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### **Courts, Ship-rolls and letters: reflections on the Indian labour Diaspora**

**Citation for published version:**

Bates, C 2005, 'Courts, Ship-rolls and letters: reflections on the Indian labour Diaspora'. in T Aways (ed.), *Creating an Archive Today*. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 21st Century COE Programme, Centre for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies, pp. 131-158.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Author final version (often known as postprint)

**Published In:**

Creating an Archive Today

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# **Courts, ship-rolls and letters: reflections of the Indian labour diaspora**

From Gesick, Sugahara, Bates et al, *Creating an archive today: decisions, uses, documentation*. Centre for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2003

## **Crispin Bates**

The social, cultural and economic networks of Indian merchants across the Indian Ocean region have been widely investigated,<sup>1</sup> however those that were created by and for labour migration streams have been comparatively neglected. This is despite the fact that internally and externally India has seen some of the largest labour migrations in the modern world, the annual emigration of Indians overseas fluctuating between 240,000 to 660,000 between 1870 and 1930, and totalling some 2,483,000 between 1911 and 1915 alone. This paper highlights what are termed 'subaltern networks' in the Indian labour diaspora, with particular reference to the Indian Ocean region, and argues that an analysis of these phenomena is crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of overseas labour flows. Secondly, it seeks to highlight the integration of the worlds of labourers (aka 'coolies'), servants, sepoy, convicts and others, arguing that rather than occupying discrete categories rooted in South Asia, they may be viewed as a composite itinerant class that may be better understood from a global perspective. And thirdly, it argues that given that labour migrants and other subaltern groups such as *adivasis* or tribals in south Asia sometimes occupied adjacent social and economic class positions they can therefore often be investigated using similar archival source materials.

In conclusion, it is argued that whilst the subaltern networks functioned ostensibly as a vehicle for the subordination of labour, they were over time, and with varying degrees of success, appropriated by the subordinated, becoming both a means of socio-cultural reassertion and an economic strategy, linking together forest, field, factory and plantation. Peeling away the labels which defined and continue to essentialise the status of the histories of Indian workers in the Empire, evidence of how the coolie, convict or slave made his or her own world and the means they found of surviving within the interstices of the colonial system must wherever possible be examined from the perspectives of the participants themselves.

### **I. The Context**

Rural-rural and rural-urban migration within India is an ancient phenomenon which, along with nomadic and shifting systems of agriculture, has been in most parts integral to the functioning of the rural economy.<sup>2</sup> Rarely if ever were villages able to

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<sup>1</sup> C. Markovits (2000). In this context, India refers to the joint territories of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh that existed in the pre-independence era. It is also referred to as British India.

<sup>2</sup> The constant inter-relation of economic and social migration is thus a key feature in Sumit Guha's (1999) history of forest communities in western India.

meet all the requirements of production and reproduction. The payment of taxes tributes imposed a degree of circulation even in tribal areas. Axe heads, ploughshares and other implements had to be made and paid for with grain, axe heads themselves becoming a form of currency still in circulation in the northern zamindaris of Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh in central India as late as the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Chhattisgarh was also traversed by Bhanjara caravans bringing salt and cowries from the Orissa coast, which were exchanged for grain. Altogether by the end of the eighteenth century the total trade of the Chhattisgarh country, both north, south and west, was believed to employ up to 100,000 bullocks in a good season (indicative of a total trade of something like 100,000 maunds).<sup>4</sup> In many parts of India furthermore, particularly those less densely populated, seasonal labour migration was a common resort at times of harvest, as it continues to be up to the present day. Likewise, Indian migration to Indian Ocean states, East Africa, South Africa, and in particular to Mauritius and surrounding islands (the Mascarene group) is as old as European colonization of those regions. Together, they could be said to constitute the beginnings of a circulatory system on an oceanic (if not global) scale even before the nineteenth century, and well before the establishment of plantations in Assam, Sri Lanka and Malaysia and the establishment of the later colonial systems of free and indentured migration.

Along with large numbers of African slaves,<sup>5</sup> persons of Indian ethnic origin, including Indo-Portuguese concubines and servants, were among the very first settlers in the Mascarene islands, arriving in Reunion with the French in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequent subaltern migrants, labelled variously as slaves, convicts and coolies according to the labour regime in which they worked, were imported from India. One of the earliest 'coolie' migrants was Rengasamy Naicker, who went to Mauritius in the 1830s:

'I was formerly employed as a sepoy under the Danish Government of Tranquebar [in the Kaveri delta]. After the annexation of that settlement to the company territories, I obtained a Vesharipoogarship in the Tranquebar talook. As my younger brother was living at Singapore and as I was desirous of paying a visit to him, I resigned the Vesharipoogarship's post and went there. After a lapse of one year, I returned to my native land and was without employment. A native of Karrical of the Vellala caste as acquainted with me.... He said he was going to Mauritius and desired me to follow him. I consented to it, and went along with him...'<sup>6</sup>

Such migrants lived cheek by jowl on the islands with Indians who arrived as free, skilled labourers and traders. The involvement of Indians in almost every phase of Mascarene and South African development, to name but two examples, thus belies the subordinate role which is often accorded the non-British migrant in assessments of Empire-building.

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<sup>3</sup> V. Elwin (1942): 227.

<sup>4</sup> J.T. Blunt, 'Narrative of a Route from Chinargur to Yentragoodum ... 1795', in *Early European Travellers in the Nagpur Territories* (Nagpur, 1930):128-130. This calculation is based on the assumption that each bullock carried about 250lbs. but that only a third were loaded at any one time.

<sup>5</sup> See Helen Hintjens in Jayasuriya & Pankhurst (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Carter & Torabully (2002): 28.

The process of incorporation of these groups into their host societies has been inadequately explored. In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian Ocean colonies, Indian subaltern groups, such as slaves and later convicts and coolies all found means of circumventing and rising above the status with which they had been saddled. The 19<sup>th</sup> century indentured immigrants, in particular, used and extended networks of support and organization put in place by their compatriots in the overseas context. This paper argues that, as a result, Indians themselves increasingly took control of their migratory patterns in the Indian Ocean region, instituting kin and family regroupment, organising repatriation and terms of settlement onto and off the plantations. And many, once freed from indenture contracts would re-emigrate to other overseas destinations (e.g. South Africa) establishing new settlements entirely autonomously. Some would otherwise re-engage on indentured contracts and head for destinations as far away as the Caribbean.

