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INDIAN LABOUR MIGRATION TO CEYLON, MALAYA AND BURMA: A STUDY OF  
*KANGANI AND MAISTRY* SYSTEM IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE (c. 1880-1940)

I am immensely thankful to the History Project research grant provided by the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET) and the Joint Centre for History and Economics at Harvard and Cambridge University, UK. The grant supported me in my data collection at various Institutions and libraries in the UK over two short visits in March-April and July 2017 accumulating to about forty five days. I had the opportunity to visit the British Library, National Archives of UK, Bodleian Library at Oxford University, the Centre for South Asia Studies library at Cambridge University and the Institute for Commonwealth Studies Library at the University of London. I also owe my gratitude to the staff at each of the visited Institution for their courtesy and patience to my queries and incessant requisitions.

My ongoing dissertation is an attempt to critically scrutinize and reappraise the historiographical parameters which have conventionally defined the characteristics of Indian migration during the nineteenth and twentieth century. I intend to do so by exploring the intricate pattern, functioning and nature of the Indian emigration to Ceylon, Malaya and Burma, in between 1850-1940, which took place largely under the *Kangany's* and *Maistry's* informal regulations.

The historiography on Indian migration has a strong tendency to view colonial migration as largely indentured in *form*, coercive and un-free in *nature*, *stimulated* mainly through the agency of Europeans, predominantly Northern Indian or Bhojpuri region as its *source*, plantation labour as its *composition* and the British overseas colonies in the Caribbean and

the Pacific as its *region of production*. Such an approach completely neglects the multidimensional nature of Indian emigration in the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

One of the key reasons for the generation of such a historiographical tradition was that the colonial state in India was explicitly involved in regulating the Indenture system, resulting in copious documentation of the system. While the 'other' systems of Indian emigration, namely the *Kangani* and *Maistry* systems- which prevailed in the Indian ocean's Bay of Bengal rim destinations *i.e.* Ceylon, Burma and Malayan Peninsula, and which had Southern India as its main source of recruitment- was less formally regulated, and thus relatively lesser documented. The relative documentary sparseness as well as incongruities in the records available, explains to a great extent its academic neglect. However, to understand the significance of these systems it is worthwhile to note that in magnitude, this non-indentured migration was far more voluminous than indentured migration. The total emigration from India in between 1834 to 1937 has been estimated at 30 million out of which emigration to Burma, Ceylon and Malay which took place largely through *Kangani* and *Maistry* system accounted for over 90 percent of the total. <sup>1</sup>

Indian labour migration to Ceylon, Malaya and Burma had begun during the early nineteenth century but it rose and acquired greater significance only by 1880s as a result of various internal as well as global developments like the transport revolution (Steamers, Metalled roads, railways) and the opening of the Suez canal which gave real pace to flow of commodities, capital, men and ideas.<sup>2</sup> The 1880s also witnessed prolonged depression of sugar prices but the demand for other tropical produce increased at the same pace as world

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Kingsley, *Population of India and Pakistan, PUP, 1951* (Part on Migration); Northrup, David, *Indentured labour in the Age of Imperialism (1834-1922)*, CUP, 1995, pp. 64. Mckeown, Adam, 'Global Migration' (1846–1940), *Journal of World History*, Volume 15, Number 2, University of Hawai'i Press, June 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Vide Amrith, Sunil, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants*, Harvard University Press, USA, 2013

trade as a whole. The market was especially buoyant for coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cotton, tea, coconut oilseeds, rubber, and rice. The increase in the national incomes and generation of surplus Industrial capital in the western state also had a very significant role. Within these broader global settings, the newly annexed colonies of Burma, Ceylon and Malaya, which were sparsely populated fertile hotspots for the production of various cash crops, caught the sight of colonial officials and capitalists as good investment grounds. A key role in the development of economies of the colonies under study was played by the cheap labor of immigrant Indians who came in huge numbers.<sup>3</sup>

The formal abolition of the Indenture system by 1917 marked the beginning of not only a further surge in the flow of labourers but also intensive documentation, with Indian officials reporting as well as legislating (*viz. Indian Emigration Act, 1922*) on issues of concern within *Kangani* recruitment regions, *i.e.* Ceylon and Malaya. The sudden increase in the official interest was not born out of rising concerns for the welfare of the migrants, their recruitment process or emigration to these areas, but because of an urgent need for an alternative to fill in the economic vacuum created by abolition of Indenture and restore the economic balance. Nevertheless, how far these regulations as well as various institutional settings acted to the interest of labourers in improving their process of recruitment, emigration and terms of life and work in the colony remains an important question to analyze. Burma on the other hand, despite being an immensely important producer and global supplier of rice, continued to face void as far as official regulation of terms of recruitment, emigration-immigration, work and life in colony as well as documentation was concerned. The three Anglo-Burmese wars not only led to annexation but also assimilation of Burma as an integral part of British India and thus there was little need felt by the officials to regulate or legislate the Indian mobility to

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<sup>3</sup> Vide Lewis, W. Arthur (ed.), *Tropical Development 1880-1913*, Studies in Economic Progress, Gresham Press, Great Britain, 1970, Chapter 1, 2 and 9.

