

## MIGRATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The dominant western migration paradigm tends to privilege Europe-based trans-Atlantic mobility of people, skills, commodities, ideas, culture etc., and undermines the role of intra-Asian migrations in the making of the modern world. The Eurocentric migration studies while prioritizing the role of western capital have also underplayed the role of Asian labor in the emergence of the international capitalist world order and modern globalization (for references on Eurocentric approaches see Adam McKeown, "Global Migration, 1846-1940" ([http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\\_of\\_world\\_history/v015/15.2mckeown.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_world_history/v015/15.2mckeown.pdf)). Moreover, the emphasis in such studies on the dominating role and influence of the metropolitan industrial world tends to undermine the historical role and significance of non-western regions and regional economic integration through migration. To challenge this assumption, this note addresses some aspects of the process of formation of regional/sub-globalization based on contacts and linkages between Asian countries by exploring the trajectory of migration of South Indians to Burma, Malaysia and the Gulf countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Global South, mainly the Asian continent, has been closely integrated by the mobility of millions of its people across the seas/oceans. From about the mid-nineteenth century, migrations within Asia were also closely linked to the changing global commercial, economic and political conditions. Although the Indians migrated to the far off places in the Pacific (Fiji) and Caribbean islands and the Indian Ocean region (Mauritius and South Africa/Natal) predominantly as indentured laborers, the interconnectedness was greater within Asian countries than beyond. Available evidence suggests that between 1834 and 1917, around 1.3 million indentured laborers migrated to the above destinations, whereas six million contract laborers went to Southeast Asia under the *kangani* and *maistry* systems (Clarck et al. 1990, "[South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity](#)", p.8-9). However, unlike the European migrations the Indian migration flows across the Bay of

Bengal region were characterized by several forms of middle-men-mediated contract systems and debt-bondage. Labor migrations in the mid-nineteenth century from South India to the Bay of Bengal region, and since the 1970s to the Middle East/Gulf countries are a case in point.

The Bay of Bengal's circuits of migration both responded to and brought about changes on a global scale. For instance, Malaysian rubber – tapped by South Indian migrant workers – fed the American Automobile industry. During the colonial period, Malaya became the most economically valuable tropical colony in the whole of the British Empire, whereas Burma became the largest rice exporter in the world, in a boom backed by Indian Chettiar capital and drawing millions of Indian migrant workers into the every sector of its economy. Indian migrations grew in the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially after the abolition of the indenture system. Around 28 million people crossed the Bay of Bengal in both directions between 1840 and 1940. The Bay of Bengal region was home to one of world's great migrations under European colonialism. Subsequent to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, large-scale Indian emigration began with the development of European commercial and industrial enterprises in Southeast Asia. It has been estimated that out of approximately 28 million people who emigrated from India up to 1940, close to 27 million went to just three destinations in Southeast Asia; Burma, Ceylon, and Malaya. In other words, the Bay of Bengal region accounted for nearly the sum total of India's emigration history in the age of empire. During the post-colonial era, the Gulf boom of the 1970s and thereafter led to a considerable increase in the revenue of the oil-producing countries in West Asia and the Gulf region. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the South Indians responded almost immediately to the growing demands for labor in those countries. Starting on a modest scale in the early 1970s, this trend continued to grow. Between 1976 and 2011 more than 29 million Indian workers obtained emigration clearance to work in the foreign countries, predominantly in the Middle Eastern countries. The gulf labor migrations are mediated both through the recruiting agents and social networks. In principle the Gulf migrations are voluntary and

free, though elements of compulsion and coercion are noticeable.

Indeed, unlike the trans-Atlantic migrations, South Indian migrations across the Bay of Bengal region included short-term, chain, and return, as well as family-oriented patterns. In the case of South Indian labor migrations, development of extensive middlemen and agents' networks were crucial during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. The South Indian migrants relied on the networks and connections that kinship and local community provided to find jobs and security and to carve out new ways of migrating to Southeast Asia and the Gulf countries. Between 1844 and 1910, about 250,000 indentured laborers migrated to Malaya. The *kangani*-recruited labor formed the bulk of the labor force on the rubber estates. From 1844 to 1938, *kangani*-assisted migration accounted for 62.2 percent of total Indian labor migration, compared to 13 percent for indentured migration. It was estimated that in 1920, only 12 percent of Indian workers were voluntary migrants, but this proportion had increased to over 91 percent by the 1930s. Thus it is clear that labor migration to colonial Burma was mostly temporary, short-term, and circular (sojourning). As I pointed out in a recent article ("[From Coromandal Coast to Suvarnabhumi: Intra-Asian Migrations in the Era of Globalization](#)", p. 132-34), unassisted and voluntary labor migrations have become popular in Burma and Malaya during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the pace, patterns, and networks of South Indian labor migration increasingly undermined the structure and function of the middlemen. Thus by the 1930s assisted and free South Indian

labor migration increased rapidly. In the development of such a pattern the return migrant and village played a significant role. Available evidence indicates that many of the returnees invited their relations and friends to go over either to Burma or Malaya and take advantage of the opportunities there; while many returned with newfound awareness and competence. Nevertheless, the main difference between the Asian and the Atlantic migration circuits lays in the numbers of those who settled rather than returned. Amrith, in "[Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia](#)", found that that between 6 and 7 million Indian people, and a similar number of Chinese, had settled overseas by the end of the 1930s; whereas 85 million people of British origin lived outside the British Isles by that time (p. 18). An examination of the available data on arrivals and departures from colonial Burma between the years 1889 and 1929, and for Malaya between 1888 and 1935, indicates that more than 80 percent of the South Indian laborers did not migrate to settle permanently.

An argument can thus be made against the view that northern migrations were voluntary and free, while the non-European migrations were coercive, indentured and/or involuntary. An examination of the pattern and nature of Indian migrations since the mid-nineteenth century indicates that indentured migrations constituted only a small part of the total migration flows. What is more, Asian migration is comparable in scale to trans-Atlantic migration in the same period in the global context.

*Adapa Satyanarayana's recent publications include the article "[Beyond the Eurocentric History of Migration: An Indian Perspective](#)".*