Research into the subaltern networks of Indian contract labourers demonstrates that the indenture system did not operate simply or wholly as a European sponsored importation of a non-white work-force, but tapped into a wider circulatory system of labour. This requires us to challenge, the reified, fixed category which the coolie represents for so many orthodox histories of the Indian diaspora.

## II The Sources

The complexity of the ideological discourses which underpinned slave, convict and indentured labour have been underplayed in recent literature which too often appears to take sides in a discourse which is black on one side (the planters) and white on the other. Discourse analysis creates its own victims and baddies in precisely the same way as the now discredited pro-planter or pro-labourer treatises. The uncritical appraisal of the white anti-indenture activists by Kale (1998) is a case in point. Similarly Ghosh (1999) portrays the *arkatis* (labour recruiters) as evil seducers of innocent labour in a direct borrowing from reform pamphlets of the period. The politics of discourse criticism may therefore be sound, but not always its methods and techniques.

Many of the still current misconceptions about indenture can be traced back to the nationalist agitation of the early 20th century. Consider the tissue of distortions and stereotypes which are revealed in Gopal Krishna Gokhale's denunciation of the humble subaltern migrant: 'those who are recruited bind themselves, first to go to a distant and unknown land, the language, usage and customs of which they do not know, and where they have no friends or relatives. Secondly, they bind themselves to work there for any employer to whom they may be allotted, whom they do not know and who does not know them, and in whose choice they have no voice.'<sup>7</sup> Studies of indenture have failed to deconstruct the nationalist discourse as thoroughly as they have critiqued that of the 'colonialists'.

When it comes to the stigmatisation of the Indian coolie labourer, it can reasonably be questioned which was worse : the planters with their bland commercial transactions in coolie 'cargoes' or the supposed sympathisers of the overseas Indians plight, such as C.F. Andrews, who reviled the 'doe-eyed immorality' of the Indo-Fijian women or

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<sup>7</sup> V. Mishra, V.(ed), (1979): 27

Mahatma Gandhi, who claimed that 'if the badge of inferiority is always to be worn by them ... any material advantage they will gain by emigrating can... be of no consideration.'<sup>8</sup> One wonders, furthermore, what feelings were aroused among the ex-indentured populations in Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji and Surinam when the Indian National Congress propounded that their very existence testified to the 'international shame of the Indian'. And, reading the following account of Peria Gengadu, an Indian migrant who returned to recruit his fellow villagers, one could argue that in this case the so-called exploiter has himself become the victimized:

'I was really astonished to see my close relations and intimate friends holding aloof.... The public believed all that was stated in the pamphlets. Rumours were afloat that some sirdars were killed. All these put me in great fear. I could not eat. I had no sleep....In the meantime some 15 men who were negotiating with me privately to emigrate changed their minds and absconded at Ramapuram railway station. This made the situation worse. The villagers began to suspect me. The village magistrate put a guard on me. I was more or less a state prisoner. Seeing all these difficulties, I begged of my wife to go with me ... After a deliberate consideration she agreed. She also influenced 3 Indians'.<sup>9</sup>

Gengadu's story shows nonetheless that even in the midst of a propaganda drive, it was still possible for close relatives to be persuaded to migrate.

Munusamy Naidu further expressed the real dichotomy of the indenture experience – that migrants who were viewed as desperate victims, and their recruiters as exploitative scum, very often had a totally different image of themselves: 'In India, everybody – young and old – did spit on sirdars. Sirdars are treated like pariah dogs – not as gentlemen... I am not a young man to stand all abuses, to receive kicks and blows from the public. I belong to a respectable family.'<sup>10</sup> It is this self-image which the historian must refract and assess, rather than merely the splintered fragments of opposing discourses of pro and anti-migration lobbies.

The difficulty of this enterprise is compounded by the types of sources that have often been employed by historians. These are commonly less overtly political official accounts or enquiries which are concerned with the conditions or circumstances of migrants insofar as they related to the needs of legislation. This demand for legislation arose primarily, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, from the needs of employers. In the monopolistic conditions pertaining in many industrial and planting concerns in the 19th century, there was often little demand for legislation to regulate the conditions of Indian labour (on the model of the British Factory Acts of the 1820s) because of the abundance of labour supplied. This abundance arose, particularly in the north and east of India, from the expropriation of adivasis and low caste groups who are found in a majority among the workforce. In India therefore the administration gave full vent to its natural alliance with the predominantly European employers and completely ignored the conditions of labour. The motivation behind official accounts was initially

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<sup>8</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *The Indian Review*, September 1917, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [CWMG] Vol. 16: 1 September, 1917 - 23 April, 1918, P. 3

<sup>9</sup> Bhana, S. & Pachai, D., *A Documentary History Of Indian South Africans*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1984, p. 28

<sup>10</sup> Carter & Torabully (2002): 33.

the desire to demonstrate the lack of any need for legislative control of mining and industrial enterprises within India.

As competition increased however, particularly that between the Indian and European capitalists, a growing voice begins to be heard within colonial documents, making a case, also motivated by the needs of capitalists, for an alternative approach: the intervention of government and the controls required by industry in order to equalise competition. This voice was heard particularly in the 1920s and 1930s but also at other times when declining prices or competition for labour put pressure on profits. The case then needed to be made for legislation, and evidence was sought for a quite contrary interpretation: that all things were bad and there was a need for dramatic reform. By simply reproducing colonialist accounts either for or against systems of production, historians have all too easily fallen into the trap of becoming themselves crude advocates of one or other position, failing to notice that these accounts were produced for a purpose - usually that of justifying or rejecting a policy of legislative intervention by the colonialists themselves.

From this perspective one can argue that by critically examining them much more can be made of colonial Government of India sources on migration than has hitherto been the case. At the same time, greater use could be made of sources originating beyond the shores of India.

### **Ship-Rolls and Indents**

In the eighteenth century some of the earliest Indian migrants overseas were transported as slaves by the French.<sup>11</sup> There were some 600 slaves in Mauritius, for example (originating from India and Africa), rising to 38,000 by 1788. Later on, considerable number of Indian convicts were also transported overseas by the East India Company to penal settlements in South-East Asia, such as Penang, Arakan, Malacca, Singapore and the Tenasserim coast. Later on they were sent to Mauritius, the Port of Aden and the Andaman Islands (a favourite destination for the mutineers of 1857), and then to sometimes to Australia. The total number of Indian convicts transported to Aden Mauritius and South-East Asia totalled at least 100,000.<sup>12</sup> They were an extremely important source of labour, providing an infrastructure and facilities, at the very inception of these colonies.

