South Asian Labour, Migration and Diaspora, c. 1720 – 1970

A Review Essay

MICHAEL MANN

Since the 1990s, a continuous shift has been taking place in Indian historio-graphy from traditional subjects of British colonial rule, high politics and leadership towards the research of the social conditions of India's peoples, their way of live and their impact on Indian history, in short, towards social history and social anthropology. This change took place on the agricultural field in the 1970s, when peasant living conditions and peasant resistance movements against the colonial regime became fairly prominent. Rural labour has also attracted special attention.[1] But this approach has left a growing part of the Indian working population without due attention and, therefore, be-yond historical scope. On a more general level, the discourse of labour, self-organisation, resistance and colonial rule remained on the bipolar, antagon-istic level of British rulers versus Indian peasantry (the active individual few against the passive indiscriminate masses), rooted in the British perception and construction of India during the 18th and 19th centuries (and which is true for most of the descriptions of relationships between rulers and ruled).

Growing Indian industries, mostly British owned, attracted workers and, simultaneously, were in dire need of labourers. At least from the 1870s on-wards, British-Indian industrial enterprises organised labour recruitment for the infant but rapidly expanding industries like the "tea plantations" in As-sam and Darjeeling, the steel industry in Jamshedpur, weaving industries in Bombay (cotton) and Calcutta (jute) and, finally, the mining industry of Jharia. The demand of labourers within the British Empire also caused over-seas migration, especially to Burma, Mauritius, Natal (South Africa) and the West Indies. The migration of labourers and workers was officially promoted by both the British imperial and Indian governments but ultimately planned and controlled by local agencies. Complementary to this "officially organ-ised" migration, subaltern networks of temporary and permanent migration emerged. These developed simultaneously either along the existing trading

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[1]   PRAKASH, Gyan (ed.), *The World of the Rural Labourer in Colonial India*. Delhi et al.
        1992.

routes within the British Empire, e.g. to Mauritius or to the West Indies or cross-borders from India to the Central Asia parts of Russia and China.[2]

Recent studies have shown that, despite the influence of British political and economic structures with respect to the control of labour markets, the different systems of labour recruitment and the deployment of labourers and workers including the organisation of migration, an increasing economic and political consciousness can be detected among Indian labourers, traders, small entrepreneurs and big industrialists. This resulted in different forms of self-organisation, self-representation and the development of a specific life-style according to the prevailing economic-cum-environmental conditions. It is against this background that we will take a closer look at recent publications on Indian labourers and migration patterns. As will be seen, this contrasts with the ubiquitous notion of a British-dominated labour market and, at the same time, highlights the scope for Indians even on a global scale. Publications reviewed in this article deal with parts of the period ranging from the beginning of the 18th to the second half of the 20th centuries, thus covering the processes from early state formation to the nation states on the Indian subcontinent. This also seems to indicate that the dynamics of so-called 'modernisation' took place in South Asia, albeit interrupted by a retarding and deforming colonial system, with consequences still apparent to day.

Early division of labour and the emerging labour market

It seems important to start with a look at the development of key industries, workmen as well as the labour market before the impact of the colonial economy. From the 15th to the 18th centuries, division of labour emerged in the most prominent industries of India, at least in the leading sectors like textiles, shipbuilding, diamond mining and, to a lesser extent, in metal processing. Alexander Tchitcherov has pointed out the bifurcated development of the village industries: the subsistence production of tools and everyday consumption goods but also specialisation in production and separation of work processes primarily for local and regional markets. This small scale commodity production expanded in the said period and at the end of the 18th century the manufacturing of textiles, for example, was on the verge of being industrially organised.[3]

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[2]   MARKOVITS, Claude, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947. Traders of Sindh from Bukhara to Panama.* Cambridge 2000 (Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society 6), *passim.*

[3]   TCHITCHEROV, Alexander I, *India. Changing Economic Structure in the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries. On the Outline of Crafts and Trade.* USSR 1965, translated and revised, Delhi 1998, pp. 51–76.

Tchitcherov asserts that this caused a further distinction between village and town because labourers as well as spinners, weavers and dyers preferred the urban to the rural environment. This contrasts with Konrad Specker who emphasises the burden of the Indian local tax system, which hampered production in the cities and forced producers to move into the villages.[4] However that may be, the division of labour and specialisation of artisanal production provided the basis for an expansive domestic market and increasing foreign trade. This, in turn, had a direct impact on the internal commodity production and trading structures, as the local exchange between towns and the surrounding countryside intensified. On a subcontinental level traditional trading networks became intensive as well as extensive. This impinged on the intercontinental trading patterns and networks with Africa, Europe and Asia.[5] On the whole, this process indicates the emergence of proto-capitalist structures, for the hitherto established producer-merchant relationship turned into that of proto-wage labourer and employee. European trading companies played an important albeit not dominating role in this period of structural transition.[6] Tchitcherov is the first to elaborate the intra-Indian evolution of non-European-influenced pre-modern social changes, which makes his book particularly recommendable. His findings have been confirmed by Hameeda Hossain who investigated the East India Company's weavers in Bengal.[7] In accordance with Tchitcherov he discerns a dual development of domestic and commercial production. Evidence from the 17th and 18th centuries also suggests a diversified commodity production, complex market arrangements and a geographically far-reaching distribution of goods.

Prasannan Parthasarathi has recently pointed out that labourers and in particular weavers in South India had a strong position vis-à-vis the merchants and the state in the pre-colonial era. Weavers were loosely organised since they were able not only to resist attempts of intermediate Indian merchants to influence the modes and costs of production but also to independently organise production and determine the date of delivery to the European companies. Merchants provided the weavers with credit or advances to prevent them from migrating to neighbouring and financially more lucrative areas. Whereas weavers could easily alter or even break contracts, merchants had no means of getting credits repaid. In the dry regions of South India weavers and labourers traditionally migrated during the rainless period of

4   SPECKER, Konrad, *Weber im Wettbewerb. Das Schicksal des südindischen Textilhandwerks im 19. Jahrhundert.* Wiesbaden 1984, pp. 47–59.

5   TCHITCHEROV, *India*, pp. 111–8.

6   *Ibid.*, pp. 167–214.

7   HOSSAIN, Hameeda, *The Company Weavers of Bengal. The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750–1813.* Delhi et al. 1988.

the year. Migration was further supported by the local rulers' need for additional agricultural labourers they attracted by means of financial advances. It seems that state investment in agriculture and industry made South Indian artisans, peasants and labourers highly competitive agencies.[8]

In some regions of South India, women supported family income through spinning, particularly in the case of drought and dearth. For widows, incomes from spinning sometimes secured their survival. Women from "outcaste" households were regarded as the most skilled spinners. Spinning became an almost exclusively female profession from the late 1780s on, and the spinning wheel remained part of a bride's dowry in the driest parts of South India until the 1960s.[9] In the first half of the 19th century, domestic exploitation became the only means for the weavers to survive economic pressure. Women were increasingly engaged in spinning, thereby carving out one of their limited economic niches. In fact, it was their "zero wage labour" which greatly reduced the price of hand looms and made them competitive to industrial textiles.[10]

The military-cum-political impact of the British had a lasting effect on the economic power of the weavers. In contrast to South Indian rulers, the British increased their pressure upon the weavers and sometimes used brute force to pursue their economic interests. Weavers and labourers were urged to fulfil their contracts and refrain from contacts with other European trading companies. During the last quarter of the 18th century, British Indian merchants, with the assistance of the British, increased their power over the weavers, thereby preventing the rise of production costs, enforcing the repayment of debts and slowly but surely reducing the once fairly independent weavers to mere contract labourers.[11] This policy had long lasting effects on the labour market of South India when the colonial regime reduced wages for artisans and skilled labourers. In dire need of agricultural labourers, the British evicted the *parayyar*s ("parias") as well as all casual labourers from the city of Madras, which reduced their economic and social status.[12]

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[8]   PARTHASARATHI, Prasannan, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy. Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720–1800*. Cambridge 2001, pp. 27–30; 46–53.

[9]   *Ibid.*, pp. 58–60.

[10] SPECKER, *Weber im Wettbewerb*, pp. 148–50.

[11] PARTHASARATHI, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy*, pp. 129–39. It is, of course, in appropriate to accuse South Indian merchants of betraying 'their country' because they 'collaborated' with the 'enemy'. (*vide* p. 6) In economic terms the merchants pursued a logical policy of reducing production costs and, simultaneously, maximising their own profits, thus adhering to the rules of capitalism which was already operating in South India in pre-colonial times (*vide* for example pp. 20–9).

