sup> Only in times of serious crisis would these peasant migrants make their way as far as Calcutta - subsequently returning to their villages when forced back by

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<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission on Labour in India [hereafter RCLI], Evidence, Bombay Presidency, (Calcutta: GOI, 1931), "Conditions of Industrial Workers", I, i, p.8, cited in R. Chandavarkar, The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> R. Chandavarkar, Origins of Industrial Capitalism, p. 155. See also Gill Yamin, 'The character and origins of labour migration from Ratnagiri district, 1840-1920', South Asia Research, 9, 1, May 1989, pp. 33-53. Marina Carter in Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874 (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1995), chapter 3, also shows that the Maratha migrants to Mauritius were overwhelmingly from Ratnagiri.

<sup>16</sup> Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, Internal Migration in India: a case study of Bengal, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1987). On the southern Deccan, see J. Banerji,

their 'emotional attachment to the land'.<sup>17</sup> For most of the rest of the time, Chattopadhyay argues, the migrants to Calcutta derived from an elite strata of rural landlords and wealthy farmers, the class of 'idle rent-receivers' who moved to the city by choice.

In the longer term, however, a more permanent detachment from the land was sometimes imposed by the pressures of population growth, fragmentation and subdivision of the land.<sup>18</sup> This forced many peasants to become habitual or long-term migrants as a means of earning the money to supplement their incomes and to settle their debts back home - a common feature in Chhattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh, an area I know well, as well as in some of the tribal areas of central India. In Chhattisgarh, although landlessness was uncommon, according to a survey in 1929, 50% of the holdings were less than 5 acres, and the capital invested in cultivation was far too low to ensure an adequate return. Likewise in the Sadr subdivision of Ranchi district in Bihar, in 1911, one survey revealed that 80-94% of holdings amounted to less than 14 acres, and were thus insufficient to support an average family.<sup>19</sup> As in Chhattisgarh, agriculture here was predominantly rain-fed, much of the cultivation taking place on inferior soils which were extremely vulnerable, and which could be neither double-cropped, nor sustain a single rice-crop for more than a few years without fallowing. Here the poverty of the cultivator was also the poverty of the labourer. Thus the average 4.5 member *kamia* household earned sufficient to provide only 41% of its annual grain requirements - forcing one or more members of the household to migrate in search of work every year.<sup>20</sup> The same situation pertained in Bengal, where it was estimated that by 1930 less than a fifth of families of cultivators with secure rights to their holdings managed to remain free from a debt, making migrant labour an indispensable resource for the majority of the agricultural population.<sup>21</sup> Seasonal and permanent migration was thus a way of life for most of the small-holding cultivators, as well as the landless population of the poorest districts in Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Bengal, and one of the few means available for controlling the size of family units.

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<sup>17</sup> Chattopadhyaya, Internal Migration, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> See S. Bose, Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital, pp. 79 - 94.

<sup>19</sup> Central Provinces Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report, 1929-30, 4 vols., Nagpur, 1930. The significance of this report is analysed in C. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India', (Cambridge Ph.D. thesis. 1984), chapter 7. See also C. Bates 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development: the pivotal role of migrant labour' in D. Ludden, Agricultural Production and Indian History, (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1994); and 'Tribal and indentured migrants in colonial India: modes of recruitment and forms of incorporation' (with Dr. M. Carter), in P. Robb (ed.), Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India, (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1993), pp. 159-185

<sup>20</sup> D. Schwerin, in D. Rothermund and D.C. Wadhwa (eds.), Zamindars, Mines and Peasants: studies in the history of an Indian coalfield and its rural hinterland, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> S.C. Bose, Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital, p. 87.

Other more permanent migrants in colonial India included the unemployed village weavers who 'confronted by the competition of mills and the consequent depression overtaking their profession, were driven to give up working with their handlooms and to seek employment at the mills.' Other village artisans also sought work in the city, the easiest way out for the village craftsman being (as argued by the Royal Commission on Labour) 'to transfer his allegiance to the rival which is supplanting him'.<sup>22</sup>

The predominance of such itinerant and semi-skilled workers account for the large preponderance of males in the migrant community, it is argued, as well as the extraordinary rate of growth in the population of Calcutta and other major industrial centres in northern and central India, such as Ranchi, Nagpur and Cawnpore. Even as early as 1822, Calcutta was said to have a population of 200,000 with another 100,000 coming into the city for work every day from the surrounding neighbourhood, but by the end of the century the city was growing at a rate in excess of 12,000 a year, bringing the population from 447,000 to 1,200,000 in the period from 1872 to 1931.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the sheer numbers, the preponderance of skills amongst the migrants also accounts for high level of locational and occupational specialisation amongst the permanently settled workforce - particularly seen in Calcutta in Burrabazar, where each trading community monopolised a different street: the Gujaratis in Armenian Street, the Parsis and Punjabis in Dharamtolla street, the Marwaris in Harrison Road, Cross Street, Chitpur, Canning and Clive Streets, the diamond-sellers in Munga Patti, and the pharmacists in Bonfield Lane. For these elites it is clear that migration to the city was a very conscious choice, but for the majority, historians are inclined to agree that so-called push factors were of over-riding importance in encouraging them to move towards the city. The available accounts of the manner in which 'push' factors actually operated, however, are in general unsatisfactory.

To explain the arrival of poorer migrants in the cities, most historians have considered it sufficient merely to produce a catalogue of woes and misfortunes, the consequence of which are judged to be self-evident. Some, such as Lalita Chakravorty, have not even troubled to distinguish the socio-economic conditions of migrants, judging instead the ecology of the districts of origin to have been the crucial determinant.<sup>24</sup> Because of her

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Chattopadhyaya, Internal Migration.

<sup>23</sup> P. Marshall, Bengal: the British Bridgehead, New Cambridge History of India, vol. II.2, (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987), p. 160 & H. Chattopadhyay, Internal Migration, ch. V

<sup>24</sup> Lalita Chakravorty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy', Indian Economic and Social History Review [IESHR], 1975

enthusiasm for a positivist, ecological explanation for the origins of migration, Chakravorty is notably forced to regard levels of surplus appropriation in agriculture as constant, and to exclude technical and institutional change from her analysis. These assumptions are so obviously invalid in respect to tribal areas that they have to be omitted from her study altogether, as are the large and growing population of 'part-time' proletarian and seasonal labourers, who upset her postulate of an 'agrarian proletarian equilibrium' in the nineteenth century.

Most accounts have also failed adequately to explain the reasons why so many migrations were seasonal in nature: a phenomenon that should not be underestimated. Thus Anand Yang calculates that in Saran district in Bihar alone between 80,000 and 200,000 of the total population were engaged in such activities - these 'seasonal' migrants representing a very significant proportion of the total population of Calcutta city in particular.

Saran district was 'one of the greatest emigrating districts in Bengal', according to the census of 1891, a total of 364,000 of its population (or 15.4%) being enumerated in other districts of India in that year - Howrah and Calcutta (with a total of 13, 750 migrants) being the third most important destination after Champaran and Muzaffarpur. A great many not even mentioned in these figures left the country completely: migrating initially to Calcutta, but then being recruited for employment overseas in either Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad or Jamaica.<sup>25</sup>

Yang argues that migration in Saran was nearly always voluntary. Coercion by rural landlords only resulted in 'desertions' from the land, or 'avoidance protest' as he calls it, the deserters normally returning soon after, if not to the same village then at least to a similar one very near by.<sup>26</sup> A typical example of 'voluntary' migration given by Yang is that of Hira, a 42-year old Teli who lived in the village of Usri in Saran with his wife and two children. Hira held a small plot of land of less than two *bighas* on a part cash and part produce-rent basis, and from this, plus his work as an oil-presser, he earned only Rs. 192 in 1915. It was therefore necessary for him to work for four months of the year as a porter or labourer in Calcutta, from which he earned an additional Rs. 36. Without this extra income, and the money he got from selling a bullock (Rs. 28), he and his family would have starved.

