

Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking indentured labour migration in the nineteenth century¹

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Abstract

This article seeks to shift the frame of analysis within which discussions of Indian indentured migration take place. It argues that colonial discourses and practices of indenture are best understood not with regard to the common historiographical framework of whether it was ‘a new system of slavery’, but in the context of colonial innovations in incarceration and confinement. The article shows how Indian experiences of and knowledge about transportation overseas to penal settlements informed in important ways both their own understandings and representations of migration and the colonial practices associated with the recruitment of indentured labour. In detailing the connections between two supposedly different labour regimes, it thus brings a further layer of complexity to debates around their supposed distinctions.

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In the aftermath of Britain’s abolition of the slave trade (1807) and then slavery itself (1834), the colonial administration of India oversaw a system of labour migration through which close to one million Indians signed contracts of indenture in the Mascarene Islands, east and south Africa, the West Indies, and Fiji. Thanks to the meticulous research of a generation of economic and social historians, we know a great deal about the processes that underpinned the recruitment and shipment of indentured labourers, of working practices on plantations, and of the everyday and extraordinary lives of these migrant men and women.² With their eyes cast on the trade in African slaves to the sugar plantations of Mauritius and the Caribbean, nineteenth-century metropolitan opponents of Indian indenture invoked enslavement as a critical rhetorical device. Correspondingly, the historiography of indenture usually centres on the question of whether it was a ‘new system of slavery’, and historians have analysed its practices and processes accordingly. As Madhavi Kale

has argued in a penetrating critique of the politics of the colonial archive, thus the discourses associated with indenture are reflected in a set of literature that naturalizes an apparent division between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour.³

Despite its depth and richness, this literature does not engage fully with the question of enslavement within South Asia itself, and its relationship to indentured labour. As Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton have shown, despite contemporary silences enslavement in the subcontinent was pervasive. It was quite different from industrial slavery, for Indian slaves were embedded in *social webs of dependency* within hierarchically structured groups, classes, and castes. According to this reading, Indian slavery was a *process* rather than an *institution* of reciprocity and obligation, and as such it took on a range of forms that were especially absorbent of economic, social, and / or political change. Its nature and meaning, therefore, changed over time and place, including during the British colonial period.⁴

This paper seeks to shift the frame of analysis within which discussions of indentured migration take place, through a close analysis of the associative relationship between labour recruitment and shipment and the colonial changes Chatterjee and Eaton describe. I will argue that the practices and experiences of indenture are best understood primarily in relation to the institutions and imaginative discourses that framed the well-established contemporary colonial practice of penal transportation as a process of social dislocation and rupture. Indeed, from the late eighteenth century the East India Company shipped tens of thousands of convicts overseas to work as forced penal labour in colonial settlements in Southeast Asia and Mauritius, and after the 1857 Revolt to the newly established penal colony in the Andaman Islands.⁵ My aim here is not to read indenture or transportation into ideas of Indian enslavement *per se*, but to suggest a broader, more inclusive, and overlapping

framework within which they can be considered. I will show how during the nineteenth century Indian experiences of and knowledge about penal transportation informed in crucial and intertwined ways both procedures related to recruitment and shipment and local understandings and representations of migration. This focus on migrants brings into sharp relief the multiple connections between two supposedly different regimes, and their wider relationship to South Asian hierarchies of social, economic, and political dependency.

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In 1858, the government of India commissioned an enquiry into mortality on board emigrant ships bound for the West Indies. During 1856-7 there had been an unprecedented number of deaths on vessels carrying indentured labourers from Calcutta to Trinidad and Demerara. The figures were alarming: 12.39% of male and 18.58% of female adults had died on board ship. Children and babies had suffered even more, and 28.38% of boys, 36.30% of girls, and 55.91% of infants perished.⁶ The head of the West Indies committee of enquiry, Inspector of Government Jails and Dispensaries F.J. Mouat, reported that in comparison to mortality on shore, the rates were not as high as they might at first appear. Nonetheless, although medical officers had selected migrants with care, he believed that the deaths had been caused by the embarkation of an increased proportion of women and children together with the neglect of basic sanitary precautions, such as the separation of the sick and the supply of river in preference to tank water. The causes of illness and death on board Indian indentured ships remained controversial throughout the nineteenth century.⁷ However,

what interests me here is not the history of health and medical practices at sea, but the discursive alignments and slippages that permeated Mouat's text.

Mouat had an illustrious career in the government of India. He was a professor of medicine who by the 1840s had risen to the position of principal of the Calcutta Medical College, and later like many medical men found employment in the Indian jails service.⁸ By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British colonial regime had set up a web of overseas penal settlements in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and, in addition to his responsibilities as inspector of mainland jails, Mouat oversaw the transportation of thousands of convict forced labourers to Bencoolen, Mauritius, the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, Singapore), and Burma.⁹ In the mid-1850s, Mouat visited the Burmese penal sites of Arakan and Tenasserim, and in the aftermath of the Indian Revolt of 1857 he chaired a committee set up by the government of India to recommend a location for a new penal settlement in the Andaman Islands.¹⁰ In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the terminology of overseas transportation filtered into his report on emigrant ships.