Burma as it came to be seen at par with internal mobility of migrants within the ‘frontiers’. However, the British officials agreed, for all practical reasons Burma was different from India and was clubbed together merely for administrative conveniences.<sup>4</sup> Such a scenario served to strengthen the informal modes of control exercised by the maistries, which was only further reinforced by the contractual enforcement codes devised by the state through the application of *Breach of Contract Act*, 1859. All this ultimately lead the Maistry system to be infamously categorized as the one of most exploitative system for emigration of labour worldwide.

The research also attempts to challenge the Eurocentric perceptions on the Asian/Indian migrations in the global migration framework. The broader aim is not merely to present counter arguments against the Eurocentric perceptions, or argue for singularity and uniqueness of Indian migration pattern, but more importantly to deconstruct the narratives which form the very basis of establishing a dichotomy of distinctive forms/systems and characteristics of migratory trends.

Moreover, touching upon the global paradigm, the research attempts to draw interconnections between the content and substance of the *Kangani* and *Maistry* system and other world migration systems largely during the age of mass migration. The key idea of exploration will be to compare similar system of intermediary recruitment and deployment present in other migration streams (transatlantic, Intra Asian and Intra European). Secondly, the aim is also to ascertain the impact of world events of the twentieth century like the World War-I, the Great Depression of 1929, World War-II and Japanese occupation of South East Asian regions on the migration pattern, nature and functioning of *Kangani* and *Maistry* systems and

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<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill*, 1919, paragraph 8; Tinker, Hugh, *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, OUP, 1977, pp. 140; Chakravarti, N.R, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of An Immigrant Community*, OUP, London, 1971.

commodity production in the colonies under study. Archival records highlight consequential rising nationalism, anti-immigration sentiments, picketing, riot and bans asserted during this period. It is immensely interesting to peel the multi-layered narratives of what, when, how and why of the events to better understand the socio-cultural, political and economic repercussions it ensued not only internally but on the global platform. It will also help us better understand the periodic variation and multi-dimensional pattern of colonial Indian mobility, and access the interconnections between the global and the local, trans-Atlantic and the Indian ocean, commodity production and supply, 'natives' and migrants, etc.

The National Archives of Kew and the British Library where I spent most of my time in the UK, travelled me through vast mines of primary published and unpublished sources. At Kew, I got access to various primary correspondences on affairs concerning migrant labour from India which has enabled me to understand the everyday politics at the roots as well as among the officials concerning the newly annexed land in the 1880s. On a broader scale it helped me historically contextualize the former LTTE Crisis in Ceylon, the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and the spurts of ethnic conflicts in Malaysia. Moreover, the *Annual Reports of the Emigration from Madras presidency* (1890-1910), *Ceylon Blue Book* (1850-1945), as well as the Annual Reports of the *Agent of Government of India, the Controller of Labour*, and the *Labour Commissioner of Madras* for the Ceylon and Malaya, (post 1922 *Indian Emigration Act* up till the late 1930s) are extremely valuable sources for my research. Its covers a whole range of significant issues concerning the immigrant labour ranging from emigration-immigration statistics, wages, welfare, health and education schemes to law, contract, indebtedness, and immobility of the labourers. The Annual reports are extremely crucial also because it provides varying, and sometimes contrasting, opinions of officials devising the report on similar issues/themes. It helped me understand the politics of the period and

complicate the neat picture established regarding terms of labourers recruitment, mobility and work & life in the colony of production.

The reports prepared by various Commissions of Inquiry setup under special circumstances are extremely significant sources as it not only provides a panoramic view of the content of an event or process which led to its formation but also a detailed and 'critical' historical narrative of how and what of it. Marjoribank and Marrakkayar report on the Emigration to Ceylon and Malaya, 1917; Baxter Commission's Report on Immigration of Indians into Burma, 1941; V.S. Srinivasa Sastri's Report on the Conditions of Indian Labour in Malaya, 1937; Report by WGA Ormsby Gore on his visit to Ceylon, Malaya and Java, 1928, Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931; Report of the International labour Office on the Labour conditions in Malaya, 1927; Colson's Report on Ceylon, Singapore and Malaya, 1924; Report of a Commission on Immigration into Ceylon by Edward Jackson, 1937; Major Orde Brown's Report on the labour condition in Ceylon and Malaya just before the outbreak of Japanese hostilities, are some of the most important reports pertaining to my research which I could retrieve at the Kew Archives and the British Library.

