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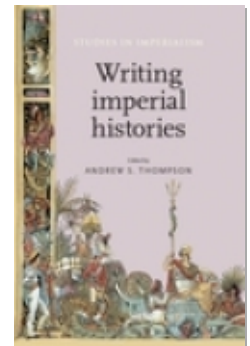
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CHAPTER NINE

Empires, diasporas and cultural circulation¹

Sunil S. Amrith

The Studies in Imperialism series has pioneered a comparative and connected approach to imperial history. The Series has been at the forefront of the study of imperial networks: from personal and professional networks, to networks of steamships and aircraft and lines of communication. Migration has always been a central concern. To begin with, the volumes focused on primarily the history of European emigration; more recently, other routes of movement, both free and unfree, have featured more prominently. This chapter aims to reflect on the circulation of peoples, ideas and cultures across empires, and to probe the challenge that the study of diasporas poses for writing imperial histories. Like the Series as a whole, this chapter focuses primarily on the British empire, but not exclusively so; diasporas crossed imperial boundaries and their journeys might provide the basis for an inter-imperial history. Particularly fruitful directions emerge when we interweave the Series' concerns with two other recent approaches. The first is the tradition of connected history, alternatively dubbed 'world' or 'transnational' or 'global' history: the distinctions are a matter of semantic debate, this chapter groups them together here for what they have in common. The second is the tradition of diaspora studies, which draws heavily from anthropology and sociology.

From the outset, a central tenet of the Series has been that imperialism is a cultural as much as a political phenomenon – a cultural phenomenon that can and should be studied historically. This gave the Series its distinctiveness, and put John MacKenzie's work, and the Series more broadly, in productive tension with the primarily literary concerns of post-colonial theory, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s.² Some of that distinction remains. Works in this Series have tended to privilege the empirical over the theoretical; their authors have mainly been historians and the interdisciplinary links they forge look as much to geography, perhaps, as towards cultural studies. But

the gap has narrowed in other ways. Moving beyond sharp distinctions between metropole and periphery, moving beyond diffusionist models of cultural contact, scholars from a range of perspectives have addressed the question of how culture *travels*. In his groundbreaking essay on 'Travelling Culture', James Clifford pointed out that 'many different kinds of people travel, acquiring complex knowledges, stories, political and intercultural understandings, without producing "travel writing"'. Cultural circulations of many kinds held empires together. Ideas and cultural practices were transformed, appropriated, and adapted as they moved, and they never moved in just one direction (from core to periphery).³

If, as Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker note, 'identity' was the most (over-)used concept of the 1990s, the idea of the 'network' might now have displaced it. A recurrent set of metaphors – networks, webs, flows, encounters, exchanges – dominate recent discussion of empires and the movements they made possible or forced into existence. In part this vocabulary draws on studies of social networks and social capital – it is often forgotten that some of the earliest research in the area stems from anthropological studies of urban Africa in the 1960s.⁴ But evidently, too, these ideas have resonance in our digital present; their expanded use stems from the vocabulary of globalisation that has moved into popular as much as scholarly usage.⁵ To the extent that they enable shared understanding, to the extent that they allow us to imagine movements that are neither linear nor easily grasped, these metaphors have been useful. But the limitations of the concepts, and of the processes they seek to describe, are very real: networks break; flows are blocked or weakened by leakage; webs unravel; threads become tangled. As such, this chapter highlights the fractures in, as much as the reach of, the cultural circulations and diasporic networks that spanned empires.

Two models of diaspora

The history of diaspora is entwined with the history of imperialism in the modern world, though the study of diasporas has only recently received significant attention from imperial historians. Diasporas – people who have spread or been displaced from their homeland – have long been agents of global connection, maintaining contact with their lands of origin and with their counterparts settled elsewhere.⁶ In C. A. Bayly's view, the study of transnational history is inextricable from the study of diasporas, since they act as conduits of capital, cultural practice, trust and information; diaspora networks have been at least as important as states and official agencies in stimulating mass migration

in the modern world.⁷ As expansive and ethnically diverse polities, large empires have often depended on diasporas for their specialised skills, their labour power or their facility with cross-cultural communication and exchange – in this respect, the British empire was perhaps home to more diasporas than any other. Diasporas crossed, and perhaps undermined, imperial boundaries even as they held empires together. The British empire is a case in point. In the nineteenth century, a vast Indian diaspora dispersed around the world, but almost entirely within the British empire; at the same time, Chinese, German, Spanish, Jewish and Armenian diasporas encompassed and exceeded the empire's limits – their movements disregarded imperial boundaries and created new, inter-imperial connections.

One of the largest diasporas in the British empire was the last to be identified as such: the British diaspora.⁸ On the estimate of American demographer Kingsley Davis, writing in the early 1950s, approximately eighty-five million people of British origin (including migrants and their descendants) lived outside the British Isles by 1940; by comparison, only six or seven million people of Chinese origin, and a similar number of people of Indian origin, lived overseas. As a proportion of the population of the home country, the emigration of Britons was of an order of magnitude greater than most – though not all – other peoples, though the contrast weakens if we compare Britain with regions of similar size (for instance, parts of coastal southern China).⁹ Between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the First World War alone, something like 13.5 million Britons emigrated – forming around a quarter of the total of European emigration in that period.¹⁰