In some instances, the issue of penal transportation emerges simply through the mistaken description of 'coolies' as 'convicts', either by Mouat or the ships' commanders and others who gave statements to the committee of enquiry.¹¹ This verbal slippage hints at the many synergies of overseas transportation and migration. First amongst these is the relationship between the political economy of convictism and indenture. The significance of indentured labour to the expansion of plantation economies, particularly sugar production, is well known.¹² And yet by the time the first indentured migrants left India, Indian convicts had built the basic infrastructure – roads, bridges, bunds – of new colonial acquisitions including Singapore, Penang, Tenasserim, and Arakan.¹³ In colonies like Mauritius, the socio-economic relationship

between the two forms of migration was clear. An 1875 Commission of Enquiry into labour conditions reported that earlier convict transportation to the island made the Indian indentured labourer 'not the entire stranger he was in the West Indies and Demerara'.¹⁴

The blurring of the language of indenture and transportation by Mouat and his informants also speaks to contemporary suspicions that migration was an escape valve for unconvicted mutineers and rebels in the wake of the 1857 Revolt. During 1858 there was a boom in world sugar and more Indians than ever before signed contracts of indenture.¹⁵ At the time, officials made unsubstantiated allegations about the illicit migration (and therefore escape from colonial justice) of mutinous sepoys from the Bengal army. The emigration agent for Demerara wrote of an incident involving unrest at sea in 1863, for instance, claiming that the migrants involved appeared to have had 'military training' and had probably belonged to mutinous regiments or participated in civil rebellion. However, he reported, this 'from obvious reason, was generally carefully concealed by them.'¹⁶ Even as late as 1877 government administrators suggested that the revolt and the acceleration in indenture during 1858-9 'were not without connection'.¹⁷

Mouat's seeming terminological confusion went further than alignments between labour and revolt might suggest, however, for his report also made broader and more direct comparisons between the institutions associated with migration and those associated with other colonial practices. Mouat noted the effects on health of the movement of prisoners and migrants through the districts on their way to jails and ports, for instance, and between confinement in jails and between the decks on migrant ships.¹⁸ His approach was far from anomalous. A series of reports during the decade that followed took a similar line, so producing migrant depots and ships - like

other colonial institutions such as jails, penal settlements, asylums, lock-hospitals, and the army - as spaces of social and medical enquiry.¹⁹ Another emigration committee set up in 1861 drew attention to the comparative rates of mortality on ships and in jails.²⁰ A year later, medical officers saw important parallels between the dieting of prisoners and the dieting of migrants.²¹ Doctors also commented on the relative propensity of prisoners, migrants, and sepoys to disease.²² Investigations into comparative health and sickness had significant practical impacts too. In 1867, after another season of 'deplorable mortality' on West Indies emigrant ships, the government of India moved to ensure that the space allotted to migrants was the same as that allotted to prisoners in jail.²³

It was not only British officials who connected indenture with the disciplinary regimes associated with other colonial innovations. Indians also forged their own linkages, most particularly in viewing migration through a prism of incarceration and transportation. In part this related to direct overlaps between penal confinement and migration. The wives of Andamans convicts awaiting shipment to the Islands under family emigration schemes, for instance, were embarked through emigration depots.²⁴ Moreover, convictism and indenture were underpinned by a remarkably similar set of practices and institutions, most especially during the months following conviction (for convicts) or recruitment (for labourers). These included the journey from district to port, confinement in jail or emigrant depot, and perhaps most significantly the sea voyage to penal settlement or plantation.

The process of registration was a significant site for the blurring of transportation and migration in Indian minds. In order to have the terms and conditions of migration explained to them, just like defendants facing trial, potential labour recruits had to appear before district magistrates. Commonly, these encounters

took place in colonial courthouses or administrative offices connected with jails. Lucknow judge D.G. Pitcher investigated recruitment practices in the North West Provinces and Oudh during 1882, and in his report he criticised this process as an unnecessary coalescence of disciplinary colonial institutions which served only to deter labourers from migrating. Magistrates should, he recommended, avoid courthouses and jails as places of registration, for they produced inappropriate connections between migration and imprisonment in Indian minds.²⁵

The penal associations of indenture continued with the march to port. From the 1840s, convicts sentenced to lengthy terms were imprisoned in large central jails, for instance Agra and Allahabad in the North West Provinces. Those sentenced to transportation overseas were transferred to holding jails in each of the Indian presidencies: Alipur in Bengal, Thane (Thana) in Bombay, and Chingleput in Madras. During the first half of the nineteenth century, convicts marched under guard to both central and holding jails in *challan* chain gangs, or they journeyed upriver on government steamers. Later on, they were despatched by train. Migrant journeys to ports of embarkation followed a similar pattern. Once registered for indenture, migrants were held temporarily in police stations before their despatch. The Dickens Committee (1838-40) described how batches were marched to the police in a manner ‘as like as possible to the conveyance of convicts from one District to another, with the single exception that they were not in chains, and the guards were armed with no other weapons than rattans.’²⁶ ‘It would be an abuse of terms to say that the Coolies were treated like slaves’, it surmised, ‘but they certainly were treated, in practice, like something between impressed seamen and enlisted recruits.’²⁷ Indeed, in order to prevent migrants from deserting, they were accompanied in their embarkation by *chowkidars* (watchmen). The presence of such overseers had the effect of blurring the

boundaries between the legal status of convicts and migrants. As the committee argued: ‘The notion of sending guards over freemen is preposterous, and the evils of such a practice obvious.’²⁸