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<sup>25</sup> See M.D. Carter, Servants, Sirdars and Settlers and Voices from Indenture: experiences of Indian migrants in the British empire, (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Yang, Limited Raj, chapter 9.

Although not the most important destination for seasonal migrants from Saran, according to their numbers, employment in Calcutta and Howrah was clearly highly remunerative, since out of Rs. 1,122, 350 paid on money orders in Saran between January 1st and December 31st 1889, the largest amount (that is, Rs. 185,400), or nearly 17 % of the total was sent from this destination. And although paid less than other workers, seasonal migrants working in the Jute Mills, for example could earn from Rs. 2 - Rs. 4 per week. Yang does not explain, however, how it was the Hira managed to obtain his employment in Calcutta, or what it was that prompted him to go there, of all places, to begin with.

The usual explanation given for seasonal migration is under-employment in rural areas - the practice being for migrants to work away from their villages for one or two months, before going back again in order to cultivate their crops. Normally the labourers went to the cities in January, returned by the end of June, went again by the end of August or the beginning of September, and then returned home once more at the beginning of November. The seasonality of this labour movement is seen to be self-evidently a product of the type of crops grown and the fluctuating demand for labour within the village - the peak demand being at times of ploughing, sowing and harvesting. Such patterns are not immutable however. They are dependent, to begin with, on the sexual division of labour within the village (weeding being an operation given over largely to women), the use of labour-saving technology, and the choice of agricultural techniques - none of which need remain constant (albeit given the limited availability of resources), and all of which are the product of conscious decision-making.

As far as the sexual division of labour is concerned it is becoming clear that a major revolution was in fact occurring in the nineteenth century, not least because of the desertion of the fields by large numbers of male migrants, whilst the evidence for technological change in agriculture of one sort or another is also quite incontrovertible.<sup>27</sup>

### **Regional specificities, recruitment practices and the role of employers**

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<sup>27</sup> See G.K. Lieten, O. Neiwenhuis & L. Schenk-Sandbergen (eds.), Women, Migrants and Tribals: survival strategies in Asia, (New Delhi: Manohar 1989). Ultimately of course many women were forced into migration too, as is illustrated in this volume and in Dagmar Engels 'The myth of the family unit: adivasi women in coal-mines and tea plantations in early 20th century Bengal' in P. Robb, Dalit Movements, pp. 225-244. On technological change and related changes in the social relations of production see S. Guha (ed.), Growth, stagnation or decline? Agricultural Productivity in British India, (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1992) and especially D. Ludden (ed.), Agricultural Production and Indian History. There is no doubt that in many other parts of the colonial world the role of women was changing dramatically. For colonial Africa see N. Hafkin & E. Bay (eds.) Women in Africa, (Stanford, 1976).

One factor that helps explain seasonality and other patterns within migration streams, a factor as important as changes in the techniques and relations of production in rural areas, were the recruitment decisions of employers. This element in the demand for labour has been neglected, but it is here that we can see evidence that the labour markets of localities were connected with those of regions, regions with those of the cities, and the cities with an international market for labour.

The importance of this factor is conspicuous when we look at the vast preponderance of male over female migrants. Females outnumbered more than two to one both among migrants, as well as in the city of Calcutta itself. This imbalance is often given simply as evidence of seasonal migration, but rarely is any consideration given to why employers in some industries preferred males, and often paid them higher wages - a stranger phenomenon than one might imagine given the large number of very heavy labouring jobs, for instance in construction, which were reserved at the same time for women.<sup>28</sup> Still more rarely are explanations given for the tendency of the employers to prefer a shifting, seasonal workforce, and more than this, a workforce often only recruited from specific districts and localities, such as Saran. Saran migrants, to take this example, were concentrated in particularly large numbers in the major jute mills of Victoria, Titaghur, and Shamnagar (which together employed some 3,500 migrants from this district in the early 1900's), and were much less commonly encountered elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> If supply factors alone are considered, this phenomenon simply has no logic to it at all.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In Calcutta jute mills typically 5% of workers were female and 14.5% 'young persons' (i.e. children), according to evidence given to the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1907-08. A common objection was the women could not be employed in night-working, on moral grounds, but this view was most commonly stated by foremen and others, not by the employers themselves - underlining perhaps the latter's lack of direct control over the recruitment process. In the tea industry, however, women were preferred as tea pickers.

<sup>29</sup> Yang, Limited Raj, p. 197, fn. 76. See also Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, (Calcutta: GOI, 1896), Enclosures 3 to 8 (pp. 309-311). A similar phenomenon was also seen in Burmese jute mills, in Maulmain, for example, it was reported to the Indian Factory Labour Commission in 1907 that 'The great bulk of imported Indians came and went every year...none of the [jute] mills, with one exception, had coolie lines'. Typically these labourers lived in government registered boarding houses in the town, where they also ate all their meals during their stay - presenting obvious economies to employers. (S.L. Aplin, D.C. Maulmain, Indian Factory Labour Commission (1907-08), vol. II, PP 1905, CD. 4519 [IFLC] p. 283.) It should be stressed though that the preference for a migratory work force was not consistent, and that in Madras mills, for example, gratuity funds were set up after the turn of the century to try and persuade workers to stay longer. This may have been connected with technological advances, such as the introduction of electric lighting, which allowed a greater intensification of production and made instability in the workforce a greater inconvenience than the possibility of unionisation.

<sup>30</sup> The seasonality of the workforce remains an important feature of the urban labour market to this day - see Jan Breman, Wage Hunters and Gatherers: search for work in the urban and rural economy of South Gujarat, (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1994). Apart from the changing demands of employers, another possible explanation of seasonality, in jute mills and coal mines at least, was simply the intolerable state of working conditions - these and other hypotheses are currently being

It may be contended that the manner in which labourers were recruited not only helps explain the concentrations of workers from particular castes and regions in particular industries and localities in the city, but also the dramatic changes that sometimes occurred in the sourcing of labourers in certain industries from the mid-1890's onwards. The most important source on this subject is still Ranajit Das Gupta's article on the sources of supply for factory labour in Eastern India, published in 1976.<sup>31</sup> In this article Das Gupta shows that while Bengalis formed a majority of the workforce throughout most of the nineteenth century, the composition of the workforce changed at the end of the century so that by 1897 a clear majority came from non-Bengali districts. This trend advanced progressively, the first of these non-Bengalis coming from U.P. followed in the 1890's by growing numbers from Bihar and Orissa, whilst by 1915 very large numbers of them were coming from as far away as the Central Provinces, until by 1929 the Royal Commission on Labour reported that 'if a circle of 250 miles radius be drawn around Calcutta the great majority of them [the jute workers] came from outside that circle'.