The reports throw light on the processes of recruitment, tales of transit, the role that the *Kangani* and *Maistry* intermediaries played regulating the system of mobility and the labour regime and life in the colony ranging from everyday problems of debt, health and pay to broader concerns like ethnic hostilities, economic competitions and riots. The rising socio-economic instability rising from the 1930s owing to events like the 1929 great depression and the World War II culminating in the process of ban of migration, decolonization and independence can be better understood through the reports. Moreover, various other primary documents, at the Kew Archives and British library, like the Tea and Rubber production

restriction and export control in Ceylon and Malaya, decline in prices and export of rice, return and repatriation data of the 1930s, Reports of the *Burma India Chamber of Commerce* in the 1930-40s, Debates of the legislative assembly regarding the subject of Indian emigration to the colonies under study, Report of the *Riot Inquiry Committee* in Burma (1938-39), Compensations and arrangements for Burma Evacuees in India during and post WW-II, not only reflect the intricate dilemma of the empire during the period of global crisis but are of immense significance to the chapter where I discuss the interconnectedness of the global-local, of the trans-Atlantic and Indian ocean by analyzing the repercussion of the world events of the 1930-40 on the men, material and mobility, on global production and consumerism. The period saw rising wave of nationalism built upon not only anti-colonial but also anti-immigration sentiment which was popularly constructed and fed by press, propaganda and politics.

The debates that arose in the legislative assembly because of the reports like that of the *Riot Inquiry Committee*, 1930s in Burma and Ceylon are crucial to build an understanding of the prevailing sentiments among varying political factions and broader objectives behind it. The socio-economic instability and the consequential riots raised crucial question in councils among the nationalist and colonialists and was responsible in setting up of special commissions of inquiry like, under Baxter in Burma, Jackson in Ceylon and Sastri in Malaya. Among various issues it was meant to address the broader task assigned was to ascertain a definite solution to the issue of Indian Immigration: whether Indians were supplementary or surplus? filling in void or generating local competition? were the well off in the immigrant colonies? what should be the future policies and regulations on their immigration? etc. The conclusions of the report, its successful/unsuccessful implementations are of great relevance to the research objective and to develop a nuanced understanding of the post colonization

politics of these countries regarding immigration policies, ethnic conflicts and prospects of future mobility of men of different race, religion and ethnicity

At the Bodleian Library, British Library and the library of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, I was fortunate to get access to a whole range of rare books, written by overlapping categories of officials, planters and scholars, as well as unpublished doctoral dissertation on themes concerning the research. Few of the many rare books that I had the chance to view included: *Labour Problems of Ceylon* (1930) and *Planter's Handbook: Labour in Ceylon* (1926) by S.E.N Nicholas, *Riots and Marshall Law in Ceylon, 1915* (1916) by P. Ramanathan, *The Rise of labour movement in Ceylon* (1972) by V.K Jayawardena, *Indian Labour in Ceylon* (1931) by Lanka Sundaram, *Indian Emigrant on Ceylon Estates* (1917) by K.T Chettiyar (which was a critique to the Marjoribank and Marrakkayar's Report of 1917), *Contract labour in Burma* (1930) by A. Narayan Rao, *History of Burma: From earliest times to end of first war with British India* (1887) by Sir Arthur P. Phayre, *Burma Government's Crusade against Indians, 1929* (which contains the Press and Public opinions in the newspapers of Burma and the Burma Legislative Assembly debates of the 1920s), *Burma Under British Rule* by S.W Cocks, *Burma Under the Japanese* (1957) by Thakin Nu (Edited, Translated and Introduction J.S Furnivall), *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia* (1941), *The Political Economy of Burma* (1931) and *The Governance of Modern Burma* (1960) by J.S Furnivall, *The Burma Delta* by Michael Adas (1974), *A History of Burma* (1967) by Maung Htin Aung, *Indian Overseas* (1951) by C. Kondapi, *The Indian Empire, Part-IV India, Burma and Ceylon* (1936) by L. Dudley Stamp, *Agricultural Indebtedness and Remedial measures* by N.G Ranga (a presidential address at a special Ryots Conference highlighting the plight of Ryots in Andhra Region), *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957*, (1969) by K. S Sandhu, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (1970) by S. Arasaratnam, *The Malayan Peninsula* (1864) by P.J Begbie, *British*