Labour recruits awaited embarkation for the colonies in purpose-built emigrant depots. In a description of the medical routines enforced there, in 1857 Examiner of West India Emigrants J.B. Scriven reported how an Indian doctor inspected all the single men for signs of venereal disease. He went on: ‘those that he considers fit subjects are then marked with a stamp, and brought before me. I usually feel their pulses, look at their tongues, take their general appearance into consideration, examine for pits of small-pox, &c’. Scriven described how he signed individual certificates, and then passed the whole batch of records on to the surgeon and commander of the emigrant ship. They signed the records off, confirming that they believed the migrants were in good health.²⁹ It was routine in these examinations for migrants to be stripped naked, and subjected to intimate examinations of the most humiliating kind.³⁰ Such medical inspections were a feature of often involuntary entry into colonial institutions of all kinds, including hospitals and asylums as well as jails, transportation ships, and emigration depots. Under the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868, Indian prostitutes suspected of having venereal disease were subject to compulsory detention, examination, and treatment in separate lock-hospitals.³¹

With respect to the examination of indentured migrants, there are two points of special interest. First is the medical examiner’s reference to marking migrants ‘with a stamp’, a process mentioned also by the medical superintendent of emigration to Mauritius, Arthur Payne. He revealed more details of the procedure a few years later in 1861. On the evening before embarkation, Payne reported, he went to the emigration depot with the ship’s surgeon for a final inspection of the migrants. They

stamped each on the forehead with ‘a figure which is not easily imitated’, checking the marks the following morning to ensure that during the night ‘no Cooley has been changed’.³² This was an allusion to fears that the sick would impersonate the healthy in order to embark overseas. Attempts to prevent this through the ‘stamping’ of migrants have striking parallels with an earlier nineteenth-century practice: the tattooing of convicts on the forehead with their name, crime, and date of sentence. Penal tattooing, known as *godna*, was enforced in Bengal and Madras between 1789 and 1849, in a bid to mark collective convict status as well as individual identity.³³ Though migrants were given temporary ‘stamps’ rather than permanent *godna* marks, both were inscriptions designed to enhance individual and collective legibility. The second point of note in the examiner’s 1861 report is his reference to the medical inspection of single men only. I have written elsewhere of the development of gender-specific practices of criminal identification. The exclusion of women from criminal photography and anthropometric measurement removed them from the purview of the colonial state in significant ways.³⁴ The exclusion of migrant women from pre-embarkation medical routines seems to reflect a similar unwillingness to probe, or practically and metaphorically speaking to unveil, Indian women’s bodies. Indeed, in his later 1882 report into migrant recruitment practices in the North West Provinces and Oude, Pitcher recognised that Indian communities’ fears about the medical examination of women were a major deterrent to female, and by implication family, migration.³⁵

The colonial penal regime produced innovations in the identification of Indian migrants in other ways too. In attempting to prevent the embarkation of sick labourers, agents looked to the administration of prisons and convict settlements in a search for strategies that anchored individuals to written records. Thus ‘stamp’ marks

were accompanied and eventually replaced by the type of regularised ship records, or indents, used for convicts.³⁶ Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting the etymological root that produces 'indent' and 'indenture' through a common allusion to stamping or impressing and splitting / joining. In making recommendations about shipboard record keeping, in 1858 Mouat suggested specifically the adoption of the system used on transportation vessels: the production of a general register detailing each individual's number, name, father's name, sex, caste, age, village, *zillah* (district), and *pargana* (subdistrict). And, in an explicit parallel with the identificatory regime then associated with mainland incarceration - and later adopted in the Andaman Islands - he recommended that each emigrant should wear a 'small wooden ticket, to be hung round the neck, with the ship's number cut upon it legibly in English and Bengali or Hindustani figures'.³⁷ In a report on migration from Bihar, later in 1883 G.A. Grierson proposed the compilation of more complex 'identifying links' that would tie indentured labourers then working overseas to their ship number, name, and date of sailing. He hoped that this would ease communication with their relatives and friends at home, and so promote steady migratory streams.³⁸

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these practices of identification implied an unequivocal extension of colonial power. Attempts to individuate convicts were undermined by practical limitations associated with the production of complex systems of record keeping, the reading, ordering and extraction of information, and the ideological conflict with a broader colonial tendency that collectivized the Indian social body according to cultural categories. The textualization of criminals was, therefore, inflected with difficulties in producing, reading, and ordering information in the context of an inability to see beyond the ordering tropes of 'race' and 'caste'.³⁹ Similar problems beset practices associated with the recruitment and shipment of

indentured labourers. Pitcher complained in 1882 of having seen one set of registers where each migrant was described as ‘of a black colour’.⁴⁰ His complaint resonates with criticisms levelled at the useless descriptions recorded on Andaman convict rolls at the turn of the century: ‘keeps company with gymnasts’ and ‘he is a bad man’, for instance.⁴¹ In 1883, Grierson wrote scathingly of the way in which registers of Bihari migrants were produced. Though district magistrates were responsible for their compilation, they received no payment. Therefore, recruiters employed bazaar writers who were unable to fill out the columns correctly in English. They sent the registers to the protector of emigrants in Calcutta, whose Bengali staff knew nothing of Bihar. ‘It is astonishing to me that the Protector’s returns are even so correct as they are,’ he reported. The records were little more than a ‘disorganized bundle of papers tied together by a string’. That is, if they had not been eaten by mice.⁴²