The movement of ideas through imperial networks shaped many of the key institutions of the modern world. The British diaspora was, in Engseng Ho's terms, a 'composite' in the process of movement across the Atlantic, a disparate group of settlers who forged a common identity. A sense of collective identity coalesced around key institutions: private property, Protestantism, the yeoman right to bear arms. The masculine, patriarchal ideology of the 'freeborn Englishman' circulated within and beyond the boundaries of the British empire, providing a progressive narrative of freedom that often contrasted the opportunities of the New World with the oppressions of the old. The ideological ballast for the trans-Atlantic settler world owed much to religious networks. Following in the footsteps of the Catholic Church in Spanish America, Protestant institutions spanned the Atlantic and gave shape to visions of common identity and a sense of collective purpose. Bernard Bailyn points out that it was in fact the Quakers 'who of all the English created the most perfectly integrated and well-disciplined pan-Atlantic religious organization'.¹¹ So successful was

the diaspora in shaping the political institutions of the lands where it settled that its very presence was naturalised. Settlers developed and imposed on North America 'a distinctively English emphasis on patriarchal control of land and labour'.¹² The question asked of most other diasporas was seldom asked of the British – how well did they integrate into their 'host societies'? – though in the United States this began to change after the Civil War. For the most part, English settlers took their political institutions with them; they built states and displaced or subsumed the peoples and polities in their way. 'In their very success', Ho writes, 'such diasporas may also take on universalist ambitions ... and become hard to identify as diasporas.'¹³

By the late Victorian period, consciousness of an Anglophone cultural community gave rise to expansive visions of a 'Greater Britain', of an imperial federation of English-speaking peoples. It was the high point of self-consciousness of an English-speaking diaspora around the world, of 'kith and kin' separated by great distance, but united by common 'values' and legal and political institutions: in J. R. Seeley's words, 'a homogeneous people, one in blood, language, religion, and laws, but dispersed over a boundless space'.¹⁴ But ideas travelled not only through the process of settlement and colonisation, but also in the multiple circulations of administrators, lawyers and officials around the 'British world', and more generally through the British empire – this has been a theme that the work of Zoë Laidlaw, in the Series, has highlighted with particular clarity.¹⁵ This greater connection over vast distances was enabled by the revolution in communications and transportation that allowed people, news and ideas to move further, and more cheaply, than ever before.¹⁶

The Anglophone diaspora shared the Atlantic world – unequally, brutally – with the diaspora of enslaved Africans who crossed the Atlantic. Slavery, in Orlando Patterson's formulation, was 'social death'. Uprooted from land, community and kinship, subjected to the rupture of the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans were forced into an Atlantic world in which they were property. Markus Rediker has described vividly the process through which West African slaves were inducted into a 'new order' before embarking on the slave ships: an order designed to 'objectify, discipline, and individualise the labouring body through violence, medical inspecting, numbering, chaining'.¹⁷ However brutal the conditions of slavery, however traumatic the Middle Passage, the cultural break between Africa and the New World was never absolute. 'Cultural survivals' were evident to those who looked closely, a theme developed in the work of the pioneering American anthropologist Melville Herskovits.¹⁸ 'Ethnic clustering, and the intense bonds of friendship and fictive kinship' of the Middle

Passage, Daniel Richter writes, provided the 'building material for human community' across the Atlantic.¹⁹

Already in the early nineteenth century, African-American intellectuals voiced their visions of the kinship that linked North America with Africa, inspired by the utopian ideals that, in different ways, Haiti, Liberia and Sierra Leone evoked. By the late nineteenth century, these ideas had taken more concrete form. The first Pan-African conference was held in London in 1900, organised by the Trinidadian Henry Sylvester-Williams. 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness', W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the *Souls of Black Folk*: 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder'.²⁰ Not until the mid-twentieth century did the term 'African diaspora' come into widespread use, though the concept was evident much earlier. By the 1970s, the African diaspora had attracted significant scholarly and political attention, taking its place alongside the Jewish Diaspora (with a capital 'D') as the ideal-type of a diaspora formed by forced exile, and reconstituted in the imagination and through social institutions abroad. Work on the African diaspora was essential to the development of diaspora studies as a field of scholarship, which came into new prominence in the 1980s and 1990s – often in response to the politics of multiculturalism in North America and Western Europe. Paul Gilroy helped to define the field with the publication of *Black Atlantic*, which sketched a black 'counterculture of modernity' forged through the experience of displacement and resistance in the Atlantic world.²¹

Together these two models – the settler colonial diaspora, and the African diaspora – have shaped the debate on diaspora and cultural circulation across empires. First, the British language of colonisation and civilisation was appropriated, by the turn of the twentieth century, by both Indian and Chinese nationalists, keen to show that their peoples, too, were brave colonists in hostile territory, bringing order to the untamed wilderness of eastern Africa or Southeast Asia, and so meriting the rights of citizenship that English settlers had appropriated to themselves. Conversely, the language of slavery loomed large in debates over labour migration in the world. Drawing directly on the language of anti-slavery campaigners, scholars and activists have continued to view indentured labour as a 'new system of slavery'.²² The direct line from slavery to indenture – from African to Asian migration within and beyond European empires – has dominated scholarship. For decades scholars believed there was a categorical difference between European migration across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century, and migration across the Indian Ocean and the China seas which was

more akin to slavery. One recent survey, for example, compares the 'voluntary and self-bound migrations in the Atlantic system' with Asian migration that 'involved a minority of free migrants, large numbers of self-bound migrants, and forced moves'.²³ Asian migration, on this view, was by and large a product of European imperial intervention and coercion. By contrast, scholars have argued recently that Asian and Atlantic systems of migration both formed part of a spectrum of interconnected migrations. Asian and European migrants alike were responding to the underlying forces of globalisation. Adam McKeown points out that indenture played a relatively insignificant role in Chinese migration overseas, and shows that the vast majority of Chinese migration remained under Chinese control. Alongside other historians of Chinese migration, he emphasises instead the power of family networks in channelling people from particular villages in China to distant but specific destinations overseas.²⁴ This is, perhaps, truer for Chinese than for Indian migration, where the role of force – including the force of British laws of contract – was clearly crucial; but the point remains, that our perspective on empires and cultural circulation shifts if we move beyond the dominant British and African models of diaspora.