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 142–4.

Ravi Ahuja's study of the labour market in Madras and its hinterland during the second half of the 18th century meticulously examines rural as well as urban labour organisation, showing hat the division of labour, including wage labour, existed in a non-European country before the commencement of the industrialisation process. The poorer strata's high mobility turned the recruitment, employment and disciplining of labourers and workmen into a difficult undertaking. To achieve control, the customary rural bonded labour system *al-amanji*, which was extensively used by various South Indian rulers and, eventually, by the British, was gradually changed. In the town of Madras, the British initially had to rely on Indian intermediaries. These became indispensable in the British attempts to get hold of a sufficient number of labourers as the intermediaries pressed people by means of bonded labour assisted by the Company's methods of legal enforcement. The erosion of Indian customary rights and habits through British legal regulations proved significant for the colonial regime's attitudes towards India from the very beginning of its territorial rule.[13] Debarred from any social mobility many labouring people eventually became stranded at the bottom of the colonial state's emerging social fabric. In many ways, exclusion, criminalisation and pauperisation became characteristic elements of British labour politics in India.

In comparison to Parthasarathi's rather sweeping work, Ahuja's study relies on a broad basis of archival sources. This becomes quite evident when both authors deal with the question of warfare in South India during the second half of the 18th century and its impact on the local as well as regional economy, in particular that of the weaving sector. Whilst Parthasarathi simply denies any such belligerent influence and points to the necessity of further academic research, Ahuja, in an article published prior to Parthasarathi's book, has elaborated the immense effects of the permanent warfare from the 1740s onwards, especially the wars of Tipu Sultan, on the country's economic and social development.[14] Generally speaking, Parthasarathi's revisionist approach lacks both the evidence of sources and the findings of current research.

In contrast to Bengal, where the textile industry completely collapsed due to the pressure of Lancashire textile imports, the weavers of South India were able to temporarily survive concentrating on the finest and coarser hand loom textiles with which machine spun yarn and machine looms could

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[13] AHUJA, Ravi, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit und das Problem der Arbeit. Eine Studie zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Madras und ihres Hinterlandes zwischen 1750 und 1800*. Stuttgart 1999, pp. 189–97, 207–42.

[14] AHUJA, Ravi, 'Labour unsettled: Mobility and protest in the Madras region', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35 (1998), pp. 381–404. Interestingly enough, P. Parthasarathi mentions this article in his bibliography – yet he seems not to have taken notice of it!

not compete. This shift in production becomes visible only when one looks at the numbers of hand looms which increased in the area by about 30 per cent during the 19th century. However, the local elite consumption of the finest quality as well as the mass consumption of the coarser textiles did not improve the weavers' overall economic situation.[15] Yet this extreme 'flexibility' of the weaving families during the first half of the 19th century also indicates the general pauperisation in the textile sector since the last decades of the 18th century. Often the weavers (mostly men) migrated to the agricultural sector of the subcontinent or e-migrated to the labour markets of the British Empire. South India, in particular, became the major recruiting area for emigrants from the 1830s onwards.[16]

Tightened labour and employment conditions intensified the division of labour. Internal as well as external migration was only one reaction to the distressing situation. Social migration became another one, either to different occupations, mostly in the agricultural sector, or to a different status as wage labourer. Khandesh, the cotton hinterland of Bombay and Ahmedabad, experienced one of the most exceptional patterns of social stratification in the course of the growing textile industries after 1850, when an increasing part of the peasant population pauperised and had to work as wage labourers or to e-migrate.[17]

Most academic studies on India's industrialisation have concentrated on the question whether British colonial rule was a clear impediment to her economic and social modernisation or, less apodictically, to what extent it prevented the subcontinent's industrial development. Recent attempts to answer the rather difficult question place South Asia in a more global context of artisanal and industrial development suggesting that traditional industry modernised and played a decisive role in India's industrialisation between 1870 (opening of the Suez Canal in 1869) and 1930 (beginning of the Great Depression in 1929), analogous to the developments in Europe and Japan. According to Tirthankar Roy, the integration of the subcontinent's market and the creation of an export market took place during that period due to an unprecedented economic stability and political unity.[18] The creative impact of colonial rule, therefore, was more important than its negative effects, which simply echoes the outdated arguments of the former "imperialist" historiography.

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[15]   SPECKER, *Weber im Wettbewerb*, p. 165.

[16]   *Ibid.*, pp. 131–4.

[17]   STAUBLI, Maurus, *Reich und arm mit Baumwolle. Exportorientierte Landwirtschaft und soziale Stratifikation in Khandesh 1850–1914*. Stuttgart 1994.

[18]   ROY, Tirthankar, *Traditional Industries in the Economy of Colonial India*. Cambridge 1999, pp. 2; 18–20; 77–97.

As research has hitherto concentrated on only a few sectors of traditional industries and industrialisation, most prominently the weaving sector, general conclusions about the industrial development of India were hardly possible. A wider range of samples will provide the necessary data basis to make conclusive remarks on the "[a]rtisanal industry [which] has seen many changes in the product composition, organization, and to some extent technology. But overall, it has not just survived, but shaped the character of industrialization both in colonial and post-colonial India." Besides clear indicators of modern industrialisation like the progressive division of labour and the accelerating process of specialisation, traditional industries definitely increased their artisanal output. As in Europe and, later on, in Japan cheap and skilled labour along with the creative use of labour were also characteristic of industrialisation in India. During the colonial period India did in fact lay the foundation for her economic "take-off", through the process is still incomplete.

For Roy the main reasons for this failure are to be found in India's postcolonial state-regulated economic politics and demographic growth. Constant over-supply of labour prevented an increase in average incomes and thus did not generate a growth in demand. The division of labour, Roy argues, replaced domestic labour, but on far too small a scale. Myriads of "proto-factories" did not mutate into real factories. Machinery was rarely employed in the production process so as to have stimulating effects. Thus, even in 1991 industrial employment was just about 10 % of total employment, the figure hardly differing from that of a century ago. Though India did industrialise in a limited sense with respect to expanding wage labour in the late colonial era, it did not experience significant structural changes or outstanding economic developments. Besides, the British never introduced protective taxes and customs, with gold thread (*jari*) as a single exception. In India, industrialisation was driven by an expanding "informal sector" based on cheap and unskilled labour and by recourse to traditional resources like the training of apprentices and conventional forms of credit.[19]

Hand-loom weaving, *jari* production, brassware, leather, and carpets are the traditional industries Roy refers to. More or less all of them experienced the same sort of transition processes as described above. As in other industrialising countries these structural changes went along with the impoverishment of some branches of the traditional industries and the pauperisation of labourers. But, on a more general level, an overall improvement can be observed. Contracts and wage labour were the most significant indications of this change which is presented vividly in the five chapters, each meriting the subject of a separate and more detailed study. However, Roy contradicts

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[19]   *Ibid.*, pp. 56–60, quote *vide* pp. 5–6.

his own approach when he admits that generalisations about the labour market and the division of labour in the sectors mentioned are not possible, because traditional industries are extremely heterogeneous and, furthermore, vary geographically within India.

Roy's conclusion is disappointing and is not conducive to further research for he concludes that "[t]he roots of underdevelopment in South Asia cannot be found in some special distress that trade or markets caused only in South Asia. Rather, the roots should be sought in those specific South Asian conditions that prevented industrialization from securing rapid growth in average incomes. These conditions might be rapid population growth or social backwardness."[20] It seems likely that neo-liberal or/and neo-Malthusian economic attitudes are responsible for this rather short-sighted interpretation and its conclusion that basically reflects the discourse on 'under-development' of the 1960s.

Industrial centres and the problem of workers

Starting from an investigation of the Bombay textile mill-hands, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar adopts a revisionist approach towards labour consciousness and class formation in the industrial centres of British India. Arguing rather dogmatically against the merits of the so called "Subaltern School" and attacking their apologetics for being a rather "Orientalistic" approach towards the history of the Indian labouring classes by exclusively concentrating on micro-studies, Chandavarkar wishes "to retrieve the significance of politics from the solvent 'popular culture' and 'everyday life' within which it has too often been submerged."[21] He admits that India's labouring classes were far from being a homogeneous group or class pursuing uniform interests. It was the neighbourhood where the in-migrating workers settled which determined their social relationships, also the organisation and control of labour as well as the organisation and conduct of collective action. This, Chandavarkar suggests, is perhaps also true for the formation of the working classes within Western countries, at least to some extent. At any rate, it was the urban environment which determined the consciousness of the emerging Indian working classes.