The somewhat ambivalent divide in the experiences of convicts and migrants in these respects was further informed through Indian understandings of colonial labour practices more generally. During the first half of the nineteenth century, many communities held the view that different kinds of labour associated with the colonial regime were forms of ‘service’. As such, both convicts and indentured labourers spoke of their recruitment to (East India) ‘Company’ or ‘government’ work. Convicts in the Straits Settlements apparently called themselves *kumpane ke naukur*, or Company servants.⁴³ It has been argued that in areas of recruitment to the Bengal army - notably Bihar, also a significant source of convicts and an important recruiting ground for indentured labour - this was probably connected to local perceptions about the relationship between distance and work within experiences of military service (*naukur*) specifically.⁴⁴ Indeed, though in theory the government did not promote migration directly, it promised recruits its ‘protection’, which led many Indians to

believe that it had engaged them directly.⁴⁵ Perceptions that convictism and indenture were equivalent to 'service' may also have spoken to certain features of contemporary enslavement in India, where a slave gave labour in exchange for their master's support.⁴⁶ One early returned migrant testified to a police enquiry that he and his companions had been told that he had been engaged to do Company (government) work: 'If they had not supposed they were going to serve the Company they would not have gone.'⁴⁷ The extent to which Indians interpreted indenture as a form of Company service (and possibly slavery) is clear from the apparently widespread belief by the 1880s that government saw such overseas contracts as a means to populate 'desert' colonies.⁴⁸ Given the extent of the practical and imaginative overlaps between transportation and migration, it should come as no surprise that during his investigations in the North West Provinces and Oudh in 1882, locals directed Pitcher to a particular village with a view of introducing him to a returned emigrant. He reported: 'he proved to be a reminiscence of the mutiny, a Brahmin, who had then been sent to the Andamans for some crime, and had served his time, bringing back money.'⁴⁹

Another interesting area of coalescence between transportation and indenture within colonial discourses was the belief that both forms of migration promoted rehabilitation through reformatory labour. I have shown elsewhere that moral reformation was absolutely central to overseas transportation during the first half of the nineteenth century, with convicts employed on public works in the Straits Settlements and Burma cut off from kin networks and moved through a 'class system' of privilege and punishment to gain a ticket-of-leave.⁵⁰ In the Andaman Islands penal colony, the government employed a similar system, also promoting the transportation of convict women and a series of family emigration schemes in the belief that moral

reclamation could be anchored to a gendered sort of social stability.⁵¹ There is clear evidence that after serving a short term or winning a pardon for exceptional service, convicts who returned to India subsequently migrated. Pitcher found a returned convict at the Mauritius depot in Benares, for instance, and without reference to the rehabilitative goals of transportation overseas expressed the hope that the ‘fine-looking Musalman’ might be reformed through migration.⁵² In keeping with the family emigration schemes associated with the Andamans, colonial officials also believed that if kin groups migrated together, indenture provided a means of producing a stable social order through the integration of hierarchies of gender with ‘honest labour’.⁵³

Pitcher reported further his encounters with returned emigrants who described the domestication of former thieves, for in the colonies, they recalled, ‘the stomach of the laziest is always full.’ The protector of emigrants in Calcutta, J.G. Grant, told Pitcher of his desire to see ‘professional criminals’ migrate, reform, and make an honest livelihood. One district police officer told Pitcher that he was surprised at the number of ex-prisoners who signed contracts of indenture. ‘It is better for the country, and for those men themselves,’ Pitcher wrote, ‘that they should have the opportunity afforded in a new country, and in the absence of temptation, of becoming good citizens.’⁵⁴ However, as during the aftermath of the 1857 Revolt, British officials were anxious about how communities under pressure might use indenture as a means of eluding arrest and trial. One British correspondent in an early 1838 investigation into labour recruitment, J. Shaw, reported his belief that heinous offenders escaped justice through migration to Mauritius. His text reveals the attraction of migration to itinerant communities like religious mendicants who by the 1830s were coming under increasing colonial pressure to form settled and economically productive

communities. Indeed, Shaw wrote of one migrant embarked for Mauritius ‘who looked *like a Thug*, and who had never been in the habit from his own account of passing a single day, as an honest or industrious labourer’. In reality, the man was no ‘hereditary’ criminal, but a religious mendicant. Shaw hinted at the suspicion such men aroused, describing him as ‘one of the vagabonds and pests to society called *Sunyussees (sannyasi)*, a most profligate and debauched set of men, than who, are not in existence in Hindoostan.’⁵⁵

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The disciplinary overlaps represented in the discussions and procedures associated with penal confinement, transportation, and migration were refracted through an indistinct colonial language that blurred the boundaries between convictism and indenture. I have already noted the Dickens Committee’s likening of the transfer of gangs of migrants with the movement of convicts between the districts. One of Mouat’s correspondents in 1858, T. Caird, an emigration agent in Calcutta, also wrote of the ‘forced marches’ of migrant parties from the districts to Calcutta for embarkation.⁵⁶ Colonial enquiries into labour recruitment in north India during the 1880s referred to batches of labourers as ‘*challan*’ or ‘*chalan*’.⁵⁷ This mirrored the use of the word during the first half of the nineteenth century as a mode of reference to chain gangs of transfer prisoners and transportation convicts.⁵⁸ Later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it also became a term of reference for groups of Andamans convicts en route to ports of embarkation, as described for instance by nationalist prisoner V.D. Savarkar.⁵⁹