Some mills in the South of Calcutta, such as Fort Gloster Jute Mills and Budge Budge Jute Mills continued to employ Bengalis, but the majority by this date were employing workers drawn from outside the Province - especially low-caste groups, such as the Chamars, who migrated to Calcutta from Chhattisgarh in central India, and accounted for approximately 10% of the workforce in the mills.

Bengalis increasingly found employment in the *skilled* sector (where 31% of workers were drawn from within the province), whilst in the *unskilled* sector they only accounted for 17% of the total number of mill workers in Calcutta by 1929. The Indian Jute Mills Association argued that the migrant workers from outside were attracted by the high wages, suggesting that there was a gradual dissemination of knowledge and information into the interior of the country about the work available in the jute mills, and the migration of these peoples to Calcutta was therefore a 'natural' response. This does not square very well however with evidence of declining real wages in the jute industry in this period, which became very acute from the mid-1920's onwards.

Equally striking is the highly specific sources from which labour was drawn for other industries in the East of India. Both the mines of Chota Nagpur and the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) in Singhbhum, for example, increasingly began to rely on an

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explored in research by Anthony J. Cox, in a Ph.D. project comparing the jute industries of Calcutta and Dundee.

<sup>31</sup> Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: sources of supply, 1855-1946', IESHR, 1976

*adivasi* (tribal) workforce towards the end of the nineteenth century, many of them drawn from far away districts in Orissa or the Central Provinces. The same applied also to the rapidly expanding tea plantations of Darjeeling and Assam, which relied almost entirely on *adivasi* labour. Thus it was reported that nearly all the immigrants to the plains of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in Assam were of 'Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Goala and Agaria castes'- all *adivasis*, mostly coming from Chota Nagpur and the Central Provinces.<sup>32</sup> Migration from the Santhal Parganas to Assam was of such a scale indeed, that it became one of the first internal migration streams to be properly regulated. Thus the so-called Santhal Parganas district emigration scheme commenced in 1894 after a successful inspection tour of Assam by Santhal village headmen, organised by the planters, with government support. Essentially this scheme involved the use of returnee migrants to solicit future volunteers to work in the Assam tea plantations.

According to the Labour Enquiry Commission of 1896, the coal mines of lower Bengal (concentrated in Raniganj, Gobindpur and Giridih) drew their labour mostly from the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, key elements in the labour force being Kols, Muslims and Gonds, recruited from Jabalpur area, and Santhals recruited from Chota Nagpur. According to the evidence given to the enquiry, although many of the mines had only recently started working, 'a stream of migration seems to have set in', emigrants seeming to find their way of their own accord after the expenses of the first two or three batches had been paid.<sup>33</sup> The main problem in this migration flow appears to have been the competition presented by recruiters from Assam, who were drawing off the labour from the mining areas in prodigious quantities. Assistance in replenishing the supply was however afforded by the East Indian and Bengal-Nagpur railway in the form of reduced rates (1.5 pice per mile instead of 2.5 pice per mile) for large parties of workers heading east from these districts.<sup>34</sup>

The situation was different yet again in the Jamalpur railway workshops in Bihar, which relied entirely on local labour; whilst the engineering industries in Calcutta were the almost exclusive preserve of the Bengalis. Muslims in Calcutta, to take another example, found employment mostly in the Engineering sector, as also in iron foundries and cotton textile mills. In Bombay cotton mills, on the other hand, as already mentioned, the

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<sup>32</sup> Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896, p. 51. See also Mohapatra & Behal, in Bernstein et al, Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants.

<sup>33</sup> Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896, p. 11. Page 15 of this report lists the location of all of the mines and the composition of their workforces by region of origin.

<sup>34</sup> IFLC, p. 10 and p.18. Similar concessions were offered by other lines too, such as the Oudh and Rohilkhand Railway.

workers were principally recruited (almost exclusively in some mills) from the Ratnagiri district.

Contemporaries often explained this phenomenon often by use of racial stereotypes - arguing that Bengalis, for example, were more nimble with their fingers and therefore more adept at Engineering work, whilst *adivasis*, due to their familiarity with the forests, were more adept at cutting trees and more inclined to work in the open, and therefore tended to prefer work on the plantations. One example of this is to be found in the words of a learned informant to the Indian Factory Labour Commission, a representative of the Muir Mills in Cawnpore, who suggested that Muslim workers were intrinsically stronger, stating that 'it would be absurd ...to compare Mohamedans - who eat flesh - with Hindus, who do not touch it'. The same informant predictably compared the strength of a 14-year old Indian boy to that of an 18 year old female in Dundee (unconsciously underlining the equation of patriarchy and racism amongst colonialists in this period), his purpose being to emphasise the pointlessness of regulations limiting the hours of Indian mill workers to the same level as in the U.K., given the relative inefficiency of the workforce.<sup>35</sup> (Not surprisingly, the workers in this instance thought otherwise, stating that they would prefer to see a reduction in their hours and also, if possible, payment of their wages when due, rather than in arrears.)<sup>36</sup>

For similar reasons of racial stereotyping serious consideration was given by colonial officials to the idea of importing Chinese labour to work in the coal-fields of lower Bengal on the grounds that a 'Chinaman' could cut four tubs of coal in a day and load one tub of dust, whilst a worker from the north-West provinces would only cut one tub of coal, because 'he is far too lazy'. The idea was finally scratched only because of the cost of importation (Rs. 40 for steamer hire from Shanghai) , the preponderance of unemployment in India - perceived as a social problem of more pressing importance - and the thought that the Chinese workers might not apply themselves so diligently without the 'immediate supervision' which they were often subjected to at home.<sup>37</sup>

Such racial stereotyping was commonly adopted as a means of identifying and controlling a coerced or semi-coerced labour force - as is argued by Robert Miles - but

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<sup>35</sup> IFLC, 1907-08, p.204. Later in the same report another informant averred that 'The Burmans' have 'a natural aversion to hard work...' (p. 283). One could continue almost endlessly citing such examples.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 218. The Indian representative of the management of Empress Cotton Mill in Nagpur, Mr. Bajanji Dadabhoy, interestingly also thought that the work in Indian mills was much harder than in the U.K. and the necessity for shorter hours real enough - IFLC, p. 366. This perhaps reveals the influence of racism on the opinions ventured by British managers.

<sup>37</sup> Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896, p.17.

they were in themselves often mutually contradictory (one wonders, for example, why *adivasis* should also according to this logic, be well-suited for work underground or in a steel mill), and its significance is easily exaggerated. Thus in the case of Mauritius the perceived suitability of *adivasi* labour (described as 'hill coolies' or '*dangas*') was definitely a factor in recruitment, but it was also powerfully determined by the sheer numbers of such labourers available amongst the migrant population of eastern India in the early nineteenth century.

An equally important factor on the demand side of the equation, and one neglected by Das Gupta, Yang and other authors, is the manner and means by which migrant labourers were recruited. It is clear that the caste and regional distribution of the Calcutta and Bombay workforces was not straightforwardly the product of rural impoverishment and other such 'push' factors (although these could undoubtedly be important), nor an unusual desire for betterment, or a inherited proclivity for migration shown by particular communities, nor simply a product of prejudice. Rather it resulted, to a significant extent, from the particular recruitment strategies adopted by the employers.