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[20]   *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[21]   CHANDAVARKAR, Rajnarayan, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics. Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850–1950*. Cambridge 1998, p. 2. Though the author might not agree, in many respects the book does not differ that much from the positions of the 'subalterns' but enriches their arguments in many ways. The book can thus be read as a supplement and extension to the arguments of the 'subaltern' articles on labourers and the industrialisation of India.

With his study on Bengal's working class between 1880 and 1940, Dipesh Chakrabarty has launched a new and highly controversial discussion on the problem of class consciousness and class formation among Indian labour. Focusing on Bengal's jute industry, Chakrabarty, in contrast to Chandavarkar, alleges that the resilience of rural ties of kin, clan, caste and community still divided workers in their urban environment, fractured their solidarity and impinged negatively on the emergence of "working class consciousness". Jute workers did not merge into a unitary working class because pre-capitalist conditions and culture in society at large divided the workers more effectively than the place of work united them. Therefore, a "clash of cultures" between the rural and the urban social environment prevented the growth of a working consciousness and, ultimately, class formation.[22] However, it seems that the different developments in Calcutta and Bombay may also result from the different social and cultural background of the two regions. India should not be treated as a uniform subcontinent. Nonetheless, gates had been crashed to start a fierce debate on the background and behaviour of the Indian labourer.

Looking at the Calcutta jute industry, Parimal Ghosh emphasises that any distinction between the petty peasant and the poor urban worker in the colonial period is futile since the jute mill workers indeed lived in those two spatially and socially different worlds and had to cope with this twin identity.[23] Samita Sen argues that women's experience of the rural social environment was doubtless transformed in the urban setting and that pre-capitalist conditions were not simply reproduced in the capitalist surrounding.[24] The urban environment produced new identities based on the same geographical origin, the same religion, and the same residential areas within the city, to mention but a few criteria. In his pioneering book, Vinay Bahl opposes the "Subaltern School's" claim of being the sole authoritative voice of the working classes and that labour history can only be told in terms of gender, racial and national oppression. Instead, Bahl suggests that workers were active, not passive agents, shaping and realigning intra- and inter-class relations. Therefore, the formation of an industrial labour force has to be seen in the context of choices and actions of the workers themselves. They act in direct response to their specific experience of industrialisation.[25]

[22] CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940*. Princeton 1989.

[23] GHOSH, Parimal, *Colonialism, Class and a History of the Calcutta Jute Millhands, 1880–1930*. London 2000.

[24] SEN, Samita, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India. The Bengal Jute Industry*. Cambridge 1999.

[25] BAHL, Vinay, The Making of the Indian Working Class. The Case of the Tata Iron and Steel Co., 1880–1946. New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London 1995, pp. 20–9.

However, it seems likely that the positions of Bahl and the "Subalterns" are not that incompatible as both stress the labourer's "agency" (Bahl seems to miss the "Subalterns'" point). Anyway, all authors agree upon the fact that the "agency" of the workers, and, even more, of working women, was limited. However, the "agency" did exist and thus disproves the notion of a static and timeless Indian society, especially its lower stratum. In stark contrast, Urs Olbrecht again maintains that in the 1920s the still existing rural foothold of urban workers strongly supports the idea of the pre-capitalist segmented workforce which did not become subjected to class formation.[26]

It has been argued that the studies on labour and migration in the 18th and 19th centuries make it difficult to generalise on a subcontinental level as long as regional, specific and detailed studies are missing. The same is true of Indian industrialisation and the emergence of a working class. The case study of Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) provides us with a lucid example of labour recruitment, labour organisation and labour consciousness in the hitherto 'backward' area of Orissa. Cash advances to middlemen who very often engaged sub-contractors, facilitated recruitment from neighbouring districts, but mostly from adjacent villages. Customary links were still the easiest way of recruiting and pressing workers into Jamshedpur, the site of TISCO's steel plant and city. The colonial state's forest policy in the densely wooded region uprooted many local tribes, which caused their impoverishment, thus creating a pool of pauperised people desperately looking for work as wage labourers. Additionally, this policy led to the decline of local iron-melting industries and set free a migrant labour force of skilled people who could readily be absorbed by TISCO. Also, peasants from the declining agrarian sector in Bihar and Orissa easily found their way as labourers into Jamshedpur. It is quite striking that it was not the high wages that attracted the poor people but their deteriorating economic situation and social deprivation.

Temporary migration or circulation from their place of industrial employment to the place of agricultural production and family reproduction was prevalent among these labourers. They kept up their ties to the rural background comprising caste and clan relationships as well as family relationships. On the other hand, new social and cultural relations evolved among workers in their industrial environment. Simultaneously, TISCO managers took advantage from their workers circulation pattern as wages could be kept at a low level, thus subsidising industrial capital by appropriating unremunerated agrarian labour. TISCO policy towards its workers was characterised by a scheme of 'divide and rule'. Division of labourers favoured

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[26] OLBRECHT, Urs, *Bengalens Fluch und Segen. Die indische Juteindustrie in spät- und nachkolonialer Zeit*. Stuttgart 2000, p. 60.

racial and gender lines as well as contract arrangements and modes of regular payment. Housing policy, working hours, overtime and off-time regulations were used as a means of privileging workers. Deliberately, TISCO created differences in social and economic status in order to prevent a uniform labour force through a growing class consciousness. TISCO policy was supported by the colonial regime's judicial system. Indian customary ties were, again, combined with forms of Indian labour recruitment and British legal regulations.[27]

As has also been argued, it is important to concentrate on the regional development of India's industrialisation because only this kind of investigation will shed some light upon the diversified labour market. Almost simultaneously with the industrialisation of the Bombay region, Calcutta's jute industry slowly emerged. Yet until World War I, the Indian jute industry remained a typically colonial industry, since mill owners, entrepreneurs, managers, shipping agencies and insurance companies were almost exclusively owned by British capitalists who transferred their profits to Europe. This structural cartel operated closely with the colonial administration of Bengal and India, the latter located in Calcutta until the British-Indian capital was moved to New Delhi in 1912. The intimate co-operation between state, industry and capital in late colonial India is emphasised by Parimal Ghosh, who points out that it was this specific constellation of powers with which the Bengal jute mill workers were confronted and which was the reason for the lamentable conditions of the mill hands in the factories and in the factory lines, as well as the legal situation of the workers and their gradual social deprivation.[28] Urs Olbrecht, who delineates India's industrial labour history from its commencement in the middle of the 19th century with particular emphasis on the 1880–1964 period, shows that from 1919 onwards the situation of the jute mill workers deteriorated-well into the post-colonial era.[29]

Unfamiliar with Samita Sen's work, Olbrecht vaguely points towards unspecific "push" and "pull" factors which are made responsible for the temporary migration of up-country petty peasants to Calcutta. Like many other authors he stresses the agricultural background of the migrants but fails to locate the causes for migration.[30] Samita Sen provides us with the striking example of women migrating to Calcutta. Almost all of them were widows, whilst just a few had deserted their husbands or had been deserted. Deprived of their economic means of subsistence and their social background these

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[27] BAHL, *Making of the Indian Working Class*, pp. 92–132.

[28] GHOSH, *Colonialism*, pp. 10–12; 35–44.

[29] OLBRECHT, *Bengalens Fluch und Segen*, pp. 88–109; 145–8; 162–79.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 30–35.

women were forced to migrate and to earn their livelihood.[31] Moreover, the relationship between the rural and the urban setting becomes evident like, for instance, in the infamous Calcutta riots of 1926, as Parimal Ghosh shows. The sharp rise in sold railway tickets to destinations in north Bihar and the spread of religious unrest up-country indicates the close social and emotional connection of the migrants with their families. Urban conflicts were thus "transported" into the rural hinterland where they developed locally specific dynamics. "Push" and "pull" factors can clearly be traced and depicted.[32]

In the beginning, factory owners in Calcutta recruited labourers from the immediate rural vicinity. Since the rapid expansion of the jute industry in 1880, mill owners increasingly depended on up-country migrant workers mainly from north Bihar and the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. Fortunately, British entrepreneurs did not have to organise the recruitment of their workers as the existing recruitment system for the intra-Indian plantation labourers (tea and indigo) as well as for the plantation colonies (Mauritius, Natal, Trinidad) provided the emigration-port Calcutta with plenty of potential workers. Many of these workers had a "textile" background. Surprisingly enough, the mill owners and their Bengal *babus* (workshop managers, lower middle class) and *sardars* (jobbers) did not take advantage of this circumstance and many weavers, despite their skills, were employed as spinners.