Most significantly, from the early 1840s both British administrators and Indian communities used the expression *kala pani* to describe the sea voyage into indenture.⁶⁰ The literal translation of this metaphorical term is ‘black water’; it

invokes powerfully the caste pollution produced on ships through common messing and the sharing of berths, water pumps, and latrines. Indeed, one of Pitcher's informants, Prag Singh, said that one of the main deterrents to indenture was the impression amongst potential recruits that because migrants ate out of a single dish on board ship with 'people of other castes' they would become '*bedharam*' (irreligious).⁶¹ And yet though *kala pani* is now most commonly associated with the experience of indenture – indeed in places like Mauritius and Trinidad it has come to symbolise the hardships of indenture in collective memory – by the time the first indentured migrants left India in 1834 *kala pani* was a commonly understood term of reference for the journey into transportation. Journeying to penal settlements, convicts also faced the prospect of compromising caste, most especially because they were locked to a common chain. Nineteenth-century proponents of indenture thus found it most perplexing when British magistrates and emigration agents continued to employ the phrase, they claimed in order to impress upon labour recruits that they would have to undertake an ocean voyage as part of their indentureship. Pitcher described what happened when individuals appeared for registration. If magistrates used the words *kala pani*, 'the coolie is apt to lose all self-possession'. 'Says the coolie to himself, when he hears a Magistrate Saheb talking to him of *kala pani* – "*Kya! Ham ne kya kasur, kiya ke ham ko kala pani sunate hain?*" ("What! What wrong have we done, that [he] speaks to us of *kala pani*?"). Migrants told him how as a result they 'escaped' from recruiters ("*Tab bhag jata*").⁶² *Kala pani* was, Pitcher underlined, a well understood reference to convict transportation, and it should therefore be avoided as an explanatory frame for processes associated with indentured migration.⁶³ Indeed, the magistrate of Jaunpur reported at about the same time that though formerly he had used the expression *kala pani* in making it clear to potential migrants that they would

have to travel by ship, he no longer did so as had been warned that its association with transportation would deter them.⁶⁴

Though the potential migrants interviewed by Pitcher clearly interpreted their sea voyage in relation to both its association with penal transportation and the caste pollution it invoked, I would not like to suggest that such an outlook was socially or culturally static and unchanging. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that convicts had highly variable attitudes to the prospect of travelling by sea, and that they changed over time and were informed through (rather than causally associated with) complex combinations of religion, community, and status.⁶⁵ Migrants too had different feelings about ocean voyages. Surgeon superintendents charged with their welfare reported commonly that after a few days at sea migrants ate all kinds of food, including meat. One of the captains who corresponded with Mouat in 1858, John Lawson, noted that migrants had few or no dietary requirements: 'They would have eaten food from my table', he reported.⁶⁶ The medical superintendent of emigration to Mauritius, Arthur Payne, reported later on that he believed that during voyages 'caste prejudice is greatly abandoned', and 'a majority of the Emigrants use meat with avidity and advantage'.⁶⁷

It seems that over time, in order to overcome social ambivalence about migration, caste Hindus found new ways of resisting the threat of ritual pollution. Grierson reported that in some of the districts of Bihar new beliefs about sea voyages were gaining ground, leading to significant changes in cultural practices.⁶⁸ His diary comments in this respect are worth citing in full:

About caste, the people have invented a curious theory regarding ship-board life, which shows the adaptability of native customs. I was saying that the cooks on board-ship were generally Brahmans, and was met by the assertion that there are some castes, Sonars for instance, who will not eat food cooked by Brahmans. "How then do they do on board-ship?" "O, that is simple enough; a man can eat anything on board-

ship. A ship is like the temple of Jagannath, where there are no caste restrictions.” I admit that this rather staggered me, but I have since enquired from respectable men, and without doubt this belief is spreading. It is said to have originated with the steamer journey from Calcutta to Orissa, which is one of the incidents of a pilgrimage to Jagannath. On board these ships the theory was first introduced, as one of the incidents of the pilgrimage, and is now being extended to emigrant ships, to the great benefit of the Colonies.⁶⁹

The roots of the cultural dynamics of migrant voyaging can perhaps be found in earlier shipboard practices amongst Hindu convicts keen to protect their caste or, in the case of ‘respectable’ Muslims, their status. Convicts took food with them, formed their own messes, and on arrival in penal settlements performed purification ceremonies.⁷⁰ One returned emigrant from Demerara, Ganga Din Misr, seemed rather bemused about the cultural meanings supposedly attached to the crossing of the ocean as he described his voyage to Pitcher. He had not only crossed the *kala pani*, he said, but the ‘*sufait* [white], *lal* [red], *nila* [blue], and *hara* [green] *pani*’.⁷¹

I would like to turn for a moment to the nature and significance of the process of ‘social absence’ in framing Indian understandings of transportation, which in turn filtered into the language of migration in important ways. There is no question that the removal of convicts from Indian communities to overseas penal settlements influenced Indian attitudes to indenture. Though there is evidence that convicts wrote letters home, because they were almost always sentenced to life terms most never returned to India. Given that the overwhelming majority of convicts were men, this had a significant effect on family units. Overseas penal settlements left convicts’ India-based mothers, wives, and children in a perilous economic state. In the aftermath of the mass transportations that accompanied the 1857 Rebellion, for instance, dozens of women presented petitions to government, often repeatedly, begging for relief.⁷² Transportation had an important cultural impact too. For example, it was not unusual for the elderly or sick parents of convicts to seek news of

their sons, in the vain hope that they would return to perform impending funeral rites. Though transportation affected relatively few families directly – the government shipped tens of thousands of convicts out of a population of some millions – I would argue that its impact was felt in many communities. Though over time, Indians acquired often detailed knowledge about penal settlements,⁷³ nevertheless they regarded them as spaces of social disappearance.