Unfortunately the manner of recruitment itself has been inadequately dealt with so far by historians - a problem that applies not only to the understanding of migration to Calcutta, but also in the understanding of labour movements elsewhere in India, as well as in the migration of Indians overseas to destinations such as Mauritius.<sup>38</sup> The literature on this subject has instead tended to polarise, as already stated, into a moralistic debate between two camps who may crudely be labelled voluntarists and objectionists - the former offering statistical analyses of migrant data to affirm that labour recruits were not simply helpless victims of external forces, but were geographically mobile and voluntary participants in this trade; the latter seeking to illuminate the brutality of life in the new capitalist enclaves.<sup>39</sup>

In between, of course, are a variety of different positions: Ranajit Das Gupta, argues for example, that since the majority of migrants to Calcutta by the 1920's were low caste this

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<sup>38</sup> An exception may be seen in the detailed treatment given to this issue by Marina Carter in *Servants, Sirdars & Settlers*. That such evidence of employer driven recruitment exists for other destinations of long-distance migrants is incontrovertible. See for example the 'Petition of Natal Planters', reproduced in Y. S. Meer et al (eds.), *Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851-1917*, (Durban: Institute of Black Research, 1980), p. 115.

<sup>39</sup> Amongst the latter may be included authors such as Breman and Tinker (*op. cit.*), whilst amongst the former are to be found authors such as Brij V. Lal who, writing about migrants recruited in Calcutta for work on the plantations in Fiji, has pointed to the great variety of castes employed, and has concluded from this that overseas migration operated as a relatively 'free' market.

can be taken as evidence that the upper caste people were less inclined to leave their villages in search of work, whilst those who did so were only those who were the most rootless, landless and suffering from the lowest social status - a position not far from the Gandhian view of the city as the repository of all that is most polluting, degrading and non-Hindu.

Common to all these authors however is a tendency to ignore the way in which migration was structured by demand, and the way in which the employers went to great lengths to recruit particular castes for particular tasks, with the overall purpose of establishing a cheap, predominantly male, labour force. Some employers, of course, such as the planters in Assam, preferred to employ family units, and were particularly keen to recruit women,<sup>40</sup> but what is important is that as many migrants were turned away as were actually recruited,<sup>41</sup> indicating that a determining role was played not simply by rural conditions, but by the recruiters of migrant labour.

### **Problems of interpretation**

The polarisation of the literature on migration, and the heavy reliance on quantitative techniques and government sources, has caused particular problems for historians seeking to analyse recruitment practices. The objectionists, neo-slavists and many neo-Marxists, in particular, have tended to interpret all migrations as due to impoverishment and characterised by coercion, corruption or abuse, and this has led them to ignore whole areas that do not accord with their perspective - such as the forms of recruitment that are not directly controlled by either the governments, the employers or their agents, or the occasional evidence of low death rates and good working conditions.

It may be suggested that one reason for this polarisation in the literature is that the colonial sources on which many accounts are based are largely juridical - the product of enquiries or commissions designed to make a case either for or against legislative intervention. Such sources always present evidence of extremes, but never the subtle or nuanced aspects of the case. Many subjects that do not attract the interest of legislators were left out of account altogether.

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<sup>40</sup> Dagmar Engels and Mohapatra & Behal, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> See for example the evidence of Mr. J. Marcus, a Free Labour Contractor, based at Purulia, who was recruiting labourers for Assam from the Central Provinces. He averred that on one occasion his arkatis, or recruiters, brought him 18 men from Hoshangabad, 16 of which he rejected, at some considerable expense, as he had then to pay their rail fares home. Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896, p. lviii.

Quite important social issues, were of course sometimes touched upon by legislators and an abundance of evidence therefore exists on such issues as the quality of family life, and the working conditions of women and children amongst the labour force. But it is important that historians remind themselves that the motivation behind such enquiries as the Dufferin Report of 1888 or the Royal Commission on Labour in India of 1931 was not simply patriarchal but also economic. Such legislation that was enacted, as a consequence, was therefore far from being moral or humanitarian. Nearly always, government intervention was aimed at striking a balance between the competing demands of British, Indian, and overseas capitalists. Far from being a benevolent neutrality, therefore - as some have suggested - the purpose of the government was to equalise the competition for labour between rival sources of demand.

These capitalists were assured of their markets within the imperial system, and were therefore convinced that the best way to raise the profits of production was not through technical advances, but by establishing an abundant source of labour.<sup>42</sup> The need for this, and some sort of regulations to ensure an inequality between the bargaining positions of employers and labourers is well illustrated by the case of Natal, where the largely unregulated i.e. 'free' state of the labour market in the years between the abolition of Black slavery and the introduction of Indian indentured labour put the planters to considerable inconvenience. Since the recruitment of indentured labour from India was not permitted, and the importation of labour from China had foundered for one reason or another, Natal planters were forced to recruit their workforce in Port Louis, Mauritius, from amongst those recently arrived in the island, a system described by an offended planter at the time:

This system continued till about 1850. I will not attempt or could if I would, paint the scenes presented at this depot; - it was not the labourer looking for a master, but planters (goaded on by impending loss of all their late costly plantations) might be seen bidding against each other for the favour of these (but a few months past) almost starving Indians. Some, arm in arm with a dirty Sirdar or more impudent and brazen Coolie, who truly or falsely pretended to have influence over twenty or thirty others. Scarcely a ship arrived but presents of all sorts, bags full of rupees, and gold watches too, were freely given to some of these fellows (as bid for their good will) who would probably immediately go and get the same from another party and then jilt them both. Year after year were humiliations submitted to in the vain hope of staving off the again threatening ruin, and at any rate meeting engagements as well as possible. Memorials, petitions were all unavailing, - the general ruin of 1847 was slow in bringing about a change. But this crisis did more than

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<sup>42</sup> This point is made quite convincingly in the case of Mauritius by M.D. Carter in Servants, Sirdars and Settlers.

ruin colonists; with them fell large London firms - Barclays', Gower's, Reid, Irwins, &c. - and, fortunately for the colony, home interests being affected, relief came at last, but very slowly.<sup>43</sup>

The means to curb this was in the first instance to tighten the Masters and Servants Ordinances, to prevent labourers, both native Natal workers and imported labour from Mauritius, from changing their employer at will until after service of at least three years (formerly the requirement had been for only twelve months of service). But there was still a desire to introduce a ready supply of labour direct from India, in as considerable a quantity as feasible, in order to depress wages and the initial costs of recruitment. Unfortunately, so draconian were the new Master & Servants ordinances introduced by the Natal government that the India Office refused to sanction migration of indentured labourers under these terms. Suitably modified however, so that workers could change their employers before the lapse of three years upon payment of a penalty, the way was finally opened for the commencement of formal indentured labour migration in 1860.<sup>44</sup>

Such changes did not satisfy the planters however, since they desired not merely a regular supply but a surplus of labour. The requests for new recruits thus never ceased. The supply of migrant labour might well fluctuate, but in all the plantations, both within India and overseas, the call constantly went out of their being a labour 'shortage', regardless of the actual numbers recruited, and recruiters were sent out ever further and wider in order to secure the more than abundant supply required in order to depress wages and minimise labour costs.

To achieve this labour surplus, and to encourage migration there was frequently a degree of deception involved. However the disinformation disseminated by employers was rarely general (as authors like Tinker would have us believe), but usually very specific - relating, for example, to the likely wage rates that would be paid to workers who came to work in their factories. In fact as migrants became more knowledgeable by the end of the nineteenth century, considerable subtlety was essential.