Indian diasporas in the British empire

In the nineteenth century, Indian and Chinese workers in the world were known as 'coolies'. Some linguists believe the term has its origins in the Tamil *kuli* – payment for menial work: a *kuli-al* or *kuli-karan* was a day labourer. Others traced it to the Urdu *quli*, again denoting labour or service; still others suggested that 'coolie' is a Portuguese rendering of the name of the indigenous Koli people of Gujarat, whom early European observers associated with hard labour. Finally, some suggest a root in the Chinese *ku-li*: 'bitter labour'. Whatever its origins – perhaps an aural conflation of these different roots – the label reduced the social and political lives of Chinese and Indian workers to their labour power alone. It was a term of denigration, even dehumanisation. It held that Indian and Chinese 'coolies' were inherently suited for hard labour in the tropics, and that, in contrast to free white workers, they needed coercion to make them work.

The vast movement of Indian labour within the British empire began in response to abolition. As political pressure mounted for slavery's abolition, sugar planters began to look elsewhere for other kinds of unfree labour. The demands of sugar underpinned the nineteenth century's worldwide shift from enslaved African to indentured Asian labour. That shift would in time outstrip the needs of

sugar, and it would transform far more than the sugar industry. It was neither easy nor direct: slavery, licit and illicit, fed sugar production until the end of the nineteenth century.²⁵ The first Indian workers departed for the sugar colonies of the Indian Ocean and the West Indies in 1834. Between 1834 and 1839, Mauritius alone received 25,469 Indian labourers. They went under contracts of indenture, reviving a form of bondage that had taken many poor white workers to North America two centuries earlier. But where white indentured servants held reasonable hopes of working to achieve plots of their own in the New World, Indian emigrants departed with different expectations. 'We agreed to the terms and signed them', an early Indian emigrant to Mauritius declared, 'because we are poor men of this place, or else we would not have gone on board ship, or to a foreign land, from fear of losing caste.'²⁶ With the planters' lobby clamouring for labour, and humanitarians demanding the emancipation of slaves, British officials had to tread carefully as they unleashed a new movement of Indian workers to the cane fields of the empire.

In 1835, the government of India decreed that 'intending emigrants' must 'appear before a magistrate to satisfy him of their freedom of choice and knowledge of the circumstances of the case'.²⁷ The Protector of Emigrants emerged as a new office, executed by a local magistrate at each of the major ports of emigration. The 'freedom' of the Indian emigrants – in a strictly legal sense – was carefully constructed. Critics charged that freedom was a useful fiction. Before long, English abolitionists, fresh from their victory, asked whether indentured labour was but a 'new system of slavery'. Indentured emigration to the sugar colonies was banned in 1839. It resumed three years later under pressure from the planters' lobby. Humanitarian concerns were assuaged with assurances that migration would receive the closest supervision – supervision that was also another layer of intrusion by the state.

In his novel of indentured migration, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh evokes the emigrants' first sight of the camp as their convoy arrives in Calcutta: 'Beyond lay a newly cleared stretch of shore, still littered with the stumps of recently felled trees.' On this ground, 'three large, straw-thatched sheds stood in a circle at the centre of the clearing; a short distance away, next to a well, was a modest little shrine, with a red pennant flying aloft on a pole'.²⁸ The camp is makeshift; it is hastily constructed; it aims, with its 'modest shrine', to provide some sense of continuity to the lives of migrants, radically disrupted. The camp was where the indentured workers' journeys began. On arrival at the camp, Hugh Tinker writes, 'the labourer was ready to begin the process of becoming an indentured coolie'; within, 'he was just one of many human parts in a vast assembly process'.²⁹

The next stage in the journey, for those who passed the medical inspection and the legal examination, was the voyage out. This was the indentured workers' experience of the Middle Passage. 'The girmitiyas were in a trance of fear', Ghosh writes as he describes the *Ibis's* departure for Mauritius: 'it was as if they had just woken to the realisation that they were not only leaving home and braving the Black Water – they were entering a state of existence in which their waking hours would be ruled by the noose and the whip'.³⁰ In the reminiscence of an Indian migrant to Fiji, 'we were given a space of one and a half feet wide and six feet long each to stay in'; 'how many people', he recalled, 'were crying oceans for their fathers, mothers, siblings...'.³¹ A medical officer in Trinidad put it simply: 'over a period of eight years more than eleven times as many immigrants died on board Calcutta ships going to Trinidad than on board English ships going to Victoria'.³² Conditions on the voyage improved by the turn of the twentieth century. Emigrant ships carried medical inspectors; sanitary facilities improved. But the trauma of the voyage remained. And across the sea, in 'Mareech' or in the West Indies, the suffering continued all too often. An Indian work song from Mauritius is a lament for expectations confounded:

Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,
We arrived here to find gold, to find gold.
Instead we got beatings of bamboos,
Which peeled the skin off the backs of laborers
We became Kolhu's bullocks to extract cane sugar,
Alas! We left our country to become coolies.³³

The final line ('Alas! We left our country to become coolies') underscores the transformation.