Ship-rolls or passenger lists were the lists of free labourers on board ship, specifying their names, age, region of origin, and particular skills or reasons for travelling. In the case of Mauritius these are stored in the state archives in Port Louis. For indentured migrants an emigration list was produced at the port of embarkation, which was then copied into the immigration register upon arrival by the Protector of Immigrants. This register was kept up to date with details of their employer, whether they were married or not, and even a photograph in some cases, along with details of their date of birth, caste, occupation, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Barker, J., (1996); W. G. Clarence-Smith (1988); Moses D. E. Nwulia, (1981); Kernial Singh Sandhu (1969); Deryck Scarr (1998); S. B. C. Servansing and U. Bissoondoyal (1989); Vijaya Teelock and African Cultural Centre (1995); Vijayalakshmi Teelock (1993); Charles Telfair (1830).

<sup>12</sup> Hargrave Lee Adam (1909); Clare Anderson (1998; 2000); John Frederick Adolphus McNair and W. D. Bayliss (1899); Satadru Sen (2000).

For convicts being transported to penal colonies from the UK, India (or Mauritius), personal details were kept on 'hulk-lists', if they were transported on prison ships, or within the passenger list if they were transported in smaller groups on ordinary merchant vessels. Upon arrival at their destination – whether in Mauritius, Australia, Malaysia, or elsewhere – a Muster-Master and clerks would copy the ship-roll, recording the details of the individual's name, crime, and sundry other characteristics, as well as interviewing the convicts and minutely examining their physical appearance. The resulting document, known as an indent, can be surprisingly revealing of the lives of convicted individuals.

Passenger lists and indents of convicts transported to Mauritius can be found in the Mauritian Archives and in the Public Record Office in London. The indents of Indian convicts transported to Australia are to be found in the Archives office of Tasmania in Hobart, or in the State Archives Office of New South Wales [SANSW] in Sydney. Further details of the lives of convicts and the crimes of which they are accused can sometimes be traced back to the High Court records in India, Mauritius, or in the UK (for example the Old Bailey session papers held at the Guildhall library in London).

Convict indents reveal there to have been a far wider and more diverse migration of Indians overseas than is commonly realised. The records of transportees from London to Australia, for example, included several Indian lascars or sailors, who had left ship and settled ashore in London, who subsequently committed an offence and were transported. One can deduce that they were many others more fortunate who, apart from fleeting references, remain invisible in the historical record – not least of all because British records in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> are almost completely oblivious of concepts of race. Racial profiling of offenders, in local government records and in census returns does not become commonplace until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One example is Sheik Brom, a 'dark-skinned' servant, aged 22, originating from Surat, who was arrested and indicted for stealing on March 4<sup>th</sup> 1824. Details of his crime are to be found in the printed records of the London Old Bailey Sessions papers for 1824, which state that Sheik Brom stole from the dwelling house of Francis Robinson at All Saints, Poplar, in west London, a 'provision-merchant' who ran a 'depot for the reception of black men' [most probably he was providing accommodation for 'black men' as a commercial enterprise]. Sheik Brom was no small thief, having taken three coats, two pairs of trousers, four waistcoats, a pair of breeches, two handkerchiefs (these were usually highly decorated silk and lace), a pair of gaiters, two pairs of stockings, a pair of shoes, a towel, five gloves, six shillings and two sovereigns (each worth 20 shillings) – all the property of William Green, a clerk to Francis Robinson. Altogether these were valued at a total of 101 shillings – equivalent to a minimum of £500 in modern terms, although almost certainly very much more.

Sheik Brom was probably a Muslim seaman who had left his ship and resided in the locality where he committed his crime. His mistake was that he had lived in the locality long enough to be known, yet did not move away in order to sell the stolen goods. He thus sold a waistcoat and breeches to a tobacconist from whom he regularly purchased snuff, other items he sold to another shop-keeper, and two coats he pawned to a pawnbroker (using the name Jack Brown), all of whom gave evidence against him in court. When arrested he had 17s. 6d. sown in his trousers, but claimed that he

had only 2p about his person. Sheik Brom was sentenced to death, but this was commuted to transportation to New South Wales (whence he travelled on the ship 'Asia') in view of the fact that he was a foreigner for which he was 'recommended to mercy'. The resolution of his case was helpfully explained to him by an interpreter.<sup>13</sup>

A rather less charismatic character is Mahomed Balletti, 5' 2", 'Black' and 32 years of age, a literate Muslim from Bombay, whom – it is stated – 'can read and write in his own language'. He was tried in the Central Criminal Court in London on May 9<sup>th</sup> 1842 for the crime, to which he confessed, of sodomising a lascar on board a ship. Mahomed was sentenced to transportation 'for life' to Van Diemen's Land (otherwise Tasmania), where he served for nine years in Wedge Bay – including four consecutive sentences of up to three months hard labour for disobedience or laziness. He was eventually given his ticket of leave (i.e. permission to work for a private employer under probation) in 1851 and was clearly reformed by his experiences since he soon after married a somewhat rowdy young woman by the name of Martha (who herself got into trouble for drunkenness and talking in chapel). Sheikh Brom was conditionally pardoned in 1854 and disappears from the records having managed to avoid falling into trouble with the authorities thereafter [see illustration: M. Balletti indent record]<sup>14</sup>.