The colonial sources themselves, however, tend to obscure such subtleties because the accounts are often being written by competitors - for example the agents of mill owners or tea, indigo or sugar planters - who wished to blacken the reputations of their rivals, and the seasonal character of the workforce within India intensified this competition and the resulting controversy amongst employers, leading to numerous accusations of unfair

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<sup>43</sup> Letter of J.R. Saunders to the Natal Mercury, 25-4-1855, in Documents of indentured Labour: Natal 1851-1917, p. 25-6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 33 and pp. 50-51.

competition, as well as a particularly venomous distrust of trade unions. A great many reports of bad labour conditions or coerced migration were therefore simply invented, as were the equal number of reports of conditions in certain factories, mills or plantations which painted them as being little short of perfection.

The same applies to the depiction of family life seen in government reports, which are usually filled with accounts of depravity and prostitution. This factor is therefore also commonly featured in histories of Labour in Calcutta.<sup>45</sup> It is no coincidence, for example, that H.E.A. Cotton's sweeping denunciation of the city's condition in *Calcutta, Old and New* (1907) preceded by only a few years the setting up of the Calcutta Improvement Trust (in 1911), a year that also coincided with the first major census of prostitution in the city - calculated to be the principle occupation of 4.4% of the female population in the Census of 1911: a figure still alleged nonetheless to be an underestimate (the Census-takers insisting that many prostitutes were probably 'shamed' into declaring their occupation as that of 'maidservant').

An equal number of government reports would, however, often describe family life as being little short of ideal - a common feature of reports on the coal industry, for example, where competition for labour was less acute and there was seen, at the time, little need or legislative intervention in this area. Both extremes, as they feature in the government records, are equally incredible. In consequence, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out in his book *Re-thinking Working Class History*, Government sources are often far more significant for what they do not tell us than for the information they actually reveal. In regard to recruitment this is particularly so, since employers relied very heavily (since it reduced costs) on *sardars* to discipline and control their workforce, as well as to recruit the workers, and this is one reason why very little is said about recruitment in most reports - this being a matter only indirectly under their control and therefore of little concern to the employers themselves, no matter how vital it might be to the workers in the factories.

An important way round this problem lies in the use of depositions (in law courts and elsewhere), diaries and private letters. These sources are also important in that they reveal the fashion in which the experience of migration changed the perceptions of migrants, the manners in which they preserved their connections with their natal villages, how the knowledge of employment opportunities was disseminated, and how the subsequent migrations which followed upon the initial recruitment were encouraged.

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<sup>45</sup> E.g., chap. 5 of Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, Internal Migration in India.

## **The role of sardars and returnee recruiters**

By looking more critically at official sources, and by using the writings of the migrants themselves wherever possible, it becomes apparent that at least in the earliest stages in the origin of a migration stream, and often for a considerable time thereafter, a key role as labour recruiters was played by sardars: also known as 'jobbers', 'foremen' or gang-leaders. These were not simply agents, although such locally based agents - the despised *arkatis* or *duffadars* - did exist, but were often former migrants, who having ventured further afield returned to take others back with them. The role was not simply one of deception and inveiglement, it was also a means of communication facilitating the movement of workers to destinations further afield than to which they might otherwise have ventured. As such they were a part of a larger process, but nonetheless played an important role. The simplest manner in which it worked is described in the evidence of Mr. Driver, a Selecting Agent of the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association, based at Purulia in Chota Nagpur:

A large number go from Ranchi and Calcutta to work on roads and drains entirely of their own accord...Chapra people go even north to Lakhimpur of their own accord. They go for the cold weather, and mostly return; but even then the Manager will keep on one or two through the rains on light work, and send them down at the beginning of the next cold weather to get more labourers. some free emigrants to Cachar are put on agreement at Silchar, but others remain free always. Gangs of free migrants are generally led by a man who knows the way. I think he makes something out of it. Spontaneous and unassisted migration emigration is limited... to the passage of people from Behar and some North-Western Provinces districts to Eastern Bengal for purposes of late harvest, to persons from Chapra to Assam for the cold weather...to Uraons from Ranchi and others who go to the Duars under their own leaders in search of work, to the same class of people who go to Calcutta to work on roads, drains, botanical and vegetable gardens, and those who go generally to the construction of new railways or other works like the docks. Others go to the Tributary States, where they clear the jungle and are promised land rent-free for five years.<sup>46</sup>

As a consequence, this planters' agent was of the view that no single agency could possibly entirely control recruitment of migrants to Assam, although this was indeed what was subsequently attempted, trampling underfoot many of these 'free' migrations' in the process.

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<sup>46</sup> Labour Enquiry Commission 1896, p. lvi

Villagers themselves in the Santhal Parganas expressed their satisfaction with the above-mentioned forms of labour migration, but, with one exception, varying degrees of suspicion of the ways in which villagers were recruited to work further afield.<sup>47</sup> Amongst the long district migrants, those who had been recruited by returnee migrants were satisfied, whilst all those who had been recruited by agents (arkatis) at the various labour depots, commonly complained of being '*phuslaoed*' (lured or deceived) - perhaps precisely because the recruiters were not known to them.<sup>48</sup>

Deception of one sort or another, including cases of abduction, commonly feature in official reports and proceedings, precisely because of concerns that such practices should be suppressed for fear they might deter future migrants. Many though actively chose to migrate, albeit for want of alternatives, and relied upon friends and companions for information on where to go and of the opportunities to be had. If they were lucky their guide would be a sardar or returnee recruiter rather than a despised *arkati* or *duffadar*. The deposition of Mootosawamy, an inhabitant of Nathum, a village in the district of Trichinopoly, reveals the pressures that commonly bore upon small peasant cultivators and the manner in which they arrived at their final destinations:

I was cultivating the land of my maternal uncle Camatchee Nadanam in the village of Nathum for several years; but the produce after payment of the kist money to the Circar, proved insufficient for the support and maintenance of my family and children - consequently I left my village about five years ago with the intention of earning my livelihood at Madras - on my way I heard that labourers for the Mauritius were obtaining service at Pondicherry through the means of one Caroopayee - on my applying to her, she took me and 29 other men to a French Gentleman who carried us to the Police Office, where our names were registered and we then signed a Document expressing our desire to proceed to the Isle of France to serve under Mr. Cochin there for five years, on salary of 5 Rupees each per month as well as Batta and Clothes - we received each of us three months wages in advance and were embarked with 170 others in a vessel bound to the Mauritius, where we arrived after a voyage of 33 days - on landing Mr. Cochin got our names registered at the Police Office and employed us to work in a Sugar Cane Garden.<sup>49</sup>

Another typical example emphasising the role of the sardar is given by Bhiwa Ramji Nare, a retired weaving mater from the Murarji Mills in Bombay, who reported in 1907 that the uneducated man from Ratnagiri had no option but to work in the cotton mills of Bombay, the usual rule being for them to pay Rs. 5 to the jobbers for the giving of

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xlvii

<sup>49</sup> M. D. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*, Chapter Two.

employment in both the weaving and spinning department. His comments were reported as follows: 'It took a new hand about two weeks before he could earn money, and his first month would bring him in about Rs. 8. As a rule the new hands came from their country to relations in Bombay, who kept and helped them to tide over the first few weeks. They did not fall into debt on account of this...' <sup>50</sup>