Since there existed no formal recruitment system for the jute mills, the informal and personalised sector became decisive as regards access to jobs and various urban facilities which often depended on the relationships brought from the village into the city. Until the 1930s, the *sardars* played the most important role on Calcutta's recruiting market and the informal organisation of the labourers in the workshop. While the *sardars* did not influence inter-regional migration movements between 1880 and 1920, on the local labour market they were indispensable for the everyday supply of workers, as fluctuation and absence was very high in the jute mills.[33] Admission to work was regulated by the *sardar* who often misused his position through demanding bribes or sexual "services". Furthermore, the *sardar* had a tremendous influence outside the factory as a supplier of credits, of housing and of temporary work for the *badlis* (day labourers). As can easily be imagined, women were most exposed to his tempers and favours.[34] Thus, the

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[31] SEN, *Women and Labour*, pp. 180–6.

[32] GHOSH, *Colonialism*, pp. 79–85.

[33] OLBRECHT, *Bengalens Fluch und Segen*, p. 35. Olbrecht denies the important, influential and very specific role of the *sardar*.

[34] SEN, *Women and Labour*, p. 50; The role of the *sardar* is vividly demonstrated on pp. 125–33.

sardar did not simply represent the traditional protective *ma-bap* (lit.: mother-father) relationship between a superior (employer) and a subordinate (labourer), but developed a unique despotic position with multifarious disciplinary, even physical powers which quite poignantly mark the specific colonial context. Customary relationships were transformed within the capitalist system of the colonial regime, extending and intensifying the dependence of subordinate working people upon the controlling factory personnel.

In her important study, Samita Sen directs attention towards working class formation in India which has so far been investigated without the aspect of gender. The role of labouring women in an urban environment clearly reflects their function with respect to class formation. English middle class notions of female domesticity and family values as well as the Indian Brahmanic, but also Muslim understanding of secluded women, purity and honour, converged in the contrasting idea of poor and "single" labouring Indian women destitute of moral values. Obsessed with the threat of an epidemic spread of venereal diseases among British-Indian soldiers since the middle of the 19th century, colonial medics and administrators feared similar developments in the crowded *basti*s and factory lines. The British notion of disease, crime, and prostitution characterised the colonial view of their beings low and licentious women. "Single" women (widows) became the object of suspicion and they were almost indiscriminately regarded as potential or real prostitutes.

The very same is true for women who migrated to Trinidad. Mostly escaping from a divorced marriage these women sometimes entered new relationships with Indian overseers simply in order to survive in the harsh economic environment. However, despite their socially and ritually integrative role for the newly established families in their new homeland, these Indian women were often considered to be of morally low status.[35] According to the conviction of most British officers, 'respectable' women would not have crossed the *kala pani* (lit.: black water, i.e. the ocean), which is why only women of low origin including starving widows, abandoned wives or professional prostitutes sought work overseas. As Marina Carter and Khal Torabully show in their fascinating anthology, it is this view of working women which became one of the most durable British stereotypes within the context of labour and migration and which still dominates the historical discourse on Indian female labour.[36]

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[35] CHATTERJEE, Sunita, 'Communitarian identities and the private sphere: A gender dialogue amongst Indo-Trinidadians (1845–1917)', in: Crispin BATES (ed.), *Community, Empire and Migration. South Asians in Diaspora*, pp. 206–223, esp. pp. 209–12, 215.

[36] CARTER, Marina and Khal TORABULLY (eds), *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, pp. 51–2.

Additionally, Samita Sen points out that disregarding predominating "low caste" and tribal forms of marital arrangements, British officials rejected any form of "temporary marriages", "concubinage" and "protective cohabitation", as they were considered as promiscuous and morally aberrant. Practices like divorce, desertion, adultery and polygamy were also denigrated. Furthermore, the British 'orientalist' (in the sense of Edward Said) notion of a seductive and morally lax East moulded Indian prostitutes into professional "castes" and sects. Consequently, Indian women, especially widows, were viewed as professional prostitutes. The point at issue, as Sen stresses, is not the fact that women sometimes took money for "sexual services" or did indeed work as prostitutes to earn their and their children's livelihood, it is the circumstance that female labour and income was regarded as "supplementary" and, therefore, demands on working skills (simply manual and highly repetitive) was low and correspondingly, the level of wages was kept below a subsistence minimum. This dire economic dilemma forced women to find additional, indeed supplementary incomes.[37] Class formation seems to have happened without the working women who have accordingly been excluded from labour history. Samita Sen has re-introduced them impressively.

For the western and eastern parts of India, i.e. the cotton and the jute industries, it could be demonstrated that class formation took place according to specific regional and local, economic, political and social circumstances. But it seems that on a subcontinental level parameters have to be changed if we take a look at the construction of railways. Ian Kerr has shown that the construction scheme's grand scale was accomplished by British capital and Indian workers. And again, the influx of colonial capital greased the recruitment of labourers. Thousands of them were employed along the track organised by contractors and local intermediaries who became the decisive link between capital and labour and soon themselves turned into petty capitalists. A system of advances, again, was important for the mass mobilisation and retention of labour. Work along the track was executed by labouring families, very often on a mere existence level. This is in contradiction to Kerr's own argument that Indians preferred the hard, unremitting work because it represented familiar patterns of labour division and family organisation which could be maintained due to the recruitment system. Apparently, the division of labour within the families was broken by the tough wage labour and organised according to the requirements of the British railway companies.[38]

With her authoritative work on *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*, Nandini Gooptu shows how the in-migrating poor

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[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 177–212.

[38] Kerr, Ian J., Building *the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900*. Oxford 1995, pp. 44–126.

developed class, religious, caste and occupational consciousness within the new urban setting. Gooptu does not concentrate on the factory worker but takes a closer look at the 'bazaar' and the 'neighbourhood' as decisive factors in an emerging network of communication, cooperation and consciousness during the process of urbanisation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Usually 'confined' to the informal sector, the urban poor encompassed peddlers, hawkers, street-vendors, sweepers, scavengers, transport and construction workers, the labourers in small enterprises and workshops, and, for that reason, constituted the bulk of the urban labour force, particularly in cities with hardly any or no industrial plants at all. It seems that the industrial labourer of the 'formal' sector within the growing cities is rather the exception to the rule of an 'in-formally' organised labour market where temporarily employed workers were forced to rely on 'self-employment'. Gooptu rejects the predominant Indian middle-class perception of the urban poor as being a homogeneous mass and argues in favour of non-economic forms of class consciousness constructed along the lines of political and social identities.[39]

Permanent indebtedness to their urban employers or money lenders seems to have been the general feature and fate of the urban poor (reproducing the harsh rural conditions, from which they intended to escape, in the urban environment within a short time). Loans on labour, materials and wages caused a reduction of earnings, thus accelerating the vicious circle of loans and repayment particularly in the 'cottage industry'. Jobbers and employers also deliberately withheld parts of the wages to check the labourers' mobility and, on a more general level, to control the work force. In the interwar period, the conditions of this simple system of debt bondage and labour control were increasingly and unilaterally defined by the urban middle class employers. These, in turn, became the backbone of the emerging 'respectable Hindu society', which enlarged their influence on the political agitations and public sphere of the late colonial state with its participatory bias.[40]

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[39]   GOOPTU, Nandini, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India.* Cambridge 2001, pp. 3–5. The title of the book is, in a way, somewhat misleading as it does not analyse the political strategies of the poor but that of the middle classes and how they view the urban poor. Despite a few examples (*vide* pp. 167–9), the 'agency' of the poor is hardly visible. Even the chapter on the 'Untouchable Assertion' (pp. 143–84) only deals with the literate representatives of this section of the urban poor as actors on the stage of high politics (the Adi Hindu against Dr Ambedkar's and the British officials' ideas of separate representation after the Poona Pact in 1932 as well as against the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha nationalistic ideas of uplifting the deprived and depraved untouchables). Nor does the analysis of the urban poor cover all cities of India but concentrates on the development in the UP industrial towns of Allahabad, Banaras, Lakhnau and Kanpur. Generalisations should, therefore, be avoided.

