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3:12 pm, Jul 26, 2022

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Crossing the Bay of Bengal

The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2013

year arrived in Ceylon to work on the coffee plantations. By the end of the 1850s this had grown to nearly 100,000 arrivals annually. Between half and three-quarters of them returned to India each year. The longer journey across the Bay of Bengal to Malaya involved much smaller numbers until the 1880s, but by the end of that decade 22,000 people were arriving annually at the ports of the Straits Settlements from South India. Beginning in the 1880s, Burma was the third great destination for Indian labor, and it would attract the most migrants of all. By 1911 more than 100,000 people each year arrived from India in each of these three destinations across the Bay of Bengal.³

The statistics are notoriously imprecise, but in the century between 1840 and 1940 somewhere around 8 million people traveled from India to Ceylon, 4 million to Malaya, and between 12 million and 15 million to Burma; a varying but large proportion, well over half, returned to India within three to seven years. Most of this movement occurred after 1870. Whole families moved to and from Ceylon; to Malaya and Burma, the migrants were mostly men until the 1920s. Consider this in the context of the totality of Indian migration overseas: from the beginning of organized Indian emigration in 1834 until 1940, well over 90 percent of all Indian emigrants went to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya. Put simply, the Bay of Bengal region accounts for nearly the sum total of India's emigration history in the age of empire.

Now consider this in a global context. Migration around the Bay was comparable in scale to transatlantic migration in the same era. Some 26 million people arrived in the United States between 1870 and 1930 from southern and eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Pacific. Add Chinese migration to Southeast Asia to the equation—around 19 million people in the century after 1840, more widely dispersed than their Indian counterparts—and it is clear that the region where the Indian Ocean met the South China Sea was home to one of the world's great migrations. The main difference between the Asian and Atlantic circuits lies in the numbers of those who settled rather than returned. Between 6 million and 7 million people of Indian origin, and a similar number of Chinese, had settled overseas by the end of the 1930s; American demographer Kingsley Davis contrasted this with the 85 million people of British origin who lived outside the British Isles by that time.⁴

"The piercing of the Isthmus of Suez, like the breaking of a dam, let in upon the East a flood of new ships, new men, new methods of trade,"

Joseph Conrad wrote.⁵ The opening of the canal in 1869 reshaped the Bay of Bengal's geography. It meant that a journey from Europe to the Bay was a matter of weeks, not months. Suez reconnected the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean. Through the sliver of the canal, steam power reordered the world. Conrad's "new ships, new men, new methods of trade" sparked mass migration, east and west, and stimulated commodity production across the tropical world. As steamships glided over the oceans, no longer at the mercy of the prevailing winds, undersea telegraph cables engirdled the world beneath the seas' surface. By 1870 the British India Submarine Telegraph Company had connected Bombay with the Red Sea. A year later cables crossed the Bay of Bengal. News of prices and harvests now traveled instantaneously. On land, railroads compressed time and distance and attracted huge capital investment. As the transcontinentals snaked their way across the North American continent, so the Indian railways provided the sinews of imperial power in South Asia. Land and sea routes converged as radials upon port cities that pulsed with people, the cities' fabric sagging under the weight of new wealth and new misery. In the nineteenth century fossil fuels broke almost every conceivable limit to growth.⁶

Rails, rivers, and seas intersected. As the Suez Canal brought the Bay of Bengal closer to Europe, *the railways extended the sea's reach* beyond the coasts. Like a "magnetic field," Braudel wrote, the Mediterranean cast its influence far from its shores. Similarly, the life of the Bay of Bengal drew the products of the land, and the sons of the soil, into its steam-powered web. By the 1880s migrants came not only from the coastal regions but also from further inland. Most of those who crossed the Bay were no longer from traditional seafaring communities. On the other end of their voyages, railroads brought the ports closer to the frontiers: once Ceylon's railways reached the Kandyan highlands, the infamous "long walk" from port to plantation was eased. Railway construction in Burma was slower to take off, given the country's thousands of miles of navigable waterways, but as the railways developed, Indian migrants followed the steel lines from Rangoon.