The employers preferred up-country migrants, including adivasi and small peasant cultivators such as Mootoswami, both because they often fitted a racist stereotype of their notion of the ideal worker, and because they had to be brought in to swamp local labour if the conditions of labour surplus were to be maintained and the price of labour was to be kept down. 'Upcountry' therefore was not merely a racist categorisation of labour, but an economic definition too, signifying for the employer the recruitment of a cheaper workforce. This particular recruitment policy of the employers therefore helps, in general, to account for the growing numbers of up-country migrants moving into Bombay and into Calcutta from the 1890's onwards. It is the dominance of the sardar over recruitment for the factories, however, which explains the tendency for certain factories to favour particular castes from particular localities - since it was usually the sardar's own relatives, kinsmen and friends (usually male) who constituted the workforce.<sup>51</sup>

Thus Ganu Sonu, a 25 year mill jobber in the Standard Mills, Bombay (acting as the spokesman for fifty mill hands), stated: 'Very few of the Bombay mill operatives are permanently settled down in Bombay: almost all of us have our homes in Ratnagiri district and in the Konkan, and we go down there once every year or two for a short visit. When a man is too old to work he does not return to Bombay, but passes his old age at home, being helped by remittances from Bombay by working members of his family. Our children are as a rule all born in Ratnagiri, not in Bombay'. <sup>52</sup>

Whilst most objected to working long hours, some were reported to even prefer the opportunity to do so, precisely so that they could take more time off to spend at home with their relatives in Ratnagiri: the jobbers keeping employment open for them in their absence.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> IFLC, vol. II, pp. 116-7.

<sup>51</sup> RCLI, vol. V, part 1, pp. 11 & 262

<sup>52</sup> IFLC, vol. II p. 156. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as 'segmentation' of the workforce, a phrase I prefer to avoid because of its association with marginalist economic analysis and its implied assumption of the existence of an alternative 'unsegmented' or 'free' labour market.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 278

Chakrabarty in his study of Calcutta jute mills, deals with this phenomenon only cursorily - his concern being mostly with discipline and control within the workplace itself. The accounts of factory discipline, as Chakrabarty points out, were usually unfavourable, since 'what appeared to the State as corruption, abuse or breaking the rules was precisely the form in which sardars manifested their authority and control over the workforce - *an authority incompatible with bourgeois notions of legality, factory codes and service rules*'.<sup>54</sup>

The same also applied to the methods used to recruit this workforce, but Chakrabarty suggests that it was a mere 'accident of history' that the jute industry's search for an ample supply of labour took place at the same period as that which saw enormous increases in the emigration of labour from Bihar, U.P., Orissa and the Central Provinces into Bengal.<sup>55</sup>

This is far from being the case however. Whilst the 'push' factors in these labour movements should never be ignored, a crucial factor in the mobilisation of this labour force in the first place lay in the active policies adopted by the employers, and in their use of sardars and returning migrants as a means of adding to the labour force.

It is in this area also that we often see migrants, for the first time, acquiring a controlling voice in the process of migration. This phenomenon is especially well documented in the sources relating to the indentured migration of Indians overseas - the ultimate destination of many who made their way from village to village, from village to town and thence to the port cities of Calcutta and Bombay.

### **The creation of new identities**

One reason so many sardars or gang-leaders were willing to commit themselves to the interests of their employers and become active recruiters of labour within India for service in industry or on plantations overseas was because for them the experience of migration had been largely positive, and a genuine path to prosperity. This was not simply because they were paid for those they were able to recruit, but because within the factory, mine or overseas plantations as 'old hands' they themselves enjoyed considerable influence and significantly higher rates of pay. The experience might not be the same for all, but when they recruited others to join them they could speak genuinely of the advantages to be gained from migrant labour. It is for this reason too that they often

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<sup>54</sup> D. Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940, (New Delhi: O.U.P.1989), p.112. My italics.

<sup>55</sup> Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working Class History, p. 102.

sought to recruit friends and relatives from their natal villages, rather than complete strangers (the usual targets of *arkatis* and *duffadars*). As leaders of such bodies of workers they brought benefit to their village and to the workplace, and advanced their status and influence in both. Employers all too often were happy to encourage this and leave the business of recruitment to the sardars and other returnee migrants: a relationship that was mutually beneficial, not least of all because it would enable Indians with initiative to reunite their divided families, and to spread what benefits were to be had from labour migration. These practices of the sardars and other returnees migrants rarely figure in employers records but their role was nonetheless important, not merely as organisers of labour, but as channels of information. This role was played most effectively by those who had succeeded in turning the system to their advantage, by those who had managed to save, to buy lands, to repatriate incomes, and to support their kith and kin, at home and abroad. In other words, by those who were able to make the world of the migrant labourer in some way their own.

Some of the most prodigious collections of depositions, petitions and letters of Indian migrants, which tell of their experiences, are to be found in the records of the Protectors of Indentured Indian Migrants, set up at insistence of the Government of India and established at the ports of the various colonies to which they were despatched in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana etc. The Protectors amongst other things sorted and delivered the mail of migrants, recorded minute details of the migrants upon arrival, and noted every aspect of the disputes and court cases in which they became involved. They also kept copies of migrants' letters home when required for official purposes, and preserved letters received from the relatives of migrants in India, which had gone undelivered for one reason or another.<sup>56</sup>

Often correspondence between families in India and their relatives overseas occurred not simply out of a desire for news, but as the letters of women in particular show, in order to request financial support. Amongst other things these letters reveal that, for their part, the overseas Indians evinced a great sense of responsibility for the maintenance of their families back home. Despite the distance and the often lengthy periods of separation, the correspondence sent back by Indians working overseas shows the persistence of strong ties with, and a continuing involvement in the family problems and celebrations.

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<sup>56</sup> These sources, drawn mostly from the Mauritian archives, are the focus of the book Voices from Indenture: experiences of Indian migrants in the British empire, by M.D. Carter, published in 1996 by Leicester University Press in the series 'New Historical Perspectives on Migration' (editors C. Bates & M.D. Carter). Several of the letters cited here were collected by Dr. Carter from the Port Louis archive in Mauritius and I gratefully acknowledge her permission to reproduce them.

Migrants also frequently wrote of their plans to return home at the expiration of their contracts, and occasionally wrote to urge others to come out and join them.

Indentured labourers who managed to save some money, particularly the elite sardars, often found a way of providing for their relatives overseas by buying them out of their indenture contracts so that they might become 'free migrants' again. They were also often able to send money to help support their families at home, transactions which inevitably generated a voluminous correspondence. These letters were often written in 'Bhojpuri', a dialect of Hindi common in the Chota Nagpur region, but sometimes also in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, or English.

A typical example of such correspondence were the letters passed between Sheoraj Tewary of Sultanpur and his brother Ganesh in Mauritius, copies of which were passed onto the Immigration Department and filed there when a registered letter sent by Ganesh failed to enclose the bank draft mentioned therein (the letters being preserved because of the need for official investigation). This letter from Ganesh offers tantalising insights into the relationship which family members were able to maintain despite their separation, as well as illustrating the complex network of contacts and the various channels of communication which the migrants were able to establish both with each other and with their kith and kin at home.