The experience of the early Indian indentured workers weighed on later scholarship. Hugh Tinker's majestic account of Indian indentured labour drew on the humanitarian commentary of the nineteenth century: his prose, moving and indignant, imbibed the rhetoric of anti-slavery activists and Indian nationalists. The archive of indenture is shaped by successive British official attempts to justify, to inquire into, to regulate indentured labour: commissions, depositions, petitions and investigations contain the 'voices' of Indian workers overseas, or of those who had returned to India. But the profusion of contracts in the archive – contracts of indenture, signed or imprinted with a mark or a thumbprint – led others, of more legalistic inclination, to the opposite conclusion: Indian indentured labourers, unlike slaves, were free in the eyes of the law; they were free to enter into their contracts and free to return home upon their contracts' expiry. Indenture, in this view, was a rational choice for people with few options.³⁴

The brutality of indentured labour was insistent: it was a form of legalised bondage. The demands of plantation production killed countless workers, exhausted and brutalised many more. Unlikely slavery, however, indenture was neither perpetual nor hereditary. A proportion of indentured workers did return home each year; others moved off the plantations and found their livelihoods in petty trade or in thriving commerce. The cultural rupture was less complete and less permanent than that which the Middle Passage tried to impose on Africans, though even that rupture was less complete than at first it appeared to be. Indentured labourers travelled with fellow villagers, to whom they were bound by caste and kinship; they shared a language; they preserved or recreated forms of community: social resilience was as common an experience as 'social death'.³⁵

With the indentured migrants, forms of Hindu and Muslim religious culture from South Asia were transplanted over long distances. Wherever South Asian migrants went, they took their sacred landscapes with them – sometimes these began as small tree shrines on the plantations, miniature recreations of familiar symbols in a strange new place. In time, they developed into living places of worship, often taking on aspects of local cultures in both their physical design and in the rituals they hosted. Within the Indian diaspora, as within so many others, the tension between preservation and innovation was ever present; if diasporic cultures appear frozen in time, change is – paradoxically – inevitable and constant.

The transformation of the Shi'a Muharram celebration as it travelled to Trinidad with the indentured labourers is a case in point. The Muharram procession in Trinidad – known locally as 'Hosay' – developed as a hybrid of local and diasporic influences, shaped by the context of labour relations on the cane fields. In Prabhu Mohapatra's compelling account, the annual procession, in which Hindus played a leading role, became increasingly charged as a means of resistance against the regimented world of the plantations. In Trinidad, and in other parts of the empire, including in Penang, the carnivalesque elements of the Muharram celebration provided a means to undermine the prevailing order.³⁶ In Trinidad and elsewhere, Hindus celebrated the Muharram festivities as actively as did Muslim labourers. As indentured labourers from diverse origins in South Asia found themselves thrown together on the plantations, their practices developed from combinations of both 'high' and folk religious culture from different Indian regions. Of the canonical texts of the Hindu tradition, the *Ramayana* was especially popular in the diaspora; its 'central text' – in Bhikhu Parekh's view the *Ramayana's* narrative of exile and return, suffering and redemption – had obvious resonance among those who had journeyed across

the world to work. Public readings and performances of the *Ramayana* were common on the plantations of Trinidad or Natal. But the epic, throughout its history open to innovation and appropriation, changed as it moved – just as it did over space and time in India.³⁷

Enthusiasts for emigration among the British Indian government pointed to the propensity of migration to weaken 'caste prejudice'. 'Emigration is a great teacher of self-respect', the Indian census commissioner wrote in 1931, 'for caste is to a large extent put away when the Indian emigrant crosses the sea'.³⁸ The reality was more complicated. Caste has proved persistent in the diaspora; European planters, among others, paid careful heed to the boundaries of purity and pollution in the design of the plantation barracks and in the allocation of different kinds of work. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that if caste did not disappear, it certainly changed in the process of migration – marriages beyond caste lines were, for instance, common on the plantations of Malaya and Ceylon by the early twentieth century. Furthermore, Indian communities overseas were not immune from the wave of social and religious reform sweeping India. Reformist organisations including the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission – both aimed for a purified, standardised and more scriptural Hinduism – moved overseas, seeking to reform the religious and cultural practices of Indian workers in Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji.³⁹

The disproportionate attention in recent scholarship to the experience of Indian migrants in the sugar colonies of the Indian Ocean and the West Indies risks blinding us to the reality that far more Indian migrants crossed the Bay of Bengal than any other part of the Indian Ocean, and that a relatively small proportion of them were under contracts of indenture. Between 1834 and the late 1930s, over 90 per cent of those who left India's shores travelled to just three destinations: Burma, Malaya and Ceylon. Although indentured labour was used initially in Malaya, other forms of recruitment soon superseded it; it was never used in Ceylon or Burma. Because of their proximity to India, and because of the historical connections across the Bay of Bengal, Malaya, Ceylon and Burma all stood in different relation to India than did the distant sugar colonies of the Caribbean or Indian Ocean. Even indentured workers moved back and forth between India and Malaya; the image of Indian communities marooned far from home held little sway across the Bay of Bengal. New migrants arrived in societies where their fellows had already transformed land and landscape.⁴⁰