[40]   *Ibid.*, pp. 53–65.

Town planning in the 1920s and 30s reflected the British colonial as well as Indian middle and upper class ideas and attitudes towards the growing number of urban poor. Accused of reproducing their rural habits and habitations (settling densely in open areas beside open drains and *nalas*, building simple shelter constructions and hutments with no sanitation amenities), the poor became the prime target of the newly established Town Improvement Trusts for uplifting Indian cities. Consequently, clearance schemes evicted many poor people from central urban areas, creating space for the commercial and recreational interests of the middle classes. No wonder that this kind of urban politics became the reason for additional tensions between the middle and lower classes and, additionally, among the lower classes themselves as they had to fight for the distribution not only of scarce labour, but also of housing facilities. Due to an often violent outburst of tension and friction, it was easy to depict the urban poor as 'dangerous classes' which had to be policed by the municipal authorities. During the 1920s, the armed police became the strong executive arm of the colonial, and also, after the granting of provincial autonomy, of Congress governments.[41]

The poor reacted in many ways to the urban social, economic and political challenges. As Gooptu points out, they often realigned their strategies of resistance across class, status or caste. Particularly the paramilitary organisations (*akhara*) and the volunteer corps overtly demonstrated the willingness of the poor to oppose governmental violent threats. The largest group of urban workers, the untouchables, moulded their political consciousness in *bhakti* devotionalism, whilst the poor low-caste *shudras*, often manual workers, responded to tensions and marginalisation with "martial religious militancy".[42] And the poor Muslims demonstrated their growing consciousness through an increasing public display of piety. In substance, religion and violence, rather than political strategies, determined the ways and means of 'the politics of the urban poor'. Other forms of representation, realignment and resistance were not taken into consideration. This, however, leaves us with an 'Orientalist' discourse (in the sense of Edward Said) which depicts India as a country inhabited by a race of mysterious, religious and violent people.

To sum up this section, it seems important not only to take a closer look at the initially mentioned various reasons for class formation but consider also the kind of industry and the places of work, the residential area and the dynamics of the neighbourhood as well as of the labour networks. It still remains to be proven to what extent, where and in which way class formation took place in India during the colonial period and its aftermath. But it seems

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[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 77–138.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 422.

evident that in some cities a highly diversified class of workers emerged with specific links to the agricultural hinterland. However, as the analysis of the urban poor has shown, in many cases the connection with the rural hinterland as point of migratory departure did not remain the focus of future economic and social prospects. Without doubt, workers laboured in different occupations in the formal as well as the informal sector, as almost all jobs in the industrial zones and the 'bazaar' did not require special qualifications or particular skills. This is presumably the main reason for India's large group of poor people within the city limits. To understand Indian industrialisation, urbanisation and the recruitment of workers it is indispensable to dwell also on the migrants' rural point of departure.[43]

Migration of labourers and market conditions

Neither during the British *Raj* nor after independence was the subcontinental migration of Indians a particular focus of scholarly interest. British records hardly mention migration as a separate subject, and the renowned *Cambridge Economic History of India* touches upon migration very sporadically and concentrates on international and intercontinental e-migration. Basically, internal migration has not been treated as a major economic and social problem.[44] Only recently have South Asian historians turned their attention towards migration, realising that increasing migration and overall mobility were not just the preconditions of the division of labour within an industrial society but that migration is a phenomenon characteristic of human life since time immemorial. Apart from that, migrating labourers do not simply indicate a shift in demographic figures but indicate a political process too. Most certainly, internal migration is one of the key elements of India's industrialisation.[45]

Regional migration within the rural sector as well as between the rural and urban sector already existed in South India in the 18th century. Seasonal work attracted and partially forced migration which created some sort of "mixed occupations" of temporarily wandering people. Simultaneously, permanent migration, especially to the urban environment, became more significant. On the other hand, nomadic mobility as a kind of permanent migration

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[43] GHOSH, *Colonialism*, pp. 25–34; 79–85.

[44] *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol. 2, c. 1757 – c. 1970* (ed. by Dharma KUMAR), Cambridge 1982, pp. 305–9, 511–7.

[45] BATES, Crispin N., 'Regional dependence and rural development in Central India: The pivotal role of migrant labourers', *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (1985), pp. 573–92.

was still ubiquitous in the region. Mostly large groups, like the famous "tank diggers" migrated to places where their skills and labour were needed. But this type vanished under the colonial regime's policy of "peasantisation" in the 19th century. Commercialisation and war increased the chances of spatial as well as social mobility.[46] Migration, as has already been pointed out, was in most instances a temporary shift of the place of labour, be it for a harvesting season, or for a limited number of years. In this context, Claude Markovits prefers the term "circulation" to that of "migration".[47] The high percentage of circulating people among the migrants has also been observed by Marina Carter who points out, for instance, that at least one third of the emigrants to Mauritius returned to India during the 19th century.[48] In any case, Indian labourers and workmen became increasingly mobile and circulated or migrated either in the region, the provinces, within the subcontinent, to adjacent countries or other parts of the British Empire. This also gives contradicts the common notion that Indian rural people were opposed to mobility and migration which dominated the British discourse on Indian peasants as recruits for labourers.[49]

Between 1846 and 1932 about 28 million Indians left the country for good, which is more than Britain's and Italy's emigration rate during the same period. This impressive figure only represents external migration and does not include internal movement. Within the subcontinent millions of people, mostly men, sometimes families, seldom single women, migrated to take up seasonal labour in neighbouring or far distant regions as industrial workers or field workers. In the beginning, for example, the Bombay textile industry recruited its labour force mainly from Ratnagiri District (Konkan), the percentage dropping from 50 % in 1911 to 25 % two decades later. On the other hand, a growing part of western India's rural population migrated seasonally to the neighbouring central Indian states to work in the agricultural sector. Interestingly enough, the agrarian area of the Dakhan plateau showed stronger "pull-effects" on migrating people than the nearby industrial centres of Bombay, Ahmedabad and Jamshedpur.[50] This indicates that migrants preferred their familiar agrarian environment in contrast to uncertain or alleged urban advantages.

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[46] AHUJA, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 155–62.

[47] MARKOVITS, *Global World of Indian Merchants*, pp. 4–7; 166–77.

[48] CARTER, *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire.* London and New York 1996, p. 62.

[49] CARTER and TORABULLY, *Coolitude*, pp. 46–53.

[50] STAUBLI, *Reich und arm mit Baumwolle*, pp. 144–8.

"Unsettled tribes" (according to British perceptions and understanding) were very often among the internal migrants because the revenue policy of the colonial regime did not include tribal communities in the new revenue scheme of the 1860s but settled them on a summary tribute. The harsh colonial forest policy also worsened the situation for the "tribals" whose physical environment was substantially reduced and whose economic basis was greatly diminished. Accordingly, the Indian recruiting agencies for labourers in the industrial as well as the rural sector could increasingly rely on tribal communities. Various authors have emphasised this development which gained momentum as soon as the government placed the recruitment agency in the hands of Indian subordinates. From the middle of the 19th century, internal and external migration gathered an unprecedented momentum, as the case of the indentured labourers in Mauritius and the West Indies indicates.[51]

Global migration of Indian labourers and traders became the focus of academic research in the 1990s. Investigations have hitherto concentrated on the final point of migration, i.e. the country of destination and on problems of integration and separation. This includes the question of diaspora, identity and rising communalism among the minorities abroad, particularly in countries where Indian "indentured labour" became prominent as in Fiji, Mauritius, Burma, Sri Lanka, Natal and the West Indies. In the older research it seems to be taken for granted that the indenture system represented both an organised migration and a disciplined labour force. Moreover, indentured labour was regarded as being some kind of successful prolongation of the slavery system which dominated the sugar islands.[52] Yet it has recently been shown that in the wake of the abolition movement Mauritius was seen as a model for colonially controlled "semi-free labour" for other British colonies to follow. Indentured labour seems to have bridged the gulf between slavery and the "free labour market" of the industrialised nations.