After the usual ceremonious expressions, and wishing blessings and good health to persons named in the original, the writer represents:

I have received the letter you sent, and I am much pleased to learn your welfare, but you stated nothing in that letter about the money I sent you before along with my own, this gave me much pains in my heart. The money was sent you by Ramsurup Missa relative of the people of Sajrampur, which you stated you did not receive. You better make a search for the house of Ajudhia Singla of Galal in Kodaimisser Kapurva near Sagrampur and take Rs 20 from Ramsurup positively. My uncle Balgobind you had written me before that you were in hard circumstances. At the very sight of your letter I sent you money accordingly and told you not to expend the money uselessly and to purchase cows, bullocks and provisions if possible. I also told you to send you another Hundi that you may pay off the debt if you have any. I hope you will send me a letter quickly. I will send you as much money as you require but you better not expend it uselessly. You should give me information about the money you require through Juggu. I have learnt what you wrote about the marriage of your daughter. Kalka Misser is alive, you should settle according to his advice. Try if you can to make arrangements for the marriage of Sheeraj and let me know the result through a letter. I will go after two months. I have learnt the number (of the village) is going to be made in the name of Bishnath. It is

advisable to go. I will see you all. my experience is not imperfect. I will pay all expenses. Look to the value of the case. I have despatched a Hundi of Rs 200 to Sultanpur. The Hundi was enclosed in a letter. Go to Chandan and ask from Ramnath Misser where Ramsarup resided. He will tell you. Bring the money by Ganesh. I have paid off what I owed to Kalka Misser. Kali Beehin Zemindari of Sukhana did not pay me Rs 2 she owed me. Do not fear I will take that sum from her anyway how. I have neither father nor mother. I got no further information. I will send you money as soon as I will receive a letter from you. I have purchased land. People wish to purchase the same from me, but I will not sell it. If you tell me, I will sell that land for travelling expenses. Try to get the number of the village for Sheoraj. Ram Sochit is not here.

Ganesh Tiwari offers prayers for Babu Singbali Singla and Amres Singh. You should send me a correct account of what you will have to pay in future and I will send you the amount accordingly. You my uncle Balgobind, you are a worthy man and you should be a well-wisher of the whole family. Through your bounty I have heard Serimal Bhagwat for 7 days. Do not lose the case for money. Be contented. Do not let the case be spoilt. Get the letter written by a good writer. Write in your letter the sum of money you receive from me.<sup>57</sup>

Ganesh's main concern is clearly with the issues confronting his family back home. He offers advice about an arranged marriage and cautions his uncle to spend the money he has sent wisely. Throughout there is a sense of his feeling of responsibility for and closeness to his family in India. He is concerned about debts, worried that the money he has sent is not being received. He looks forward to his prospective return. Ganesh has evidently used the services of returnees to forward money on occasions, and he instructs his relatives to apply to neighbouring villages for the same. He also writes of his frustration at not hearing from them more regularly and asks them to have their letters written by a good writer. Although Ganesh himself wrote well, many Indian families could not read or write and were therefore dependent on others to interpret their correspondence. It was common too for migrants to transmit money or news via other returnees or relatives, and such means generally constituted effective ways of reaching family members outside the more cumbersome official channels

Not all relatives of course waited anxiously for news of their migrant family members. In some cases the journey overseas had been undertaken as an act of defiance or escape, and it was only in death that the fate of such individuals was communicated to their families in India. Parboteea had allegedly eloped with one Biku Rai to Mauritius after the death of her husband, taking a nephew, Bhirgunath Rai, with them. However, on hearing of her

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<sup>57</sup> Carter, *Ibid.* PA 42 Letter from Ganesh Tewary, n.d.

death, her brothers, Ootun and Bhorosa Rai, laid claim to her estate. The Calcutta Police report noted caustically: 'the woman having left her home with Biku Rai lost her caste ... (the family) dismembered all connection with her but hearing that she has left some estate have now appeared as heirs'.<sup>58</sup>

When Daroobibi sought to claim her husband's estate she did so with a very stylish petition and no less than eight signatories, including local dignitaries and a priest.<sup>59</sup> Her petition reveals that she was one of many families who received regular remittances from relatives serving in Mauritius. Balloo Mia, her deceased husband, had served as a police officer in the island for some eight or nine years, and the income he remitted back to India had maintained not only his wife but three sons in Ratnagiri. As with others, more than one member of the family was working in Mauritius: she also had a brother-in-law in government employment on the island.

Those most likely to be able to acquire capital on a significant scale were of course the sardars, who received higher rates of pay for their supervisory functions and were sometimes also given responsibility for the pay of the men under their charge. There are thus numerous examples of sardars acting as moneylenders on estates, opening shops and even gambling dens, and of sardars playing key roles in land and property acquisitions in the various colonies. Thus when visiting the Albion estate in the Black River district of Mauritius in 1872, the Inspector of Immigrants reported being directed by an Indian sardar to

...his very comfortable quarters, to which he had returned from India with two wives, and where he had cattle, fowls, and other comforts, and a donkey and cart.<sup>60</sup>

Having acquired capital in the work as sardars, Indians went on to set up as independent proprietors, job contractors and shop owners. As they moved into the colonial elite, they became in their turn employers, and occasionally exploiters, of Indian labour. The Indian contractor Doolub is a good example. Calleemootoo, who had migrated from Tranquebar as a boy in 1859, was employed by Doolub for five years, and then went to work for Gungah, an Indian jeweller. Being then arrested as a deserter from Doolub's employ, he was forced to enter a new three year engagement with Doolub in order to avoid

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<sup>58</sup> Carter, *Ibid.* PA 54 Nolan, Magistrate, Shahabad to Protector, Calcutta 16 June 1883; Emigration Agent, Calcutta to Protector of Immigrants, Mauritius 30 June 1883.

<sup>59</sup> PA 206 Daroobibi to Inspector General of Police, Panalja 11 August 1899. See Carter, *Ibid.*, pp. 194-5.

<sup>60</sup> Carter, *Ibid.*, *Parliamentary Papers* Cmnd. 1115 -1 Appendix B to Royal Commissioners' Report no 38 Report of a Visit to Albion estate, Black River, 16 Sept. 1872.

imprisonment and separation from his pregnant wife. The status and position of Doolub seemed thus to have been comparable to that of local European employers, and at his shop and residence he often played host to the British magistrate of the district, and was thus hand in glove with the local judiciary.<sup>61</sup>

From Natal we have one of many examples of upward mobility, in the case of Telucksing, a former indentured labourer, who ultimately became a shopkeeper in Durban:

I have been in Natal between twenty-four and twenty-five years. I came to the Colony indentured. I first worked for Mr. Walford, and two months after I was transferred to Mr. Palmer with all the other coolies. I remained ten years working, and then became a storekeeper, working on my own account in West Street, Durban. I sell rice, dholl, ghee, and different kinds of clothing, in fact everything that is required for the Indian trade. I am trading on my own account and not as an agent. I generally buy goods here, but I sometimes get goods from India. I generally deal with the white merchants here for the articles which I resell in my shop. During the last two years I have been dealing with white merchants only; I think I get my goods cheaper from them; they include rice, which I buy from Messieurs Arbuckle, Dunn and Rennie. I do not consider that the white merchant is able to compete with the Indian, because the expenses of the white merchant are far in excess of those of the Indians. I manage my business with the assistance of a relative and one kaffir. White planters purchase coolie rations from me, especially fish. All those Indians who are respectable and look after their own interests, and do not eat and drink to excess, or incur large household expenses, are able to save money.