To a greater extent than with the sugar colonies, the connections between south India and Southeast Asia were characterised by constant circulation. Migrant workers travelled back and forth, often crossing the Bay of Bengal several times in their lives, alternating between

periods of time spent labouring overseas and periods at home.⁴¹ With them moved a constant flow of goods, ideas, cultural practices, words and dreams. And alongside the plantation workers, there was a constant flow of other migrants – diverse in their outlook and origins – to the port cities. Overlapping communities of Tamil Muslim and Hindu traders, mariners, dockworkers and labourers moved through the port cities of Southeast Asia and returned frequently to south India. Working-class south Indian migrants travelled in large numbers to Singapore, Penang, Colombo, Rangoon and smaller towns in Southeast Asia. They worked on the railways, in the Public Works Department, laying cables and building roads. The majority of Colombo's and Rangoon's rickshaw pullers and dockworkers were migrants from India. Migrants to the cities came from a wider region than the plantation workers, including many Malayalis from south-western India, Punjabi Sikhs, many of whom worked as policemen, and Hindi-speakers from northern India, prominent in Singapore's milk trade.

In the early stages of mass migration diasporas were in flux, infused with new ideas, institutions and, not least, new arrivals from their lands of origin. By the early twentieth century, the Indian diaspora in Malaya and Ceylon assumed a more stable character. It developed sharper internal and external boundaries and more permanent institutions: schools, newspapers, chambers of commerce and cultural associations. Sojourning turned gradually to settlement, and societies shaped by circulation coalesced into locally rooted diasporic cultures with firmer contours.⁴²

Chinese diasporas between empires

'The story of the Chinese in the various Far-Eastern countries in which they have settled ... provides the same picture, varying shades of an "imperium in imperio" seeking to establish itself.' So wrote a Malayan civil servant in 1940, viewing with alarm the rising tide of labour unrest sweeping the territory.⁴³ It was an old fear. Half a century earlier, the traveller and photographer John Thomson wrote that the Chinese, were 'the most successful traders and most patient toilers in the East', whose 'love of combinations, of the guilds and unions in which all Chinamen delight, tempts them too far'.⁴⁴ Unlike South Asian migrants, who remained almost entirely within the British empire, Chinese migrants moved more freely across imperial boundaries in Asia, North and South America and the Pacific. Chinese labourers worked primarily for Chinese employers in Southeast Asia, unlike the Indian migrant workers who toiled for the most part on European-owned plantations.

The circulation of ideas accompanied the movement of millions of Chinese across the South Seas – the world of the Chinese overseas represented a vital, if often unrecognised, part of the fabric of British imperial networks.⁴⁵ At stake was the contention of different ways of being Chinese, and being modern, in a world of strangers. Underlying the different positions taken in this debate was the sheer diversity of the ways in which Chinese experienced travel and mobility, the richness and tension of their encounters with other Chinese and with other peoples. It is no coincidence that the mass migration of Chinese beyond their shores happened at the same time Chinese politics underwent a period of intense ideological ferment. From the 1880s, Chinese politics – both reformist and revolutionary – forged closer links with the Chinese overseas. Reforming Qing officials and anti-Manchu activists alike began to see the overseas Chinese as a fruitful source of financial support and investment, with resources and expertise to contribute to their competing efforts to modernise China. For their part, many Chinese in the diaspora began to see that a strengthened, modernised China, with a stronger position in the world of nations, would improve their position as Chinese minorities in foreign lands.

Chinese intellectuals in the diaspora had already been exposed to a range of ideas about race and nationality – not least those of the European powers under whose authority they lived – which shaped their understanding of the Chinese revolutionary message. Overseas Chinese support was crucial to several attempted uprisings in the southern provinces in the first decade of the twentieth century. Soon after the revolution of 1911, overseas Chinese contributed their resources, finances and skills to building a new China. But the debates that took place in the Chinese public spheres of Southeast Asia outstripped the boundaries of nationalism, to encompass a much broader range of questions and anxieties surrounding what it meant to be Chinese in plural societies. Mobility brought with it encounters with cultural difference; the confirmation or the questioning of prejudice; the experience of exclusion and discrimination. A central point of contention surrounded the position of culture, broadly speaking: how far could (and should) Chinese culture adapt to being practised in a world of non-Chinese, during a period of rapid political and economic transformation?

The work of Dr Lim Boon Keng (1869–1957) is symptomatic of the conflicting imperatives facing Chinese elites living under European imperial rule. Tim Harper has written of the ‘ambiguous identifications and self-definitions’ of Lim and his contemporaries. They were ‘complex figures’ that do not fit easily within conventional categories distinguishing between nationalists and colonial compradors.⁴⁶ Lim

was a third-generation 'Baba' (local-born, creolised Chinese), and the beneficiary of a distinguished education at Raffles Institution, Singapore's elite English school. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University, on a Queen's Scholarship. Lim's conversion to Christianity, and later apostasy, took place alongside his discovery of Confucianism and his struggles to learn classical Chinese. Back in Singapore, Lim was a founder of the Straits Chinese Literary Association, dedicated to the revival and discussion of Chinese classics, as well as the Straits Philosophical Society, where Singapore's literati debated all manner of subjects, from the work of Herbert Spencer to doctrines of political liberalism and constitutional government. Lim's eloquence and influence were exceptional, but the breadth of political and intellectual influences that shaped his world-view was common among his community. In *The Great War from a Confucian Point of View*, Lim penned one of the most fervent declarations of imperial loyalty of that age – at the moment in world history when empire loyalism began to wane, as the shock and carnage of the First World War called the 'civilising mission' into question. But Lim's was a utopian view that looked forward to a more equal 'imperial brotherhood' that would follow the purifying sacrifice of war.⁴⁷