It is clear that Indians interpreted migration overseas in the language of social absence also. Grierson noted the use of the word *tapu* (island) as a generic expression for the West Indies and Mauritius. It came to mean a place from which one never returned, and as such filtered into everyday language in interesting ways:

[I]f any one's son or brother disappears and is not heard of again, after a family quarrel, it is at once concluded that he has gone to the *Tápú*, and nothing more is thought about it. In this way the colonies (very often entirely without reason) get the credit of being a kind of *Limbo* where every one goes who is lost sight of, and hence they get a bad name as a place where, once a person goes, ten chances to once he is never heard of again.⁷⁴

Grierson went on to describe how 'Mirich' (Mauritius) was also understood as a referent to indenture, with some people believing that it was made up of the *zillahs* of 'Chini Dad' (Trinidad) and 'Damra' (Demerara). Apparently one old man told Grierson: 'People who go there always do disappear.'⁷⁵ Pitcher also wrote of finding wives who had waited for news of their emigrant husbands for long years, not knowing whether they were dead or alive. Indeed, one of his principal recommendations was that letter writing between migrants and their families should be encouraged through cheaper postage.⁷⁶ In improving communication, this would enable the creation of the plantation colonies as spaces of global association rather than as spaces of individual or community loss.

Intimately connected to Indian beliefs about plantation colonies as sites of social disappearance were broader rumours about the nature and meaning of indentured migration more broadly. Many officials reported that Indians were highly suspicious of government motives in encouraging migration, and this has to be viewed in the context of Indian resistance to other forms of cultural intrusion. A revenue commissioner in the Bombay Presidency wrote in 1875 that when communities saw government officers ‘interfering in the matter’ they imagined that it was planning a wholesale deportation of the population.⁷⁷ An officer working in Saran district to promote emigration reported at the same time that the first question Indians asked was: “‘Why are the Government so anxious to send us away? What is their intention?’”⁷⁸ As in cultural fears relating to the crossing of the *kala pani*, many such rumours circulated around religion. Fears about inappropriate colonial interventions into religious practices were, of course, central to the outbreak of the revolt of 1857, and it was widely believed that the British wished to forcibly convert Indians to Christianity. Prisons were important sites of rebellion in this respect, for the British had introduced a number of culturally transgressive disciplinary innovations that prisoners and their kin opposed violently in the years leading up to and during the rebellion.⁷⁹ Particularly prominent within rumours about both incarceration and indenture were beliefs about caste. In much the same way as free communities in places like Bihar mounted protests against common messing and forcible conversion in jails, according to Pitcher even ‘educated natives’ thought that migrants would be made to eat beef and pork, and forcibly converted to Christianity.⁸⁰ Such beliefs were so widespread that both during appearances before the registering magistrates and on their way to port, labour recruits were accosted and insulted by the police and railway

officials, sometimes leading to their desertion.⁸¹ Pitcher wrote thus of a courthouse scene:

Before entering [his] presence, the coolies have probably had to wait in the verandah some time, exposed to the curiosity and to the jeers of the crowds of chaprassis [office messengers], policemen, petition-writers, suitors, &c., some of whom occasionally refer unkindly to unwonted food as being ordinarily supplied to coolies in the colonies, or call them “*mirchias*,”⁸² which is supposed to embody a good deal that is dreadful.⁸³

A recruiter for French colonies, Ramesar, told Grierson how the police entered the depots and told migrants that in the colonies they would be made Christians ‘and that they will be eaten up by maggots and leeches.’⁸⁴

Referring to the rumours about the use of greased cartridges that sparked off the 1857 Revolt, Pitcher wrote of the pressing need to dispel such anxieties: ‘It is surely a greater political danger to allow the beliefs regarding interference with caste, and forcible conversion to Christianity, to remain unchallenged, than to systematically set to work to destroy them?’⁸⁵ However, potential recruits were not greeted with derision everywhere. Grierson noted that whilst in Gaya stories about forced conversion were common, in Shahabad, the population was much more sympathetic to migration, believing for instance that Hindus in Mauritius were incredibly pious.⁸⁶

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In nineteenth-century India, there was a close association between convict transportation and indentured migration, discursively, institutionally, and imaginatively. Despite metropolitan declarations that indenture was ‘a new system of slavery’, contemporaries in India framed it in different ways: not with respect to enslavement – African or Indian - but through the colonial discourses and practices

that were associated with imprisonment and overseas transportation. Colonial administrators used established penal practices in formulating procedures surrounding recruitment, identification, and embarkation. Moreover, Indian communities imagined indenture in the context of their knowledge of overseas transportation. Absolutely central to Indian understandings of indenture were beliefs that both transportation and migration invoked social rupture and permanent loss. Convicts, migrants, and their communities were deeply affected by the absence that transportation and indenture produced. Processes of social removal and dislocation thus became sites of subaltern anxiety and the circulation of rumour and speculation.

The association of migration with local practices and understandings of discipline, confinement, labour, and mobility provides a way of thinking about indenture that moves beyond the nineteenth-century rhetoric of slavery. That is not to argue that it was ‘free’ or ‘unfree’ in character, or part of some teleological move to ‘abolition’, but to suggest that the boundaries between apparently distinct colonial categories were somewhat fuzzy and ill-defined, with regard to both practice and perception. As such, and in invoking notions of service and dependency, both convict transportation and indentured migration might be considered part of a broader South Asian framework of enslavement too. A further question in this respect is to what extent Indian transportation, migration, and enslavement as labour forms became intertwined in diasporic discourse, practice, and imagination across colonial contexts and continents. That question lies outside the scope, though not the spirit, of this paper.

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² A small selection of an extensive literature includes: Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: experiences of Indian migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds), *India in the Caribbean* (London: Hansib, 1987); Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Verene A. Shepherd, *Maharani's Misery: narratives of a passage from India to the Caribbean* (Mona, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2002); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas 1830-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

³ Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp.3-4.

⁴ Richard M. Eaton, 'Introduction', and Indrani Chatterjee, 'Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia', in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (eds), *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp.1-43; Indrani Chatterjee, 'Abolition by denial: the South Asian example', in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.150-68.