All the Indians here are comfortably placed, and it chiefly depends upon their own behaviour whether they are happy or not....If an Indian conducts himself properly and works, he is better off here than in his own country. At the termination of his period of indenture, the ambition of the Indian is to become a landed proprietor, and, after amassing a considerable amount of money, to go back to his own country.<sup>62</sup>

Migrants who had completed their terms of service overseas, often returned to India, and then re-emigrated to the colonies, for a number of reasons. Some of course were outcaste from their natal villages, but many consciously endeavoured to go back to the colony where they had originally settled in order to return to employers and new families, seeing the colony of their adoption as their real home. Many returned for a second or third time, frequently bringing others with them.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Report of Enquiry into the case of Calleemootoo, Jenner to Protector, 25 Aug. 1872.

<sup>62</sup> Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851-1917, pp. 388-389: Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-7

One such habitual emigrant was Rajoo Narayen, who made several journeys between India and Mauritius as a recruiter. Ennabie, his wife, was nonetheless concerned during his long absences. On one occasion she wrote to the Protector of Immigrants at Mauritius asking him to deliver a letter to her husband:

Respected Sir,

In taking the liberty of addressing you, I respectfully beg to solicit the favour of your kindly causing the accompanying letter, to be delivered to my husband, Rajoo Narayan, who must have arrived in Mauritius, some weeks ago, having left Bombay upwards of 2 months as a Cooly passenger, per ship 'Shah Jahan'; and kindly impressing upon him the necessity of writing to me without delay, as I am very anxious to hear both of his welfare, and whereabouts;

Hoping to be excused for the above presumption

I am, Respected Sir  
your most obedient servant

Ennabie, wife of Rajoo Narayen

N.B. Please to address & oblige-  
No.17 Panjarapoor  
2nd Lane - Bombay <sup>63</sup>

Individuals like Rajoo Narayen were part of a growing band of migrants who made several journeys between India and the plantation colonies. Some men who went were not simply indentured to one colony but to several. Thus there are cases documented of a single individual visiting two or three countries amongst Mauritius, Reunion, Trinidad and Fiji. These men were in some instances the victims of labour importers for the British sugar colonies who targeted the marginalised in regions of India that were economically distressed. Others seemed to be habitual migrants who were very aware of the different economic opportunities on offer in the various colonies. George Grierson interviewed one such man in the 1880s who was on his way to Trinidad from India. He had previously worked in Jamaica, where at one time he said that he had been able to earn as much as three rupees per day. He was now less happy with working conditions there, the consequence he said of there being too many coolies and too much cultivation and he was therefore intending to try out Trinidad instead. <sup>64</sup> Grierson also met a woman called Sukhiya who had returned to set up a restaurant in India after a twelve year stay in

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<sup>63</sup> Carter, *ibid.*, PA 22 Ennabie to Protector 9 Jan. 1875.

<sup>64</sup> Carter, *ibid.*, Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency, 1883, Diary p. 17.

Mauritius. She also had a contract from the government of Demerara (later known as British Guyana) to feed migrants awaiting transfer from a sub-depot in India en route to the colony, and was said to be contemptuous of Indians who were unwilling or afraid to migrate, calling them cowards.<sup>65</sup>

Some migrants went directly from Mauritius to new destinations rather than returning to India. These offshoots from the larger diaspora tended to follow the opening up of new migration streams elsewhere. In 1883 a total of 639 Indians withdrew their savings from the bank prior to leaving the island of Mauritius. The majority were taking their capital back to India, but two of this number proceeded to Natal, two left for Reunion and two went to China.<sup>66</sup> Such individuals are testimony to the growing internationalisation of Indians in the nineteenth century and the growth of trans-national, or multinational identifications amongst Indian migrants. No longer Indian villagers, whilst remaining in touch with their roots, they were becoming part of a newer and wider world.

A further testimony to this internationalisation comes from George Mutukistna, a once indentured Indian in Natal, who originally came from a lowly caste of potters in south India:

I am employee on the Railway. I have been four-and-a-half years in the Colony. I came out as an indentured Indian. My present employment is that of clerk in Mr. Manisty's office. I speak Tamil, Hindustani, Telegu, and English, also French: I read and write in Tamil, English and French. I knew, when I came to the Colony, that I should be bound to hoe fields if required, but I came, finding India too crowded: I could not find employment there. I did not come out in consequence of getting into any trouble in India; far from it. Although I accepted a very low position here, I thought that, in the long run, I should be able to better my position.

I am of the Moodiyar caste. I am a Madrassee. My employment, just before I left India, was as interpreter on board an Indian immigrant ship sailing between Pondicherry and Bourbon: I was engaged in that occupation for two years and three months. I am a married man. I married since I came to Natal, a person of my own caste, who came with me from India. I am bound to her as husband as long as she lives. I do not think that I can legally take a second wife in Natal, but in India I could do so...

I think that caste feeling has disappeared in Natal: this disappearance commences immediately the Indians get on board ship. The little feeling

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, *ibid.*, CO Administration Report 1883 Report of the Government Savings Bank, Annexure 4.

of caste, which exists in Natal, is kept up by the Mauritius Indian merchants who think themselves better because they are rich and who think that, by observing caste distinctions, they can set themselves apart from the Natal Indian people. Men can regain their caste, on returning to India, by going through certain ceremonies, but women cannot regain their caste under any circumstances and are thrown off by their husbands and resort to prostitution for a living: there are of course exceptions....

I think that the Indian population here is very well cared for, as compared with Bourbon, Mauritius, and to a certain extent, with their own homes in India...I consider that the rations, as per scale here for coolies, are sufficient. I speak of my own experience on the Railways...<sup>67</sup>

This account suggests how cosmopolitan Indian workers were becoming towards the end of the colonial period (some would say always had been), and the way in which Indians abroad could commonly raise their status, economically and socially, and be 're-borne' into a world free of caste, if not all forms of discrimination

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of long-distance labour migration, within India and overseas cannot be simplistically described as a voluntary process. There never was and never has been anything like a 'free' market in labour functioning in India. And rarely ever, for that matter, were labourers 'freed' in the simple Marxist sense, of being, at one instance forced off the land and compelled to sell their labour. More often a process of gradual immiseration was at work, with migrant labour being one of a variety of options open to peasants and tribals in which they might attempt to resist the pressures which they were under. As such, they undoubtedly exercised a choice, but that choice was exercised in an environment heavily structured by other features of the culture, society and, above all, economy in which they lived. To speak of this as 'free' choice therefore makes no sense at all. At no stage were they entirely able to escape exploitation, and often that which they subsequently endured was far more systematic than any which had governed their previous existence. If at the end of the day these labourers prospered it was frequently despite rather than because of the opportunities open to them. Nonetheless many migrants were able to build for themselves a space within the interstices of the colonial labour market, taking the initiative, saving money to support their relatives, resisting or otherwise adapting to their circumstances. Many became jobbers, gang-leaders and recruiters themselves. The role of returnees as recruiters was sometimes deliberately engineered by plantation owners and other employers, although featuring little in official

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<sup>67</sup> Documents of Indentured Labour, Natal 1851-1917, pp. 392-393: Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-7.

records. Equally often however the process was initiated by the migrants, seeking to build for their relatives a friends a better life, in order to reunite divided families, or in other ways to prosper. As such, it is a tremendous testimony to the individual genius of migrants, to the new world which they built for themselves, and to the enduring links that they were able to maintain, often over vast distances, with their culture, kith and kin at 'home'. In the process new identities were constructed to enable them to bridge this gap between the old and the new and to somehow maintain their links with both.

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