The Chinese maritime world was at the heart of nineteenth-century globalisation. It also intersected with the world of the British empire and with other European empires. In their intersection lies a fruitful new field of scholarship in imperial history. Focusing on Chinese maritime networks helps us to see the limits of the European, and especially the British, ability to control older paths of Asian migration – or, conversely, the ability of those networks to adapt to economic opportunity and technological change. The Chinese diaspora was also the source, as much as the recipient, of the ideas that animated the colonial public sphere. The radical ideas of the May Fourth Movement in China were at least as influential as Western liberalism in the debating societies and journals of the diasporic worlds of Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁸

Cosmopolitanism and its limits

'Because of their sheer size and diversity', Anthony Pagden writes, 'most empires have in time become universal, cosmopolitan societies.'⁴⁹ As recent scholarship has shown, the cosmopolitanism of the British empire was both fractured and fragile. Imperial cosmopolitanism was never limited to the upper echelons of imperial administration; unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, the British empire created the conditions for cosmopolitan exchange that undermined the very ideology of

empire, not least by affirming the importance of national identity. The coercive force of colonial states combined with the uprooting force of colonial capitalism to throw large groups of strangers together, creating societies – from Trinidad to Malaya – that were polyglot, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Labourers and journalists and clerks of diverse origins had to learn to speak to one another, often for the first time: their voices clamoured to be heard within the colonial public sphere. Tim Harper's essay on the uneasy embrace of empires and diasporas marked a quiet revolution in the study of imperial history. Harper showed that the late nineteenth century saw the flourishing of many varieties of globalism, most of them ungoverned by imperial states – a world in which the interaction of diasporas produced new modes of communication and global political imaginations. A decade on, the field of imperial history is still addressing the analytical possibilities in Harper's path-breaking intervention.⁵⁰

At the elite level – though 'elite' in this case included many middling sorts – this exchange took place within the 'ocean of letters' that linked the port cities of the Indian Ocean and beyond. Spurred by the imperial postal service and the steamship, communication did not simply follow the conventional axis from metropolis to colony; lateral movement – from Singapore to Rangoon, from Bombay to Durban – was at least as important. As Mark Frost has shown, this was a world of journals and debating societies, of intellectuals engaged in constant conversation about social and religious reform, about political legitimacy, about economic change and about the condition of living in diaspora. Newspapers and printing presses crossed oceans along with migrant journalists, print-setters and intellectuals on lecture tours; the practice of citation and republication linked newspapers and journals across a wide area. 'Entrepôts like Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, Rangoon and Singapore witnessed the emergence of a non-European, western educated professional class', Frost shows; and the English language is what this multi-ethnic group shared. Based on a study of Singapore's public sphere, Chua Ai Lin has argued that English-language newspapers allowed, for instance, Indian and Chinese elites to engage in debate and dialogue over questions of race, nationality and empire.⁵¹

The imperial public sphere was never confined to the Anglophone world. As Isabel Hofmeyr has shown, the International Printing Press, founded in Durban in 1898 under the leadership of Mohandas ('Mahatma') Gandhi, worked in 'Gujarati, Tamil, Hindu, Urdu, Hebrew, Marathi, Sanskrit, Zulu and Dutch', and its staff was similarly polyglot in its composition.⁵² In colonial Southeast Asia, too, new technologies stimulated older worlds of print and communication. A distinct circuit of reading, writing and publishing in the Malay world – much

older, yet enabled and facilitated by the transformation in transport and communications – made Singapore also the cultural centre of the Malay-speaking world. ‘Students converged on Singapore’, historian William Roff writes, ‘where they met and sat at the feet of itinerant scholars from the Hadramaut, and from Patani, Aceh, Palembang, and Java – most of whom had themselves studied in Mecca.’⁵³ Nile Green has written of the cosmopolitan and dynamic ‘religious economy’ of the Indian Ocean, centred on what he calls ‘Bombay Islam’ – a constant circulation of texts, goods, teachings, pilgrims and religious paraphernalia that linked western India to South Africa and Iran.⁵⁴

Popular culture, the culture of the street, stimulated the interaction of many migrant groups. They converged in the performance and observation of religious processions and rituals, or in places of popular entertainment. On the street, ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, the oral and the literate, blurred into one another: quotidian gatherings of large groups of (often illiterate) men to hear the daily newspaper being read aloud in coffee shops exemplify this process. Cities, and particularly port cities, were the meeting point for different diasporas. Asia’s metropolitan centres – Singapore, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Calcutta, Jakarta, Rangoon – were precociously cosmopolitan. Their populations were much more ethnically and culturally diverse, and much more mobile, than those of the European cities of that era. As Anthony King observed, ‘the culture, society and space of early twentieth century Calcutta or Singapore prefigured the future in a much more accurate way than that of London or New York’.⁵⁵ It is an irony of late twentieth-century history that, with regard to migration, metropolis and colony switched places: imperial metropolises such as London became ‘hyper-diverse’ cities, while the entrepôts of the former empire often retreated into greater ethnic homogeneity under new nationalist governments.