⁵ Clare Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: convict transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945', in Ian Brown and Frank Dikotter (eds), *Cultures of Confinement: a history of the prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Hurst, 2007), pp.185-220.

⁶ This report appears in two forms: IOR P.188.57 (India Public): Reports by Dr Mouat on the mortality of emigrants from Calcutta to W. Indies 1856-7: Mouat to A.R. Young, Secretary to Government Bengal, 31 July 1858 (henceforth Mouat's report). The one I reference here is at: PP 1859 Session 2 (31) (31-I) Correspondence between Colonial Office and Governors of W. Indian Colonies and Mauritius, with respect to Condition of Labouring Population and Supply of Labour (Part I. British Guiana; Jamaica; Trinidad): Appendix IV, F.J. Mouat's Report on the Mortality of Emigrant Coolies on the Voyage to the West Indies in 1856-7, 10 May 1858 (henceforth PP Mouat's report). This reference appears in para. 149.

⁷ Ralph Shlomowitz and John McDonald, 'Mortality of Indian Labour on Ocean Voyages, 1843-1917', *Studies in History*, 6, 1 (1990), pp.35-65.

⁸ Ross Lawrenson, 'Frederic John Mouat (1816-97), MD FRCS LLD of the Indian Medical Service', *Journal of Medical Biography*, 15 (2007), pp.201-5.

⁹ Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers'.

¹⁰ Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: prisons, prisoners and rebellion* (London: Anthem, 2007), pp.127, 131-2.

¹¹ This confusion was also noted by Tinker: *A New System of Slavery*, p.164. See Mouat's report (para. 88), and Appendix III, oral testimony of persons examined in Calcutta (evidence of Chennell and Peppercorne). It is perhaps worth noting that most – though not all – of these errors were corrected in the report presented to parliament (PP Mouat's report).

¹² See note 2.

¹³ Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers'.

¹⁴ PP 1875 (34-I) (35-I) Mauritius (Treatment of Immigrants): Report of the Royal Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in Mauritius, p.27.

¹⁵ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, pp.85-6.

¹⁶ IOR P.188.67 (India Public) May 13, 6-7: Apprehensions of mutiny amongst emigrants for Demerara on ship Clasmerden, Hunt Marriott, Emigration Agent Demerara, to S. Walcott, Secretary to Government Emigration Board, n.d. (1863).

¹⁷ IOR P.1502 (India Public): Despatch to Marquis of Salisbury, Secretary of State for India, 3 May 1877.

¹⁸ PP Mouat's report (para. 122).

¹⁹ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, ch.2; Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: race, criminality and colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: Sate Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; James H. Mills, *Madness, Cannabis and Colonialism: the 'native only' lunatic asylums of British India, 1857 to 1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: policing venereal disease in the British Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003); Satadru Sen, *Disciplining*

Punishment: colonialism and convict society in the Andaman Islands (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁰ IOR P.15.76 (Bengal Emigration): Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into the System under which Emigration to the West Indies and Mauritius is conducted, 6 Aug. 1861.

²¹ IOR P.15.75 (Bengal Emigration): Correspondence on management and dieting of coolies en route to West Indies, Notes on Dr Dyer's report, 15 Jan. 1862.

²² IOR P.15.76 (Bengal Emigration): Report regarding mortality on the *Thomas Hamlin* and *Gosforth*, Arthur Payne, Medical Superintendent Emigration to Mauritius, to C. Eales, Protector of Immigrants Calcutta, 4 Jan. 1861.

²³ IOR P.432.19 (Bengal Emigration): Numbers in emigrant ships should be the same as limit fixed by Indian jail commission for jails, E.C. Bayley, Secretary to Government of India, to Junior Secretary to Government Bengal, 28 Oct. 1867.

²⁴ This practice is alluded to in multiple India Public 'B' Proceedings indexes.

²⁵ IOR P.2057 (India Public): Major Pitcher's report on the result of his inquiry into the system of recruiting labourers for the colonies &c (henceforth Pitcher's report), D.G. Pitcher, Judge Small Cause Court Lucknow, on special duty, to Secretary to Government North West Provinces and Oudh, 17 June 1882;

²⁶ IOR V/27/820/2: Coolie Export Enquiry (Dickens) Committee 1838-40 (henceforth Dickens Committee), pp.15-16, q. 767.

²⁷ Dickens Committee, p.17.

²⁸ Dickens Committee, p.29.

²⁹ PP Mouat's report: J.B. Scriven, Medical Examiner of West India Emigrants, to Mouat, 23 Oct. 1857.

³⁰ IOR L.PJ.6.91 File 250: P.C. Dex, 'Native doctor', British Guiana Emigration Agency, to H.A. Firth, Emigration Agent Guiana, 20 May 1881.

³¹ Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*.

³² IOR P.15.76 (Bengal Emigration): Report regarding mortality on the *Thomas Hamlin* and *Gosforth*, Payne to Eales, 4 Jan. 1861.

³³ For a detailed account of *godna*, see Anderson, *Legible Bodies*, ch.2.

³⁴ Anderson, *Legible Bodies*, p.8, *passim*.

³⁵ Pitcher's report.

³⁶ Hundreds of ship indents survive in pre-1857 judicial consultations in the Bengal, Bombay, and Madras presidencies.

³⁷ PP Mouat's report (para. 204).

³⁸ IOR P.2058 (India Public): Major Pitcher and Mr Grierson's Inquiry into Emigration, Aug. 1883 (henceforth Grierson report) (para. 116).

³⁹ Anderson, *Legible Bodies*, *passim*.

⁴⁰ Pitcher's report.