An interesting instance of mutiny, of sorts, is to be found in the case of Talicouty, a cook and groom from Trichinopoly. 'Heathen' by religion (i.e. Hindu), he was tried in the Port Louis Assizes in Mauritius in December 7<sup>th</sup> 1843, and sentenced to 10 years transportation to Van Diemens land for the crime of 'murder by poisoned pudding of a ship's mate'. Talicouty conspired in this crime with no less than three others: Osenza and her husband Samba, and Yacousal – a Muslim servant from Trichinopoly. All were sentenced to ten years transportation to Van Diemen's land. Yacousal was given a ticket of leave in 1849 and his freedom in 1853, but Talicouty excelled at creating mayhem and was sentenced to additional hard labour or solitary confinement on no less than nineteen occasions – usually for disobedience, but also for gambling, insolence, absconding or other absences from work. He was not given his freedom until 1853, and subsequently fell foul of the law in Australia again in 1868, and again in 1869 for 'idle and disorderly conduct' and a 'breach of the Police Act', for which he was returned to prison for a further month's hard labour.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the above convicts were illiterate, but a surprising number are to be found who could read – such as one 'John Solomon', from Bombay, a Muslim cook and waiter who could read and write Gujarati (he was tried and sentenced in Sydney Australia in 1840 for the crime of sodomy, and transported to Van Diemens Land), Solomon had either migrated on his own or, most probably, had been in service on an East India ship which he abandoned in search of employment ashore in Australia. 'Nowardin' [Nur Al-Din?], an Arab from Muscat, seems also to have served on an East India ship, being arrested and tried in February 1815 at the Middlesex assizes in London for the crime of stealing (with the aid of accomplices) one five pound bank note, one three

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<sup>13</sup> Brom, Sheik, AONSW, R.2662, ICS 1823-6, per 'Asia', arr. ex England 29 April 1825. Copies of these indents and relevant court cases (where available) have been passed on to me by Dr. Ian Duffield, University of Edinburgh. I gratefully acknowledge his permission to reproduce them.

<sup>14</sup> Balletti, Mahomed, 549, Con./33/32., per 'Moffat' (3), 28 Nov. 1842. VDL transportee.

<sup>15</sup> Yacousal, 277, Con. 37/1, per 'Ocean Queen', 1844; Talicouty, 278, Con. 37/1, per 'Ocean Queen', 1844. VDL transportees.



shilling bank note, 16 calico shirts, 16 pairs of trousers, 2 brass pans, and a quantity of spices from the trunk of one Mahomet Cassam, or Sarane, of the East India ship Forbes, who was staying at the time in the East India barracks in London.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes the true identity of individuals is elusive – such as that of James Sievwright, alias Edward Stuart, a literate Roman Catholic, who had black eyes and 'dark and swarthy' appearance, who came allegedly from Bengal. He was sentenced to transportation in London in 1843 for forging cheques.<sup>17</sup> For others, their career as criminals was so infamous that it necessitated detailed recording - such the case of Sheikh Adam, the thief and poisoner, a 30-year old Muslim labourer and would-be *thug* originating from Bombay, whose crimes were recorded in meticulous detail in the Port Louis assizes and are described by Clare Anderson (2000: 75-79). Sheikh Adam was originally transported to Mauritius in 1834 for a crime for which he claimed he was innocent. He subsequently absconded and embarked upon a career of poisoning and robbing innocent travellers, for which he was eventually caught, tried and transported for 14 years to Australia in 1840.<sup>18</sup> After arriving, Sheikh Adam became, perhaps hazardously, a cook to the police magistrate in Campbell town, and subsequently married the servant Sarah Swift, in 1849. No more is then heard of him.

## Court Records

At the Indian end, apart from the still under-utilised emigration department proceedings of the government of India [IOR], some of the more valuable resources for ascertaining the perspective of the subaltern are court records and commissions of inquiry. The former are scattered, arising usually whenever anything went apparently wrong in the recruitment process. Such records can sometimes throw into sharp relief the extent of the control migrants exercised over their movements and lifestyles.

The case of Mst. Singaria - a tribal woman in the Satpura Hills in central India whose migration to Assam resulted in a prosecution of her recruiter - represents a classic example of a migrant experience which can be read in a number of ways<sup>19</sup>. In the first place Singaria's story can be seen as a migration undertaken to escape social exploitation or physical coercion at home. She was a Gond woman aged 17, from the village of Nagdon in the Dindori *tahsil* in Mandla. Singaria had been married at the age of 12 to Matadin, the 11-year old son of Tithru 'a respectable malguzar' of the village. The basis of this marriage cannot be known: although the payment of bride-price is common amongst Gonds, in this case the status of Tithru may have required the payment of dowry instead. The fact that Matadin was married again shortly after might suggest that such payment was not forthcoming, that the marriage involved settlement of some other obligation, or that the purpose was merely to effect a local political alliance. At the same time, polygamy is permitted among the Gonds, especially if the first marriage is without issue, and in the records of the court there is no mention of offspring in this instance. The marriage though was arranged and, as is

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<sup>16</sup> John Solomon, Con. 37/1, Dec. 1840-June 1840, per 'Waterloo' 1842; Nowardin, AONSW, COD/141, ICS, July 1814-Jan. 1816, per 'Fanny', arr. ex England 18 Jan. 1816.

<sup>17</sup> Sievwright, James, alias Stuart, Edward, 17764, Con.33/76. per 'Maitland', arrived 30 August 1846. VDL transportee.

<sup>18</sup> Sheik, Adam, Con. 37/1. Dec. 1840-April 1844, per 'Eleanor' 1841.

<sup>19</sup> Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office, Nagpur [MPCRO], Comm. & Indy. Dept. (C.I.D.), 1916/9-34.

usual, Singaria moved to the home of her new husband. At the age of 12, and assuming no other use was found for her, she would then have been expected to devote herself largely to household chores under the instruction of her mother-in-law. This family she lived with for the next five years before running away to Assam, making the journey in *chet* (March) 1915 in the company of Molin (alias Debia), a licensed recruiter of the Sephinjuri Bheel Tea Company in Sylhet.

Singaria was possibly put in contact with the recruiter by Jharri, one of Molin's relatives, who resided in her locality. To effect her 'escape' Singaria left her father-in-law's home on the pretext of paying a visit to her husband's second wife, Manmath, at Dongaria. At the village of Sangrampur about three kilometres from Nagdon, aided by another of Molin's relatives, Kancharia, she met up with Molin and Jharri. According to Kancharia, Molin and Jharri told her that they also were heading to Dongaria, and they and Sangaria then left together.