Economic pressure, indebtedness and rural marginalisation, but also family disputes, divorce and widowhood often preceded departure from the village and ended either in intra-Indian or overseas migration. Recruitment became the nodal point for the emerging labour market within the British Empire. Ex-indentured labourers were often engaged as recruiters, thus taking advantage of their intimate knowledge of the labourers' kin and clan relationships in the remote villages of upper and south India. Equipped with capital from their overseas employers, the Indian recruiters greased their business with money advances to hesitant returnees. Reasons for signing the working contracts and the decision to migrate overseas are multifarious. In

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[51] CARTER, *Voices from Indenture*, pp. 22–7; 36–40; 73.
[52] TINKER, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery*. Oxford 1974.

fact, most people willing to work as indentured labourers did know about the circumstances and prospects of their contracts as well as the places where they were supposed to work. Stereotypes of the dumb, innocent and seduced Indian peasants and industrial workers unfamiliar with the conditions of the indentured labour market and recruitment procedures are still prevalent in the historical discourse though ample evidence proves the opposite.[53]

The ultimate "willingness" to migrate in no way negates the existence of pressure, coercion, deception and human suffering among the indentured migrants. On the other hand, indentured labourers were able to put some pressure upon the colonial government to meet the social and familial habits of the migrants, which left some marginal "agency" within the otherwise harsh indenture regime.[54] Indentured labourers developed strategies which enabled them to survive physically, mentally and culturally in their new economic and ecological environment. Besides, indentured labourers practised age-old forms of resistance in all the countries they migrated to, ranging from desertion, arson to various sorts of escapism and in an very few instances even murder of their master.[55]

It is quite interesting that the extent and forms of migration under pressure coincided with that of labour migration from Europe to the Americas since the 1860s and that indentured Indian labourers are, therefore, according to status and personal experience, related to European migrants, whose expectations, fears, intentions and behaviour were almost alike.[56] This can partly be observed with indentured labourers returning to India after their contract had expired. Apart from employers who tried to urge labourers to prolong their contract and sign for a second term many of the indentured Indians returned to their native country where they expected a haven of social and familial security. The returnees were often disappointed, had lost contact to relatives or were refused admittance to their natal villages because they were regarded and therefore treated as impure after having traversed the *kala pani*. Quite frequently the returnees decided to emigrate for another term. During a long visit at home they often persuaded relatives and friends to also sign, contracts as indentured labourers.[57]

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[53] CARTER and TORABULLY, *Coolitude*, pp. 17–36, 46–53.

[54] CARTER, *Voices from Indenture*, pp. 62–7; 76–7; 86–92; 100–1.

[55] CARTER and TORABULLY, *Coolitude*, pp. 88–101.

[56] CARTER, *Voices from Indenture*, pp. 1–2; 35 and 73.

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 156–7; 165; 183–9. Carter's latest publication on Mauritian indentured labourers is a fine example of elaborate subaltern studies. Whole paragraphs or even complete letters and petitions are printed to give labourers their voices back; photographs and autographs underline the ambitious intention of the author. Most of the book thus reads as an edition of annotated sources cum analytical interpretation.

Competing elites drew upon or even invented local traditions and myths to mobilize specific groups to pursue individual interests. This is characteristic of the mobilization of Hindus and Muslims in North India from the end of the 19th century onwards, but also in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) since the beginning of the 20th century. Ethnic and religious nationalism were able to flourish in the modern centralised state. It seems as if nationalism and racism, also communalism, are part of the same process by which capitalist economies try to control their labour force. On a global scale, the well known and well established construction of difference or of the "oriental other" became essential for this policy. Whilst Western societies were regarded as having organically evolved, unified political and cultural systems based on consensual normative agreements and values, the "East" was seen as the complementary "other" where societies are fractured, communities living side by side, the same also being true of their economies. Unity could only be imposed and permanently guaranteed by the colonial powers.

As Crispin Bates has argued in his recently published recommendable edition on migration within the British Empire and community building in the Indian diaspora, the politics of difference provided colonial governments with strong a position for maintaining order and also for arbitrating these perceived differences and various interests: "Hence the policy of separate representation for different religious or ethnic communities, and the institutionalisation of procedures for consultation with 'community leaders' in legislative councils and local authorities (a practice followed to this day in the UK) which were largely dominated by unelected officials."[58] However, in a more general context, it would be interesting to know whether this construction of difference including the manipulation of democratic institutions and procedures was developed in the colonial context and imported into the polity of Great Britain or whether it was an overall British political instrument necessary for any successful rule and consequently applied to the colonies. The history of Britain's 'Celtic fringe' would suggest the latter. Future research should lay more emphasis on this fairly 'global' nexus.

In the diaspora, traditional and customary Indian habits or rites could only be preserved to a limited extent. Besides family structures new forms of communities soon emerged. Diaspora provided for a new social setting and Indians realigned according to the needs of the specific situation. In fact, Hindus became a community in Mauritius, yet they did so because of their common geographic origin in North India and not due to religious beliefs. Community had more in common with an ethnic group sharing similar

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[58] BATES, Crispin, 'Introduction: Community and identity among South Asians in diaspora', in: *idem* (ed.), *Community, Empire and Migration. South Asians in Diaspora.* Houndsmill and New York 2001, pp. 1–45, esp. pp. 6–7.

cultural customs. However, whilst most Hindus refer to their common north Indian descent, Tamil and Malabari Hindus would never regard themselves as Hindus in the Mauritian context. Many Muslims have also de-emphasized their common north Indian Bhojpuri background. They do, however, not constitute a homogeneous religious or ethnic community. Besides, distinct ethnic groups can also form a community because they share common political ideas and interests which can only be pursued through coordinated collective action. The constitution of Mauritius has taken this specific social strata into consideration and thus created the basis for a model pluralist society. There are too many distinct communities with cross-cutting interests, which prevents the domination of one group or community. Due to the lack of a homogeneous ethnic majority able to enforce its will on minority groups and also because no group has exclusive access to the economic resources of the island, communal conflicts hardly ever turn into open violent riots though tensions do exist.[59]

Ideologies were an essential ingredient during the historical process of colonial state formation as for example in Sri Lanka. Here, mythology and ideology developed their own dynamics within colonial society forging a modern nation state which was a direct consequence of the British civilizing mission. Constructing a Singhalese nation in opposition to Tamil and Malabar immigrants helped Ceylon's Singhalese elite to enforce colonial laws preventing further immigration. Besides literacy tests and the showing of rental receipts to prove residency, the signing of a declaration of intention to settle permanently on the island became indispensable for people living in Ceylon who wanted to obtain the right to vote in elections. Changes in the franchise scheme were accordingly modified in 1931. The Great Depression which hit Ceylon in the early 1930s, further aggravated the lot of immigrant labourers when local long resident workers as well as the Ceylon National Congress complained about the severe competition and high unemployment rates among the "resident population", for which reason they demanded more restrictions on foreign immigration.[60]

Indians in the diaspora have developed independent cultures, based, of course, on their Indian regional, ethnical, religious, and familial backgrounds. Yet, the economic and social environment of the indentured labourers and particularly their descendants in the new homelands created specific cultural, societal and political forms. As *Négritude* was the political concept to

[59]   NAVE, Ari, 'Nested identities: Ethnicity, community and the nature of group conflict in Mauritius', in: BATES, *Community*, pp. 87–108.

[60]   WICKRAMASINGHE, Nira, 'Migration, migrant communities and otherness in twentieth-century Sinhala nationalism in Sri Lanka (up to independence)', in: BATES, *Community*, pp. 153–84.

raise black consciousness and to restore to black people humanity, dignity and pride, *Coolitude* is the complementary expression of a poetical concept intended to do likewise for (ex-)indentured labourers. The term *Coolitude* was coined in 1992 by Khal Torabully and has been contextualized histori-cally in an excellent joint publication with Marina Carter. *Coolitude* is an essential part of what is understood as *Creolité*, a term denoting the diverse cultural legacies of the indentured labourers which determined the hybrid culture of the later born within a "multi-cultural" society. To reconstitute a memory in the host country which interacts between the imaginations of a past and the uneasiness of the present situation contributes to a poetics which describes Indians as the latecomers to a foreign and strange society.