Imperial cosmopolitanism had distinct limits – limits that became clear in the years between the wars, but which were already clear at the turn of the twentieth century, not least in South Africa. Undoubtedly these limits owed something to the pervasive sense that non-Europeans did not truly have the capacity to be full members of civilised society, underpinned by a sense of the natural inequality of peoples – all embedded in the language of race. Almost everywhere, a hardening of racial boundaries could be observed in the early twentieth century; and the language of race was now deployed in many contexts – including by Asians, against other Asians.⁵⁶ Encounters with diverse others in the imperial port cities could open space for intercultural communication; but it could also, and it did, sharpen a sense of ethnic or racial distinctiveness. During and after the First World War, imperial authorities clamped down on what they saw as subversive, transna-

tional networks; 'the closing of political possibilities after 1914 seems to have been very far-reaching', Harper observes, though others would date that closing later.⁵⁷ Making their way in a world of mass political participation – moving from the salon to the hustle of the street – the cosmopolitan intellectuals of the port cities found their cosmopolitan political language had little resonance.⁵⁸

The convergence of internal and external constraints on imperial cosmopolitanism emerges sharply from the history of the idea of imperial citizenship, which suffered successive defeats in the 1910s and 1920s.⁵⁹ It was in defence of a conception of imperial citizenship that Mohandas Gandhi launched his political career in South Africa. His initial concern was not with the freedom of India, but with the freedom of Indians in South Africa to travel free from pass laws and to conduct their business where they pleased. Gandhi's subsequent journey from champion of the specific rights of Indians overseas as subjects of the British empire, to leader of the Indian independence movement, reveals much about the shifting relationship between imperial loyalism and anti-colonial nationalism. The political tide was tied, more than historians of imperialism have recognised, to changing patterns of mobility, migration and settlement around the empire. Arguably, the very population movements that imperial administrators encouraged and orchestrated in the nineteenth century began, in the twentieth, to expose the strains in ideas of imperial citizenship.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Gandhi was among the large number of intellectuals in colonised parts of Asia and Africa who remained loyal to the British empire, and in particular to the promise of equal imperial citizenship under the Crown. Gandhi was an itinerant imperial exile. His political consciousness was formed in London, where he trained as a barrister, and was cemented by his experience of discrimination in South Africa. In the course of his experiments with non-violent civil disobedience (*satyagraha*), Gandhi declared that 'our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects', declaring that it was on that basis that he claimed equal rights for Indians in South Africa. From the chambers of the imperial legislative council in Delhi, Gandhi's mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the liberal leader, made a wider argument for the abolition of indentured labour, again emphasising the rights of Indians as imperial subjects. Addressing in the imperial parliament in 1912, Gokhale spoke of the 'vast and terrible amount of suffering' caused by the system of indentured labour, the 'personal violence' and 'bitterness' that continued to be reported from all the regions of Indian settlement in the British empire. Beyond suffering, however, 'disgrace' in the eyes of the world was the greatest concern of the Indian elites who

condemned indentured labour. Indentured labour, Gokhale declared in 1912, was 'degrading from a national point of view', for 'wherever the system exists, there the Indian are only known as coolies, no matter what their position might be'.⁶⁰

Visions of imperial citizenship foundered on the shoals of white supremacy. The settler colonies made nonsense of the equality of subjects across the British empire by passing racially discriminatory immigration legislation starting in the late nineteenth century, and with increasing vigour by the turn of the twentieth century.⁶¹ As Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have shown, governments in Canada, South Africa and Australia drew the 'global colour line' in close connection with exclusionary legislation in the United States. From then on, the global history of migration control advanced as an extension of the specific practices and technologies of racially discriminatory immigration restriction that originated in the settler colonies and the United States.⁶² A dramatic illustration of the limits of imperial citizenship met the passengers on the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steamer chartered by Gurdit Singh to transport Sikh immigrants to Vancouver. The passengers were refused permission to disembark and the vessel was forced to return to India, escorted out of Vancouver harbour by battleships. The humiliation of the experience fuelled the flames of the Ghadr movement – a radical anti-colonial network that developed in North America and sought German aid during the First World War to mount an armed insurrection in India.

Immigration restriction represented, in Lake and Reynolds' view, a form of 'racial segregation on an international scale'.⁶³ This was exactly how Indian nationalists saw it. While they continued to campaign for the rights of Indians overseas, Indian nationalists were increasingly of the view that the best solution to the problems of emigration – discrimination in the settler colonies and abuse on the tropical plantations – would be to stop them from migrating altogether. The government of India took some steps in this direction in 1922, passing the Indian Emigration Act that controlled more closely the emigration of Indian labour; a flurry of press commentary focused on the desirability of controlling *emigration* from India, in response to *immigration* restriction elsewhere. 'Hereafter at least the emigration of Indians to other countries should be put a stop to', a Telugu newspaper wrote in 1923, 'it is all the more shameful for India to see her people, who are already dependent, suffering all kinds of hardships in foreign countries'.⁶⁴ From Lahore, another newspaper insisted that the only solution to the 'moral degradation' of Indians abroad was 'that Indians should stop going to foreign countries'.⁶⁵ Others, however, made a direct link between discrimination abroad and social reform at home. N. C.