In cases such as that of Singaria and others like her, it is difficult to disentangle social from economic causes of emigration. Not only debt, but also the cost of marriage forced many tribals to become bond-servants in central India (known as *bhagia* in Betul, or *saldars* in other parts) for two or three years, and such relationships, once established, were difficult to bring to an end<sup>20</sup>. In Chhattisgarh, for example indebtedness and high out-migration rates were attributed to '...Three factors, that is a low standard of living, an absence of work for 7 to 8 months per annum, and the existence of a large body of small cultivators whose holdings are entirely inadequate'.<sup>21</sup>

Singaria's reasons for leaving, as she told her friends on the tea estate, were that her husband used to beat her and tie her to a charpoy and, on one occasion, 'tied her to a horse's heels'. In response to questioning she insisted that she had in no way been deceived but had gone of her own free will. However, the Malguzar of Nagdon made an issue of the case, presumably because the honour of his family had been offended, and after Molin's return to Mandla a year later to carry out further recruitment, he had him arrested and imprisoned on the charge of abducting a minor. In support of this the Kotwar of Maholi (where she was born) produced forged evidence, at the Malguzar's instigation, showing that the girl was only fourteen at the time of her recruitment - old enough to get married, but technically still under the guardianship of her father-in-law. In the face of this evidence the district magistrate was inclined to take the side of the Malguzar, and Molin, the recruiter, was sentenced to six months hard labour. Only after strenuous efforts on the part of the agent of the TDLA [Tea District Labour Association], and the production of medical evidence proving the girl's majority was Molin finally released, by which time he had already served half of his allotted sentence.

This case has all the characteristics of an intra-village squabble, but it effectively illustrates the point that migration, though a conscious choice, was never a free one, and although it was a liberation for some, it commonly derived from circumstances of oppression or deprivation. The case further highlights the ambivalent attitude of the local administration, which was required, albeit reluctantly, to co-operate with the

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<sup>20</sup> W.V. Grigson (1944): 240

<sup>21</sup> *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India 1926, Evidence*, vol. vi: 4.

Local Agents and Licensed Recruiters who replaced the contractors and *arkatties* (unlicensed recruiters) who controlled the trade prior to 1915. The act which introduced this reform, the Assam Labour Emigration (Amendment) Act of 1915, was designed to reduce abuses, though practically as in the case of Singaria, unlicensed recruiters such as Jharri and Kancharia still often played an important role as intermediaries.<sup>22</sup>

### Commissions of Inquiry

Perhaps the easiest source from which to obtain some indication of the perspective of labouring migrants are the various commissions of enquiry appointed by the government of India, which are reproduced in Parliamentary Papers.<sup>23</sup> These have to be treated with some caution, as indicated above, being usually compiled for a purpose. Nonetheless the interviews with labourers reproduced in the volumes of evidence can be enlightening. They can reveal for example, that subaltern migratory networks did not necessarily compete with the recruitment agencies hired by European planters, but that they often worked side by side. This is shown in the following certificate carried by a Returnee Recruiter, in 1840 (the following examples are all taken from *Parliamentary Papers*, 1840, p. 58 et seq):

'Dear Sirs,

The bearer of this, Dhibby Deen, is a man of good character, who returns to his native country with a sum of money. His intention being to come back to the Mauritius, we authorise you, should he apply to you for the cost of his passage, to pay the same at a rate not exceeding Co. Rs. 30 besides the cost of food, as well as to any able-bodied men who may wish to accompany him, not exceeding 50 in number, forwarding us their receipt in duplicate for the sum paid. The present authority to remain in force until 31 Dec 1840. We request the favour of an early advice, should you make this advance for us.

Chapman Barclay (addressed to Colville, Gilmore & Co, Calcutta)'

Subalterns used their own village networks to leave home and would come to a port city where they used European agency networks in order to find work.

The following statements made by returning labourers at Calcutta further revealed that *dhangurs*, or tribal labourers, were not invariably tricked by recruiters.

'Juggurnath a dhanga used to cultivate land in Chota Nagpore has saved 294 rupees, "I could never save any money from my old trade as cultivator". Went with Roghoonath, and took his wife and 4 children, all have returned, and he now has two more. His wife earnt 2 rupees for 1 year and 3 rupees for 2 years, and then stopped work having a large family to look after. Karmie, his adopted child, also with them, married Bulram.'

'Burgee, a Dhangur of Chotanagpur had married his wife in M [Mauritius], daughter of one of the coolies, he had paid 20 rupees for the marriage.'

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<sup>22</sup> MPCRO, CID, 1913/9-3, A. B. Napier to sec. to CC, 2/5/1913 and 1916/6/9-20: 'Note summarising the changes effected in the law relating to the recruitment of labourers for Tea Estates ...'.

<sup>23</sup> Some of these government commissions and other sources on Indian Labour are available at <http://www.indialabourarchives.org/> This online Archive of Indian Labour was set up in July, 1998 as a collaborative project of V.V. Giri National Labour Institute and the Association of Indian Labour Historians.

This group of dhangurs went with friends, family, and are recruited by another dhangur, called Roghoonuth. Clearly there has been a large voluntary element in this process, notwithstanding the straitened economic circumstances from which the migration first arose. Other examples abound which are illustrative of a process of chain migration, such as in the following comments added to the statement of a returning labourer in Calcutta:

'Moshurruf, a barber by caste, and a cultivator had been living with his brother, a barber, in Cooliz Bazaar and was unemployed. His relative, Peer Bussh has been 14 years in Mauritius, a barber by profession there he is well off.'

It is widely accepted that such chain migrations existed for Europeans migrating to North America and should similarly be accepted as existing for migrants within India and the Indian Ocean region. These chains could sometimes extend over very considerable distances, and in many cases end in a substantial upward movement in both economic and social terms for those involved, as in the case of Telucksing, a former indentured labourer, who became a shopkeeper in Durban, Natal:

'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>24</sup>

## Letters

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<sup>24</sup> *Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851-1917*: 388-389: Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-7

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 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>25</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. 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

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<sup>25</sup> These sources, drawn mostly from the Mauritian archives, are the focus of M.D. Carter (1996). 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 here.

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>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Carter, *Ibid.* PA 42 Letter from Ganesh Tewary, n.d.