Without doubt, the "Voyage" across the *kala pani* was the most decisive and traumatic moment for a "coolie" often leaving India for good. Efforts to accommodate within the new environment and the necessity of everyday resistance against oppressive and humiliating working conditions are major experiences in an indentured labourer's life. Despite their differing regional, social and cultural backgrounds "Coolies" were generally regarded as mean, vicious, unreliable and uncivilized vagrants and mere sugar workers. This notion of the "coolie's" low social and cultural status embedded in pauper-isation and victimhood remained prevalent well into the 20th century as can be seen from contemporary documents but also in the diaspora literature. As a poetical concept, *Coolitude* should, according to Thorabully, like all litera-ture go beyond the limitations of the past. "It is particularly important for literature to work in a political, social and cultural framework in which all components of Caribbean and other societies could feel part of a wider com-munity. People need identifications, representations to mediate their relation to the past and the present."[61] In this sense, literature aims at the formation of consciousness to enable Indians in diaspora to perceive, and respect them-selves not only as individuals and humans but also as part of a larger society.[62]

Forced migration and forced labour

The emergence of a labour market in and around industrial centres in India is clearly perceptible in the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, feudal forms of non-economic means of coercion, i.e., forms that were not based on free

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[61]   CARTER and TORABULLY, *Coolitude*, p. 166.

[62]   The book *Coolitude* includes Marina Carter's interview with Khal Torabully. There are also numerous quotes from contemporary sources, poems and other forms of literature as well as latest poems by Khal Torabully. The concept of coolitude is well embedded in this broad selection of texts, which will, hopefully, help to establish the term in addition to *Négritude*.

labour or free wage-workers but on relations of domination and subordina-
tion according to social relations dominated the labour market.[63] A mixture
of simultaneous "free" and "unfree" forms of labour relationships were char-
acteristic of the colonial labour market. It ranged from (mostly household)
slavery and bonded labour to indentured labour as well as some sort of free
labour, and to industrial labour in the 19th century. Clear lines of distinction
can not be drawn between the various types.[64] The British had no interest in
reforming the labour market nor the market of labourers because they bene-
fited from the existing regulations and customs.[65] As the study of Gyan
Prakash has shown, the British judicial system in India transformed existing
systems of "traditional" bonded labour into "modern" unfree labour when
land was objectified and labour turned into a matter of debt obligations. Per-
sonal commitments were thus reduced to contractual relations. The emerging
land market of the 19th century and the vicious circles of indebtedness in the
course of the Great Depression in the 1930s characterise a development that
had lasted for about two centuries. In the commencing "Western" discourse
on "freedom" and "free wage labour", the British "invented" unfree forms of
labour and depicted them as significant and inherent elements of a tradi-
tional Indian society unwilling to reap the fruits of western benefaction.[66]

Even in the case of slavery the British just transformed customary rights
into legal constructions and did not abolish slavery at all. On the contrary,
officials in India sometimes took an active part in sustaining it. Indrani
Chatterjee points out that in many aspects slavery in South Asia has a con-
notation and associations that differ from Western notions developed in the
16th and 17th centuries. Household slavery in Bengal included social mobil-
ity, especially for women, for slaves could take part in household 'politics',
enjoy privileges and even acquire the right of inheritance; in short, they
were socially and politically institutionalised. It was the colonial law system
which fundamentally transformed this enlarged concept of kinship, reduc-
ing it – in the case of women – to "concubinage" and – in the case of men –
to legal (cheap) labour contracts. However, the problem of slavery needs
much more research to make its various forms more transparent and intelli-
gible.[67] What remains striking so far is the simultaneous existence of slavery,
convict and indentured labour within the British Empire until the middle of

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[63]   TCHITCHEROV, *India*, pp. 167–214.

[64]   AHUJA, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, pp. 207–9; 239.

[65]   SPECKER, *Weber im Wettbewerb*, pp. 130.

[66]   PRAKASH, Gyan, *Bonded Histories. Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India.*
       Cambridge 1990, *vide* esp. pp. 3–4, 21–33, 74–77, 83–142, 182–3.

[67]   CHATTERJEE, Indrani, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India.* Delhi etc. 1999.

the 19th century.[68] This corroborates the above statement that the British were not interested in a free labour market but in a system of strictly controlled labour organisation.

The gap between the forced migration of the slave system and the new forms of semi-voluntary indentured migration has recently been bridged with Clare Anderson's study of convict labour on Mauritius in the first half of the 19th century and Satadru Sen's work on the penitentiary system on the Andaman Islands in the second half of the same century. As mentioned above, all three forms of "unfree labour" existed simultaneously within the British Empire and were not contradictory to the emergence of the capitalist world economy and its demand for a "free labour market". On the contrary, the strictly controlled colonial labourer was an essential part of the early forms of globalisation. With regard to convict labour, much research has been done on North America and, of course, on Australia. Even in this context both books serve as missing links between those two countries and prove the worldwide growth of convict labour in the 18th and 19th centuries. Transportation with hard labour remained a probate form of punishment throughout that period despite reforms of the penal system in Great Britain. The cases of Mauritius and especially the Andamans vividly demonstrate the expansion of the forced labour system on a grand scale well into the 20th century.[69]

Transportation of Indian convicts to Mauritius after 1815, when the island was finally transferred to the British at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, developed into a major source of unpaid and forced labour that built and maintained the island's infrastructure during the transition period from slavery to the indenture system, as labour supply in the post-abolition period remained inadequate. Convicts had to build roads and bridges, dig canals, clear forests and plant trees and construct Port Louis's citadel. Young, fit and skilled young men were required from India who, as the Mauritian government recognised, were to be sent back after their productive capacities had been exploited.[70]

The convict system on the Andamans was closely related to that on Mauritius, the major difference being that the islands' were used solely as a

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[68] ANDERSON, Clare, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean. Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53*. Macmillan Press, Basingstoke and London 2000. CARTER, *Voices from Indenture*, pp. 103–5.

[69] For a good discussion on the penitentiary system in British India in the 19th century *vide* ARNOLD, David, 'The colonial prison: power, knowledge and penology in nineteenth-century India, in: *idem* and David HARDIMAN (eds), *Subaltern Studies* vol. VIII, Delhi etc.: 1994, pp. 148–87.

[70] ANDERSON, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean*, pp. 10; 14–24.

convict colony. The blue print of this system derived from the Straits Settlement in 1818. Sir Stamford Raffles, the governor of Sumatra, had than suggested a self-sustaining convict colony based on forced labour of forcefully transported convicts with the prospect of a long term settlement. The implementation of this plan seems to have been successful on the Andaman Islands where a colonial convict society emerged in the second half of the 19th century. The British transformed the Andamans into a penal settlement immediately after the Great Rebellion in India (1857–59). Soon, "political" prisoners were followed by ordinary criminals, mostly prisoners with life sentences. Female convicts were transported from 1862 onwards, and encouraged by the British authorities to marry the male convicts and to populate, inhabit and colonise the islands. Around 1900, more than 10,000 convicts were settled in the archipelago.[71]

The system of forced convict labour on tropical islands definitely deserves more academic research. Isolated penal islands seem to have been the laboratory of the colonial state as regards an efficient (punishing) ruler and the efficient (labouring) subject. Or, to put it differently, convict islands reflected the parental attitude of the colonial state permanently educating and disciplining naughty children for their ultimate betterment. More case studies on other convict islands like Penang and Bencoolen as well as comparative studies including Caribbean penal islands, ought to be undertaken to enable a better understanding of the convict island system.[72] In any case, globalisation set in early, but not only in the realm of respected and more visible commercial and trading networks.

Global entrepreneurial and labour networks

The emergence of a regional as well as global labour market and the corresponding migration patterns were the two sides of the same coin. The globalisation of markets rendered migration necessary. To a large extent the migration of labourers within the British Empire had to be enforced by various means. Labourers and workers remained scarce until the massive demographic increase of the 1920s. However, labour markets arose and migration also occurred outside the realm of British organisation and control. Claude Markovits' seminal study on the global world of Indian tradesmen

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[71] SEN, Satadru, *Disciplining Punishment. Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands*, Delhi 2000, pp. 1–35.

[72] DUFFIELD, Ian, and James BRADLEY (eds), Representing Convicts. New Perspectives on Convict Forced Labour Migration, London 1997.

shows that migration was not restricted to workers and labourers but encompassed traders and merchants (*baniyas*) too. He also deconstructs the notion of a unitary South Asian diaspora. Figures clearly show that out of the total number of migrants between 1830 and 1950, temporary migrants amounted to nearly 90%. However, a definition of the term "diaspora" would have been quite helpful, as it seems that a considerable semantic shift has taken place from the Jewish diaspora on the rivers of Babylon and after 70 A.D. to the modern Indian diaspora.