*Malaya, 1824-1867* (1925) by L.A Mills. Unpublished dissertations that I had the opportunity of seeing included a wide range of relevant themes: Rise of Burmese Nationalism, The Indian immigrant in colonial Burma, British Policy in Burma in the twentieth century, Agrarian development and Plural society in Lower Burma, The racial policies in Burma, The ethnic relations in Burma, Moneylenders and the economic development of Burma, Relationship between Burmese social classes and British-Indian policy on behavior of Burmese political elites, The Sino-Indian competition in Burma, The labour regime, plantation life and politics in Burma, The making and unmaking of plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka, Penal labour and citizenship debates in Singapore and Straits Settlement in the nineteenth century, The forms of exploitation of Migrant workers in Malaysia, The migrant labour system in Malaysia, The Malayan rubber holding and immigrant labour policies in Malaysia, The fictions of race, state and identity in Malaysia etc. The themes of the dissertations significantly aid me in deriving, substantiating and sharpening my arguments as well as in developing an understanding of the canvas of historiographical progression.

The British library also introduced me to a range of paintings, maps, newspaper dailies and weekly circulating in Burma, Ceylon and Malaya. One of the most interesting set of paintings and pamphlets were by G. Spencer Pryse and Dora Batty (1926-39) promoting “Empire Products” (for example, Burmese Rice, Ceylonese Tea, Strait Settlements Pepper etc.) It included slogans like “Empire Buyers are Empire builder”, Pamphlets stating “When you buy Indian products you help India and increase employment here”, and pictorial representations, of the great depression phase, of empire produce and producers (women plucking tea leaves in Ceylon, men working on copra and on sugarcane fields) provocatively links together ideas of Nation, Empire, Patriotism with Occidental consumerism and Oriental commodity production. It would be immensely helpful in enriching my arguments in the chapter where I talk about the repercussion of global events on the local. These pictorial representations from

the Empire Marketing Board at a crucial juncture of world events offered a reverse perspective and helped me move ahead from seeing the repercussion of world events on the Indian migrants, mobility and materiality in the colonies towards the efforts of the crown to sustain commodity demand in the west; from regulating production and supply to creating and sustaining demand.

The Cambridge South Asia Library Archives provided me access to a rich collection of private papers of officials, planters and their wives/relatives, many of who owned plantation land in more than one British colony. A few of them significant to the research include, but are not limited to: *Allgrove Papers*- J.W. Allgrove was planter in Malaya and the paper mentioned his enforced mobility to Singapore, Siam, Burma during the 2nd World War; *Allan Papers* of Mrs. Jemmima Allan, wife of Alexander Allan who was proprietor of Coffee Estates, Coonoor, South India; Lady Alison *Blood Papers* is about the description of her life in Ceylon and the Windward Islands as the wife of a senior civil servant, 1918-1931; *Barlow Family Papers* (seen up till decolonization) highlights their involvement in the Rubber Industry in Malaya; *Fyfe papers* highlights the railway history of Burma; *Fraser Papers* is about the first Anglo-Burmese War lecture by W.S. Desai; *Herring Papers* mentions the personal log of a voyage between Calcutta and Ceylon, 1849-50, in the sailing ship 'Centaur' by Jane Penelope Herring, wife of the Master, Anthony Herring. An interesting one is *Tayabji Papers* highlights the 'The Burma Story, December 1941 - July 1942, told by Captain N.S. Tayabji (Indian Navy Retired) where he recounts the saga of the evacuation of Burma following the Japanese advance into the country in November-December 1941; *Bagnall Papers* highlights the life of Ruth Bagnall, the wife of a rubber planter in Sri Lanka, and her memoir is called *Serendipity or Three Happy Years in Ceylon*; *Forsythe Papers* refers to Major J.A. Forsythe and William Forsythe coffee and tea planting in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) from 1877-1933; *Scriven Papers* mentions C.M. Scriven who worked in the Burma customs from

1933-1949 and his memoir is called *Thirty Years in Burma*; *Selwyn papers* contains B.M. Selwyn's correspondences concerning the Planters Association and collection of news cutting about tea and rubber planting, 1910-38; *Siebel Papers* contains notebooks on Folklore in Ceylon, dated at Kandy 1935-36.

I would like to thank again the History Project without whose support it wouldn't have been possible to travel and gain access to the huge collection stored at the archives and various libraries of UK. The sources have proved to be thought provoking and has enabled me to sharpen the arguments and re-module my understanding of certain important paradigms pertaining to the history of Indian labour and migration. It has helped to me move ahead with more confidence and bring forth a nuanced and well-argued dissertation.