Ganesh's 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. The letters of migrants, nonetheless, include a surprising number written by the migrants themselves, particularly from the 1880s onwards, as in this example:

'The Honourable Protector of Immigrant  
Sir,  
I most humbly and respectfully beg to inform your kindful honour that as my qualifications are in English up to the 2d class and in Hindi up to the 1st class and in urdoo tolerably - petitioner beg to say and further that I am a poor man of Basti District but now come to your honour therefore I hope that you will be kind enough to give me a good post as I have been in the police force for sometime and also works in an hospital and lately been a teacher.  
I am yours most obedient servant  
Debi Sanker Singh of Basti, newly arrived immigrant'.<sup>27</sup>

### **III Voluntarism and Control**

#### **The 'slave-free continuum'**

There is little doubt that the lives of slaves, convicts and indentured labourers were, in many respects, analogous. Despite supposed advances in welfare legislation and juridical control, it was as easy for unscrupulous employers to imprison and ill-treat their Indian indentured workers as it had been for the owners of Indian slaves, to confine them in chains and in stocks decades earlier. The tools of oppression changed over time, but the operation, magnitude and effect did not. Resistance was also analogous. Running away was termed 'marooning' in the slave era; indentured labourers who adopted the same tactic were categorised as deserters and vagrants. The lash could not, in theory, be used against the recalcitrant coolie, but physical coercion was as present in the camp of the indentured worker as it had been in the slave lines. Yet, coolie, convict and slave all found means of circumventing and rising above the status with which they had been saddled.

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<sup>27</sup> Mauritius Archives PA 62 Dabi Sanker Singh 5.6.84.

The typical nineteenth century, post enlightenment discourse on 'freedom' and 'unfreedom' is reproduced in much colonial writing and in subsequent historical accounts. The cultural specificities of these ideas however have been effectively critiqued by Gyan Prakash (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.<sup>28</sup> In the case of indentured migration, Michael Roberts (1989) has questioned 'the appropriateness of such concepts as "debt bondage" and "unfree labour" in a context when the labour supply was marked by circular migration' and has warned against treating labour intermediaries such as the *kanganis* (and by extension the *arkati* and returnee recruiters) as 'a mere arm of the planters'. These individuals operated also as bargainers for the labourers and as crucial informants. Roberts calls upon scholars 'to decipher the bargaining power, such as it was, of these migrant labourers by unpacking details pertaining to labour relations ... studies of this subject must be more attentive to the experiential aspect of plantation labour life'.

Kale similarly depicts indenture as occupying 'ambiguous space...in the dichotomizing discourse on slavery and freedom' but fails to enlarge upon the part played by evidence of 'family colonization' or subaltern migration strategies. These increasingly placed Indian labour migrants on a par with Irish or Polish labour who are often seen to be engaged in 'opportunity-maximising' movements, whilst simultaneously 'fleeing famine'. Returnees, *sirdars* and recruiters created out of indenture a dynamic which operated clearly outside the planter/administrator world view, but Kale has little to say about this crucial area of subaltern agency in which the 'coolie' ceased to be and the Indian overseas created his own world.

### **The character of indentured migration**

From a perspective which emphasises subaltern agency the historian must challenge the widely held notion that colonial societies, particularly those on the Indian Ocean littoral, with long traditions of Indian migration in its various guises, experienced - or exercised - such a level of control that the character it assumed in each case was entirely different. The division in the literature between Asian states which experienced *kangani* or *maistry* immigration and African or Caribbean states which imported indentured migration is thus arguably a false distinction. This is because nowhere, in any instance, did indenture operate simply as a European sponsored importation of a non-white work-force. The control of trade and shipping was always at least partially in the hands of Indian merchants: goods from India and the staple foodstuffs of immigrants could be purchased from them to supplement the estate diet - at a price; time-expired immigrants could negotiate a passage between the littoral states and India with Gujarati or Tamil merchants. Indians of earlier migration streams turned into 'educated' government employees, proficient in the languages of the colonial administrations and the plantocracy as well as their native tongues. Such individuals were able to act as interpreters and petition writers for indentured immigrants. Through Indian merchants and landowners, indentured labourers were eventually able to acquire credit and small plots of land, and establish themselves as

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<sup>28</sup> See Marcus Cunliffe (1979).



smallholders which many succeeded in doing during the last quarter of the 19th century (Allen, 1999).

In all this, there is little doubt that the traders, recruiters, clerks and bureaucrats of the Indian diaspora were advancing their own interests whilst ostensibly serving those of the indentured migrants. They profited from the separation of the latter from their customary world; and the goods and services they provided did not come cheap for the labourer. Yet, ultimately, the presence of Indian merchants, civil servants, and 'middle men' of various sorts, mitigated the perception of the Indian as an alien 'other' in colonial societies. It also helped foster the reproduction of family, kin and community networks overseas, and accelerated the eventual dispersal of the community from the plantation estates into rural settlements.

### **Chain migration and recruitment**

All too many studies of subaltern migration cast recruiters in the role of villains acting at the behest of dark colonial forces to defraud ignorant and unwilling victims into overseas migration - the classic example being Tinker, 1984 - but there are many modern imitators. Such works which often deconstruct the colonial discourse but fail to illuminate the actual mechanisms through which labour migrants from India spread throughout the Indian Ocean and beyond.

From the Indian side we have several useful accounts of how chain migration actually worked. Thus Anand Yang (1979) discusses the Indian side of voluntary chain migration and offers evidence from official sources. Thus a district officer stated that Saran's inhabitants 'having once acquired the habit of emigrating for wages, and having found that it is easy to save money in this way now emigrate yearly as a matter of habit to supplement their incomes, whether agricultural conditions are prosperous or the reverse.' (Yang: 54-55). Another official wrote 'In districts where there are returned emigrants, emigration is popular. In districts where there are none, it is the reverse. Every coolie who emigrates, on his return becomes an apostle of it'. Those who migrated far away were often described as following 'some friend or relation'.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of relatives and returnee recruiters in encouraging further migration (although not always with the desired outcome) is clearly underlined in the depositions of indentured labourers themselves. Chummun was one of a band of twenty who set out for Mauritius on the advice of 'a relative of mine who had just returned from that Colony'. Moorzan had made several trips home to Calcutta and with her brother had recruited numbers of her countrymen and women. Jhurry declared that he was recruiting his villagers on behalf of the plantation owners where he had worked for ten years to repay their kindness to him. However, his brother who had left Arrah to join him had been 'enticed away by an Arkotty who took him to the Trinidad Depot. I endeavoured to communicate with my brother, but was prevented by the Arkotty who had charge of him. I have heard that my brother has been sent away to Trinidad'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> L.S.S. O'Malley, Memorandum on Material Condition of Bengal and Bihar and Orissa, Darjeeling, 1912; Grierson Report 1883, and J.A. Bourdillon, District Census Report 1890 :402.