Baniyas from Shikarpur and Hyderabad, both are situated in Sindh in the lower Indus basin, built up trading and information networks in the 19th and 20th centuries. Markovits clearly defines "network" as a system with a centre, a capital-raising agency, dispersed settlements and travelling employees as well as an intensive exchange of personnel, capital, goods and information, the latter being the most crucial in the constant flow of resources.[73] It is these networks which enabled the widespread circulation of merchants and commercial employees between India and many regions of the world in the *longue durée*. Shikarpuris as well as Hyderabadis paradigmatically show how Indians were able to create profitable niches within the European-dominated world of capitalist economy. Thus, local histories are combined with global history, bypassing 'national' history.[74]

The absence of an elaborate caste system due to Sindh's role as a melting pot of merchants, manufacturers and producers in the 18th century facilitated Sindhi overseas expansion. Being originally engaged in the expanding opium business, Shikarpuri merchants established themselves as money-lenders cum traders in the agrarian sector of Russian Central Asia. They also had dependencies in Iran, Afghanistan and Sinkiang.[75] Hyderabadis, generally referred to as Sindhworkies, started their business as petty traders in "oriental souvenirs" along the emerging tourist routes in the Mediterranean, Cairo, the Indian Ocean, China, and, eventually, in Japan and Panama. Sindhworkies are a fascinating example of merchants copying Western techniques of trade and transforming these according to their own and their customers needs.[76]

The division of labour became the most crucial aspect in the development of cross-border and global networks which were based on the so-called *shah-gumashta* system, as it evolved in the 18th and 19th centuries. The shah or head of a firm remained in Sindh whilst he organised his business

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[73] MARKOVITS, *Global World of Indian Merchants*, pp. 24–6.

[74] *Ibid.*, pp. 295–7.

[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 63–104.

[76] *Ibid.*, pp. 111–28.

through his brokers or *gumashtas*. This enabled him to control capital, goods, men (*gumashtas* and employees!) and information.[77] Concerning the flow of personnel, this was organised exclusively on a private level, as, prior to the abolition of indentured emigration in 1917 and the Indian Emigration Act of 1922, the colonial state was not involved in the circulation of labourers, neither as an organising nor as a regulating agency. It is all the more astonishing as well as fascinating how efficiently Sindhworkies and Shikarpuris organised the circulation of their personnel.

Though the source material seems rather scattered, consisting of bits and pieces which hardly seem sufficient to start with the puzzling mosaic, Markovits convincingly creates a world of "subaltern" businessmen and experienced merchants acting fairly self-confidently on the global stage. Large parts of the mosaic are still missing and will probably remain forever incomplete, yet even the fragmented picture might turn out to be of a different colouring. In any case, a first, commendable and meritorious attempt at rewriting history and giving an impetus to a new historiography has successfully been undertaken. This refreshing approach merits close attention.

In search of labour Indians initially migrated to different parts of the British Empire, mostly to Mauritius, but also to the Caribbean islands and Fiji. Starting to work as "indentured labourers" many decided to stay in their new homeland and quite a few soon improved their lot by establishing small businesses. At least the first generation of migrants was able to keep in touch with relatives and friends in their native villages or towns in India if they wanted to. But India ceased to be the point of reference as soon as the migrants embarked on their sea-voyage which in many instances became the crucial as well as traumatic point of no return. Most of the migrants decided to permanently settle in the new country or island. Yet, sometimes forms of long lasting migration patterns developed within the British Empire's former plantation colonies, indentured labourers cross-migrating between Natal, Mauritius, the Caribbean and Reunion and thus plunging even further into diaspora.[78]

A loosely knit network of overseas and indigenous relationships thus emerged within decades. Though communications were very poor even at the commencement of the 20th century, however, the few and scattered pieces of correspondence reveal a strong tie with relatives left behind. Further research will show whether there was a sort of global network which linked at least some of the migrating labourers. But Indians have also migrated, and still do so, to the USA and Canada, to Malaysia and Singapore, raising

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[77] *Ibid.*, pp. 156–178.

[78] CARTER and TORABULLY, *Coolitude*, pp. 37–44, 131–142.

questions of community and communalism particularly between Muslims and Hindus.[79] Family networks seem to play a significant role in tightly knitting the ties of information and business among migrants. At the same time, Indians 'abroad' are compensating their lost identities with the recognition that a new identity in their new countries is being created. This is, indeed, one of the basic definitions of diaspora. As Muslims of Kerala certainly differ from the Muslims of Delhi, it seems self evident that Muslims in Mauritius differ from those in Trinidad. The same is, of course, true for Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. New identities are shaped along the lines of common descent, region, religion and culture which develop new dynamics in the country of destination.

Concluding remarks

Within the broad spectrum of labour and migration three major aspects predominate. First, it has been the transformation of indigenous Indian customs and traditional habits into legal forms which marks the specific colonial context and, simultaneously, "invented" local traditions of a "medieval", backward and static India. Secondly, capitalist industrialisation does not require an 'exclusively' free labour market. As a rule, forms of unfree labour, ranging from slavery to convict labour, indentured labour and bonded labour, existed parallel to each other within British-India and were also constitutive elements of the British Empire's growing labour market. The exception to the rule is represented by the "white" settler colonies and Great Britain which had the most advanced free labour markets. The emergence of modern capitalism and industrialisation thus does not depend on a market of free labour. On the contrary, the co-existence of predominantly forced forms of labour and migration as well as its free forms are its distinctive features. And thirdly, the diversified labour market is comprised of a likewise highly diversified labour class. At no time and nowhere did labourers form a unitary class in the strict sense of the term. They have always been a heterogeneous part of the lower strata of society.

Financial and logistic operations like capital advances, networks and information seem to have been central aspects of an evolving market of labour, labourers and workers, creating local and global labour markets through different kinds of mobility which ranged from forced to voluntary and temporary or permanent migration. The simultaneous shift from local personal ties to abstract contract relations is a complementary aspect of this historical

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79 MOHAMMAD, Aminah T., 'Relationships between Muslims and Hindus in the United States: *Mlecchas* versus *Kafirs*', in: BATES, *Community*, pp. 286–308.

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process. Various forms of contracts to regulate finances, trade and labour became the backbone of India's industrial development from the middle of the 19th century and decisively influenced the progress of industrialisation, migration and urbanisation.[80] Even in the case of rural development and the still ongoing process of "peasantisation", contracts played an important role in the distribution of labour including short and long range migration. Next to the many types of contracts as the "modern" form of labour organisation, increasing migration became equally decisive for the process of industrialisation in consequence of the growing division of labour.

In addition to the more general aspects of migration we can observe differences or gradations among various types of forced migration. The main reasons for migration were definitely non-voluntary. Whilst earlier academic research concentrated on the destination of the migrants, recent investigation focuses upon the point of departure. This is especially true with Samita Sen's "gender study" on women in the Calcutta jute mills and the rural origins of the migrants. In the wider context the coercive character of the colonial regime's approach towards Indian labour becomes the outstanding feature. Slaves, convicts, indentured labourers and bonded labourers were past and parcel of the colonial regime, in which dominance was based solely upon coercive means without hegemony.[81] The labour policy of the colonial state is certainly a good example of the British colonial system at work.

British social construction of India including the "invention" of India's traditions commenced in the 18th century and continued well into the 20th century. This became characteristic of the colonial system organising its labour market, along patterns of paternalistic protection, by employees on the one hand and various forms of bonded labour on the other, denying India's working people the ideas of egalitarian principles among contracting partners. In some way this comes close to a re-invention of England's own "lost paradise" of a feudal-paternalistic social order in India where traditional forms of bonded labour were cast into the moulds of English legalism and jurisdiction ("rule of law") for the protection and betterment of the Indian people. In fact, neither at home nor in their colonies, particularly in the Indian Raj were the British interested in free labour – and certainly not in a "labour force" – or any kind of free labour market because neither could be controlled effectively. However, to control their Indian subjects became the obsessive mania of the British colonial regime in India and throughout the Empire, and labour was considered to be the most appropriate means to this end.

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[80] ROY, *Traditional Industries*, pp. 30–41.

[81] GUHA, Ranajit, *Dominance without Hegemony. History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge/Mass. and London 1997, pp. 24–8.

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