Ganguli, who wrote extensively on the Indian diaspora, declared that 'if Anti-Asiatic laws are regarded as an invention of racial arrogance, equally so is the caste organisation of the Brahmin hierarchy. If our countrymen are segregated in the British colonies and Dominions, we should regard the treatment as a just nemesis which has overtaken us for the crime of untouchability.'⁶⁶

As early as 1930, the Indian economist Lanka Sundaram argued that the government of India should invoke the legal provisions governing migration within the British empire, as well as 'India's membership of the League of Nations' for the purposes of 'retaliation and arbitration respectively in the case of unjust treatment of her nationals overseas'.⁶⁷ In the public sphere, a growing hostility to emigration found expression in widespread coverage of the citizenship debate in Malaya. The normally pro-British newspaper, *The Pioneer*, posed the question pointedly: 'are Indian emigrants to Malaya a mere labour force or have they the option of settling there permanently with full citizenship rights?'⁶⁸ The Congress's *Searchlight* newspaper lamented the resumption of emigration to Malaya after the depression. India, they argued, risked becoming 'the great suppliers-general of black coolies for European plantations', where they would be treated 'as mere beasts' and denied 'all rights and privileges – economic as well as political – that belong ... to other emigrants or settlers – be their skin black or white'.⁶⁹ If Indian labourers overseas could not live in dignity, Indian journalists suggested, then they should not go at all; and if need be, the state would have to intervene to prevent them from emigrating, for their own protection and for the protection of India's reputation abroad. As John Kelly and Martha Kaplan has shown, Indian nationalist commentators took a harsh view of the 'colonial-born', seeking to discourage them from returning to India and putting distance between the citizens of the future nation and the 'coolies' overseas.⁷⁰

Post-colonial diasporas

The borders that divided the post-colonial world were, in almost every case, colonial borders; they were arbitrary and often they were not designed for anything other than administrative convenience. But the late colonial period also shaped a debate over territory and mobility that would bedevil new nation-states the world over: what was the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship? Could the descendants of migrants ever truly belong within a national political community? The imperial borders that mobile peoples had crossed with relative ease, now became international borders, policed by passports and new visa regulations. Yet imperial administrators in some ways anticipated

this transformation on the eve of the Second World War, bringing in new restrictions governing movement within the British empire in Asia.

In the aftermath of war, large parts of the Asian continent witnessed an often bloody contest over sovereignty, between European imperial powers and Asian nationalist movements.⁷¹ Yet there was also a convergence on all sides around the norms of the international system of nation-states. Colonial administrators, too, began to see their task in terms of nation-building, even as they retained a commitment to maintaining imperial control.⁷² Many of the architects of the post-war order came around to the view that active citizenship was difficult to foster in a 'plural society'. Within the post-war imagination of social citizenship, diasporas and migrant groups were agents of destabilisation – and potential disloyalty – rather than guarantors of cosmopolitanism and openness. Post-war nation-building sought to affirm an entirely new relationship between 'birth, residence, migration, and citizenship'.⁷³

Politically, too, the war and the process of post-war reconstruction marked a rupture in the connections between South and South-east Asia. Speaking in India's Constituent Assembly in March 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru indicated the attitude that his government would take towards the question of Indians overseas:

But the real difficulty is the question of citizenship. How, these Indians abroad – what are they? Are they Indian citizens? Are they going to be citizens of India or not? If they are not, then our interest in them becomes cultural and humanitarian, not political ... This House wants to treat them as Indians and, in the same breath, wants complete franchise for them in the countries where they are living. Of course, the two things do not go together.⁷⁴

Nehru's essential question – 'what are they?' – was faced by a great many of the empire's diasporas in the years after 1945; diasporas that had long lived across the boundaries of colonial territories, and often crossed the boundaries between different empires. The Jews of South-east Asia, the Armenians and many creole ('Eurasian') communities found themselves, literally, homeless; they became the 'orphans of empire' in the new age of nation-states.⁷⁵ Writing of the Hadrami Arab diaspora that lived across the British and Dutch empires of the Indian Ocean, Engsang Ho has shown that as 'diasporic persons became minorities within new nations, some were then expelled to homelands they had never known; others became permanently stateless'.⁷⁶

Yet, as Ho has argued, diasporas have often outlasted states and empires; they have long memories and their networks have been

submerged rather than suppressed. The legacies of the imperial history of diaspora and cultural circulation can be seen almost everywhere in the world today – and new connections build on older ones, seen in the mass influx of labour from South to Southeast Asia, again, in the 1990s. As David Ludden observed in his 2003 presidential address to the Association of Asian Studies, the routes that take workers back and forth from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan to and from jobs in the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia recall 'old sites and routes around the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean. These spatial coincidences indicate that very old histories of mobility animate the Asia that South Asia inhabits today.'⁷⁷ The living legacies of old migrations are inscribed on the land and the landscape, around the world. 'Consider the scale of Asia reduced to these fragments', Derek Walcott intoned in his Nobel Lecture of 1992: 'the small white exclamations of minarets or the stone balls of temples in the cane fields, and one can understand the self-mockery and embarrassment of those who see these rites as parodic, even degenerate'.

Walcott disagreed with that diagnosis, as would most theorists of diaspora: what he saw in the cane fields was not simply a historical artefact but a living tradition – a tradition that had gained new life from its origins in a global history of migration, displacement and diaspora formation.

I misread the event through a visual echo of History – the cane fields, indenture, the evocation of vanished armies, temples, and trumpeting elephants – when all around me there was quite the opposite: elation, delight in the boys' screams, in the sweets-stalls, in more and more costumed characters appearing; a delight of conviction, not loss.⁷⁸

And as the diasporas of the age of empire have taken root in distant places, and created new connections in fact and in the imagination, so they have transformed the old metropolis. The Studies in Imperialism series has, from the outset, insisted on the inextricable links between metropolitan and colonial history, between British and imperial history – the empire's many diasporas make this point amply; their history will remain fruitful ground for a new generation of imperial historians to take the Series in new directions in its next twenty-five years.

Notes

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