<sup>30</sup> MA BIA Beyts Report, 1861.

Subho Basu's study on factory workers in India (2004), offers similar evidence of migratory networks and quotes Foley's report on the sources of labour supply in Bengal:

'The rates and conditions of work in the Calcutta industries are well known in the (Saran) district . There is a constant flow to and from the mills, and one man will inform a whole village as to what his earnings and his work have been. To test this I attended a chaukidari parade. Several chaukidars told me, as I thought, what some weavers from their village had made in a jute mill, another what another kind of worker made in a jute mill, and a third seemed to know a good deal about jute presses...The people from Saran ... are well aware of the benefits to be derived from employment in the industrial centres, and a larger number than from any other district seek employment in those centres spontaneously.<sup>31</sup>

The second generation of the workers from Bihar and east UP were thus well informed about the nature of jobs in the industrial areas of Bengal which created a steady flow of labour to the industrial belt.

Basu goes on to provide a useful critique of historians who have depicted the workers as in the grip of conservative sirdars, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has written that 'In the jute worker's mind itself, the incipient awareness of belonging to a class remained prisoner of pre-capitalist culture; the class identity of worker could never be distilled out of the pre-capitalist identities that arose from the relationships he had been born into.'<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Tanika Sarkar argues that '[T]he very oppression which the sardars embodied was not only far more personalized but was also deeply familiar to the worker. With his patronage functions, his caste and kinship connections, with his ownership of land and bustees and his control over the caste panch, the sardar and the system based on his control in several significant ways replicated the village authority structure within Bengali industrial suburbs while, at the same time, subtly modifying the known aspects, through the additional new functions that were tied to the factory floor / urban slum control.'<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, Subho Basu provides numerous examples of subaltern networks – i.e. family members finding jobs for relatives in jute mills - and shows that considerable care and effort was often made by people to reach labour centres:

'Myna Khandayet a worker from Puri district stated that he borrowed money to pay his train fare from Puri to Calcutta. Narsama also borrowed money to come to Calcutta.

Abdul Khan was brought to the Chapdany mill by his cousin who was a sardar. Biro came to Rishra with a member of his village who secured him an

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<sup>31</sup>B. Foley (1906): para 83

<sup>32</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989): 218

<sup>33</sup> Tanika Sarkar (1987): 65-66.

employment in a jute factory. Mohan Noonia also got into mill work through his country cousin.

Behari Rai, a worker in the Angus mill, told the Royal Commission that he had been recommended by returning migrants to go to Angus because it was known to be free from accidents.<sup>34</sup>

The extraordinary degree of effort which some migrants, particularly returnees, were prepared to make to re-emigrate to a colony in which they had formerly found service is exemplified by the story of Cassiram Juggurnath. Sent back from Mauritius with another nine men to recruit in Bombay, they arrived with their wives and families there only to find that the depot had been closed, and emigration from that port suspended. The recruiters and their bands remained for almost three months in Bombay waiting for a ship which might be able to take them to Mauritius. During this time, one of the ten recruiters died, and another declined to continue. With no passage to the island forthcoming, the eight remaining recruiters resolved to travel to Calcutta on foot. They set out in November 1855, but after a quarrel broke out amongst them at Nassick, Cassiram Juggurnath returned to Bombay. He was eventually embarked on the *Futtay Mobarak* in 1856.<sup>35</sup>

### **The role of the Kangani or Sirdar**

The role of the Kangani or Sirdar is the aspect of labour migration and worker's organisation perhaps most seriously in need of revision in the historiography of labour migration, both within India and abroad.

Patrick Peebles' (2001: 34-38) account of the role and history of the kanganis in Ceylon begins this process with a useful deconstruction of contemporary descriptions of their activities, and of historians' generalizations about them. Peebles' work thus reveals that even for key intermediary figures such as the kanganis of Ceylon, there is little known fact and much that is misleading written about such subaltern networks. He dismisses historians' notions of the kangani as a 'patriarch' or as necessarily a man whose caste status gave him a position of authority with his workers – pointing out that cases occurred of low caste kanganis with higher caste labourers under them. He notes that recruiting kanganis, thousands of whom were sent by planters to recruit in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not always recruit their own kin, but that they sometimes bought coolies from other recruiters, or induced bonded labourers to desert. Peebles also discounts the usual demonisation of the kangani as a physical abuser of coolies, pointing out that the evidence suggests 'they relied more on moral influence than coercion'.

Peebles argues that contemporary accounts of kanganis 'do not reflect actual conditions but rather planters' distaste for the independence and prosperity of the kanganis ... planters had little control over the kanganis. Planters did not know how many workers would arrive, what would be their physical condition, or whether they

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<sup>34</sup> Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1929 [RCLI], Vol.XI: 360-364 and 355.

<sup>35</sup> Mauritius Archives [MA] RA Series (Immigration) RA 1361, Report of Bombay Committee of Enquiry, 13 April 1856.

actually came from India or simply walked off a neighbouring plantation'. Thus accounts from colonial sources of kanganis as patriarchal or as exploiters who defrauded labourers must be treated with caution as 'there certainly is some truth in both accounts, but by themselves they carry little weight'.

Peebles also points out 'since one in eight plantation Tamils was a kangany, the possibility of becoming a kangany was a real one for labourers. Anyone who could return to India and bring back labourers or who was chosen to supervise others became a kangany and had a substantially higher income'. Peebles' final point is that 'The planters demonised the kanganies, but they are a creation of the system, taking advantage of the opportunities given to them. Neither the planters nor the government would cooperate with the other to create a viable alternative, and the planters used kanganies to compete with each other'.