⁴¹ Anderson, *Legible Bodies*, p.153.

⁴² Grierson's report (para. 111).

⁴³ Anderson, *Legible Bodies*, pp.105-6.

⁴⁴ Anand A. Yang, 'Indian convict workers in Southeast Asia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', *Journal of World History*, 14, 2 (2003), pp.3-4.

⁴⁵ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an anthology of the Indian labour diaspora* (London: Anthem, 2002), pp.25-8.

⁴⁶ Eaton, 'Introduction', p.3.

⁴⁷ IOR V.27.820.22: Bengal Police Department, Examination of Coolies returned from Mauritius to Calcutta in the John Bagshaw, 1840 (1840), p.5.

⁴⁸ Pitcher's report.

⁴⁹ Pitcher's report.

⁵⁰ Anderson, 'Sepoys, Servants and Settlers'.

⁵¹ Satadru Sen, 'Rationing Sex: female convicts in the Andamans', *South Asia*, 30, 1 (1999), pp.29-59.

⁵² Pitcher's report, Appendix VI.

⁵³ On this point, see especially Carter, *Servants, Settlers and Sirdars*, ch.7.

⁵⁴ Pitcher's report: Pitcher to Secretary to Government North West Provinces and Oudh, 17 June 1882.

⁵⁵ IOR V.27.820.3: Report of the Committee appointed by the Supreme Government of India, to enquire into the abuses alleged to exist in exporting from Bengal hill coolies and Indian labourers, of various classes, to other countries; together with an appendix, containing the oral and written evidence taken by the Committee and official documents laid before them (Calcutta: G.H. Huttman, Bengal

Military Orphan Press, 1839): No. 7: J. Shaw, Civil and Session Judge Zillah Tipperah, to T. Dickens, Chairman of a Committee appointed by Government to enquire into certain abuses alleged to exist in the export of Coolies, 18 Sept., 1838 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁶ PP Mouat's report: T. Caird, Emigration Agent Calcutta, to Mouat, 31 Oct. 1857.

⁵⁷ Pitcher's report: Pitcher to Secretary to Government North West Provinces and Oudh, 17 June 1882; Grierson's report.

⁵⁸ IOR P.142.50 (Bengal Judicial): J.P.Sparks, Assistant to the Commissioner, to H.M. Durand, Commissioner Tenasserim Provinces, 19 June 1846; IOR P.145.4 (Bengal Judicial): Memorandum of H.T. James, Sessions Judge East Burdwan, on the state of the jail, 5 Aug. 1853.

⁵⁹ TNSA (Madras Judicial): C. Bernard, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, to C.G. Master, Acting Chief Secretary to Government Madras, 5 Nov. 1878; V.D. Savarkar, *The Story of My Transportation for Life* (Bombay: Sadbhakti Publications, 1950), pp.34-7.

⁶⁰ IOR V.27.820.22: Bengal Police Department, Examination of Coolies returned from Mauritius to Calcutta in the *John Bagshaw*, 1840 (1840), p.8.

⁶¹ Pitcher's report.

⁶² Pitcher's report, Appendix VI.

⁶³ Pitchers' report.

⁶⁴ IOR P.1862 (India Public): Report of a meeting to discuss Coolie Emigration to the colonies, Apr. 1882.

⁶⁵ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, p.134-44; Clare Anderson, "'The Feringees are Flying - the ship is ours!': the convict middle passage in colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790-1860", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 41, 3 (2005), pp.143-86.

⁶⁶ Mouat's report, Captain John Lawson of the Hamilla Merchant to Demerara.

⁶⁷ IOR P.15.75 (Bengal Emigration): Correspondence on management and dieting of coolies en route to West Indies: A. Payne, Medical Superintendent Emigration to Mauritius, to T. Caird, Emigration Agent Mauritius, 16 Oct. 1861. See also IOR Z.P.83 (Bengal Emigration): Regarding low rate of mortality on Alnwick Castle from Calcutta to Trinidad, Report of the Surgeon Superintendent of the Alnwick Castle (Dr Pearse), 15 Jan. 1862: 'Although Surgeons should never forget the existence and force of influence of caste amongst Natives of India, it will rarely be found, after the first week [on board ship], an impediment to the administration of any kind of food.'

⁶⁸ Grierson's report.

⁶⁹ IOR P.2058 (India Public): Major Pitcher and Mr Grierson's Inquiry into Emigration, Grierson's diary (henceforth Grierson's diary).

⁷⁰ Anderson, "'The Feringees are Flying"'.

⁷¹ Pitcher's report, Appendix VI.

⁷² These petitions are recorded in the IOR India (Public) series.

⁷³ Clare Anderson, 'The politics of convict space: Indian penal settlements and the Andamans', in Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange (eds), *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.40-55.

⁷⁴ Grierson's diary.

⁷⁵ Grierson's diary.

⁷⁶ Pitcher's report.

⁷⁷ IOR P.1502 (India Public): L.R. Ashburner, Revenue Commissioner Northern Division, to Secretary to Government of Bombay, 30 July 1875.

⁷⁸ IOR P.1502 (India Public): C.T. Metcalfe, Officiating Commissioner Patna Division, to Secretary to Government Bengal, 8 Sept. 1875.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *The Indian Uprising*, ch.2, pp.68-76.

⁸⁰ Pitcher's report.

⁸¹ Grierson's report. See also Pitcher's report.

⁸² 'Mirich' or Mauritius; a generic term for indenture.

⁸³ Pitcher's report.

⁸⁴ Grierson's report.

⁸⁵ Pitcher's report.

⁸⁶ Grierson's report.