A similarly measured account of the role of the kangani was made earlier by Arasaratnam (1970), who wrote that a Kangany is 'a person who was himself an immigrant working on the plantation as a foreman, or even as a labourer of some influence and standing. The employer would send him to India provided with money, to go to his village and district and recruit labourers among his own people. He was empowered to pay the passage and all other expenses connected with the migrants' departure.... There was now scope for the migration of families rather than individuals .. When the kangany returned to Malaya with his group of labourers and delivered them to his employer, they were employed in that plantation, usually under the kangany who had recruited them. Thus there was a continuing connexion .. the kangany had subtle means of keeping the labourer on a lead, attached to and dependent on him....'<sup>36</sup>

The transformation of India into a source of cheap labour for the British Empire, and the increasing involvement of overseas capitalists in recruitment for plantation economies resulted in competition both among colonial recruiters and between them and local employers (Bates & Carter 1993). The sourcing of recruiters from within the ranks of migrants became crucial to the effectiveness of labour mobilisation, but in the process the increasing autonomy of these agents subtly altered the balance of power between labourer and employer with far-reaching consequences for the plantation societies to which they resorted in large numbers. Recruiting sirdars, men and sometimes women who had been overseas and could speak with first-hand experience of conditions in the colonies emerged - both formally and informally (they did not always bear the title of 'sirdar') - as a 'middleman' network between the subaltern and employer. This was undoubtedly typified the involvement of sirdars in recruitment for industrial labour within India as much as abroad. For this reason their demonisation and later disappearance from contemporary records post 1914 (noted by Chandarvarkar 1994) should be taken with a pinch of salt. Their role was never quite what it seemed in the first place and is unlikely to have immediately once they lost either official sanction or their usefulness to employers.

The networks of information which fuelled migration did not necessarily always work in the interests of the plantation owners. When wage rates fell in Mauritius in the 1860s, the recruiting networks were soon drawing labourers to more remunerative

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<sup>36</sup> Arasaratnam (1970): 16.

opportunities in other colonial destinations. Agitation fomented by Gandhi in South Africa, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also filtered down to would-be migrants through subaltern networks showing that disaffected returnees could effectively spike chain migration. Their information could quickly spread rumours about adverse events in the colony – demonstrating the effectiveness of coolie information networks. Muthusamy, a sirdar recruiter, ruefully reported that he had managed to collect only seven Indians:

'I would have done better, if one Venkatachalam had not arrived in my village in the meantime from Natal. He was drawing there 4s. a month. He returned about two months ago. He told the villagers [about] the present agitation in Natal. He warned the villagers to take care of their children chiefly young women. He made the people believe that some sirdars are purposely come to India to take away from their kith and kin, some young women of fair complexion to get rich husbands in Natal, and thereby get some large amount. This was a talk all over'.<sup>37</sup>

Ghosh (1999) quotes the experience of disgruntled tribal migrants to demonstrate the helplessness of these subalterns in the face of colonial labour mobilisation but he omits to mention that the same source also records the existence of a sophisticated network of tribal recruiters, already operational in the 1830s, which provided information from migrants located in Calcutta to the tribal heartland of Chota Nagpur and elsewhere.

Munusamy Naidu, a sirdar from Natal, recruiting in 1911 at the height of nationalist anti-indentured agitation, still found that simple word of mouth, the evidence of known individuals – that greatest propeller of chain migration, was sufficient to procure a band of recruits from his village:

'My master's advice was not to speak untruth, not to exaggerate Natal and its advantages, not to force Indians to emigrate, etc. I spoke to my own people. I told them the whole truth. I secured in April last some Indians and sent them to my master. I patiently waited in my village. All the time I was treated by the villagers very respectably. They knew that I was one of the sirdars. They also understood that I was not influencing by false statements and pretences any Indian to emigrate. Of course, Tamil notices, printed, warning the public not to emigrate to Natal were freely distributed in my village. These notices did not interfere with my work. I must admit that these notices contained some true statements...When time came for my departure to Natal my people about 4 quite willingly started with me. No one in the village raised any sort of objection. I got a name for myself and my estate.'<sup>38</sup>

## **Gender issues**

Women migrants within the indenture system have commonly been considered the greatest 'victims', 'super-exploited', and subjected to patriarchal controls by a double layer of colonial and male oppression. A recent study (Kale 1998) which has sought to 'recast' women labour by portraying the debate between imperial policy makers and Anti Slavery Society (ASS) reformers in terms of a battle

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<sup>37</sup> Bhana & Pachai (1998): 27.

<sup>38</sup> Carter & Torabully (2002): 33.

which was 'lost' by the latter, merely takes the discussion into a different cul de sac. The ASS, who were based in England, often had a less than firm grasp on conditions and events in the colonies. Their 'insights' were often as wide of the mark as the more extravagant assertions of estate owners. Some of their wilder claims, for example that family life was non-existent on the colonial sugar plantations have been taken up by historians and anthropologists and contributed to the persistence of absurdities such as Hugh Tinker's (1984) depiction of overseas Indian women as 'sorry, broken creatures' and the notion common among anthropologists until recently that 'caste' disappeared once Indians had embarked on a migrant ship (an issue addressed in Bates, 2001: 1-45).

In fact, research has increasingly demonstrated that the vast majority of women who migrated to Mauritius at least sustained their family ties throughout the period of indenture (Carter, 1995). Moreover, an analysis of individual life histories of indentured women reveals that the migration was usually made within a wider family decision, and that most women accompanied kin members, or were summoned to rejoin family overseas. (Carter, 1996). If this has been established in the case of one Indian ocean resort, then it is not an untenable supposition in the migrations to South-East Asia and the Caribbean too. New research by Veronique Bragard (1998) and Radica Mahase is leading in this direction, addressing the means by which Indian women found to survive and prosper in the Caribbean and in which they were able to assert themselves in social and cultural terms.

## **Conclusion**

The history of colonial labour is a story in itself, one which took place against a background of, and impacted upon, the transformation of colonial societies. This paper suggests ways and sources with which historians might attempt to capture that story without subordinating the worker to competing discourses derived from political controversies of the past or present day economic, sociological and anthropological concerns. The aim is to re-situate the migrant labourer and thereby disrupt the reified, fixed category of the 'coolie' which is so often found in the literature on migration, both past and present. This does not require us to deny the constraints and exploitative character of field, factory and plantation work in the colonial period. Indeed, it is the very coherence of colonial systems of labour control that created competition in labour recruitment and the space in which Indian, itinerant labourers could seek out alternative opportunities for employment on a global scale. However, in studying these diverse forms of employment at home and abroad, we must avoid victimising the victims of unequal labour relations, and endeavour to establish instead an 'emic' perspective on the choices exercised by migrants, and to analyse and emphasis the agency and ambitions of the Indian labourers themselves. To achieve this, a broad chronological and trans-continental approach is required, which suggests the applicability of a collaborative, team-based method and the relative in-utility of purely regional or 'national' archives and perspectives in the study of South Asian migration.

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