For more than a millennium the Bay had been a highway between India and China. Throughout that time, traders and states sought shortcuts around it, and ways around the vulnerable choke point of the Straits of Melaka. In the first millennium traders had used overland portage

across the Isthmus of Kra—the narrow strip of land in southern Thailand before it widens out into the Malay Peninsula—to connect the Bay to the South China Sea. The rise of Melaka as Southeast Asia's great emporium diverted traffic to the south. But in the nineteenth century the railways renewed the promise of a northerly route to China's interior, feeding into its internal waterways. The engineer Arthur Cotton imagined eastern Bengal's railways as the first step in a line from Calcutta to Canton. Competing proposals envisaged a line from Chittagong to Yunnan via Bhamo, and another cutting through the Shan states. A rail link between India and China remained a perennial dream. In 1904 the British government signed an agreement with the consul general in Yunnan to build a railroad from Burma to China; in the 1930s the plans remained under consideration—not for the last time.⁷

Steam power demanded new sources of energy and made new demands on the land. Before the age of steam, "more energy could be captured from the wind . . . by changing the number, arrangement, and operation of sails on ships." The clippers of the early nineteenth century represented the highest achievement of these incremental adjustments. They were elegant, streamlined craft that could reach unprecedented speeds. But the energy that steam could provide surpassed even the most efficient use of wind; steam engines harnessed matter buried deep in the earth for thousands of years.⁸ By the middle of the nineteenth century, steam-powered vessels were a common sight on the Ganges. The East India Company owned ten river steamboats by 1850, and a number of oceangoing steamships. All these vessels demanded supplies of coal. The mid-nineteenth century saw the rapid development of coalfields in eastern India—in Burdwan, Sylhet, Assam, Palamau, and Cuttack. Where coal was unavailable, the Company sought firewood as an alternative, creating a thriving market for fuel. **Burma's untapped energy resources, located centrally along the** Bay of Bengal's routes, beckoned to British administrators and shipping companies.⁹

The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was formed in 1865: owned by the brothers Henderson, originally from the village of Pittenween in Fifeshire, Scotland. The family's fortunes rose from the adversity of George Henderson, shipwrecked while commanding a sailing vessel "trading to the near east." He survived the ordeal and installed himself

in Italy, where he flourished in the marble trade to Britain—the Glasgow end of the business was handled by his three brothers. By the 1850s the Hendersons had abandoned marble and moved into long-distance shipping: they owned a small fleet that sailed initially between Scotland, New York, and Quebec. At the turn of the 1860s they were at the forefront of the “emigrant trade” to New Zealand. On the return journey the Hendersons’ vessels began to call at Rangoon, where they took on cargoes of rice and teak. Before long the Burma rice trade proved so profitable that the Hendersons abandoned the antipodean leg of the voyage altogether; around the same time, they purchased a small fleet of steam-powered river craft to profit from the Irrawaddy’s flourishing trade.

A promotional booklet of 1872 assured potential investors that “there is no trade to the east more capable of . . . continuous expansion than that of Burmah.” The Irrawaddy had “its banks studded with towns and villages, crowded with an active, industrious population to whom this river is the great highway.” Until the advent of steam, “the whole traffic on the river was conducted by native boats”—up to 25,000 of them. Now steam power, “by its speed, regularity, and safety, is gradually superseding native craft”; all that was needed was a “sufficient supply of plant to monopolise, in great measure, the traffic.” For two decades the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company imported its coal directly from Britain; beginning in the 1890s, supplies began to arrive from the coalfields of Bengal. Already by 1890 Dalah, across the river from Rangoon, had developed into a thriving dry dock and repair station: “here also were situated Boiler Shops, Erecting Shops, Machine Shops, Carpenters Shops and all the other type of shops which go to make up a shipyard.”¹⁰

But steam triumphed over sail more gradually than we might imagine. Scale and state protection gave European transportation firms a competitive advantage, but Asian shipping merchants fought back. Well into the 1870s sailing ships followed their old routes around the Indian Ocean and across the South China Sea. Crossing the Bay of Bengal remained risky.¹¹ But by then the advance of passenger steam travel was under way. Beginning in the 1860s the British India Steam Navigation Company (BISNC) grabbed the largest share of passenger traffic across the Bay. In 1861 the BISNC launched a monthly steamer between Calcutta, Akyab, and Rangoon. Within a decade, fortnightly and then weekly steamer services connected Rangoon with the ports of the eastern Indian coast, north of Madras: Coconada, Vizagapatnam, Bimlipatnam,

Calingapatnam, Baruva, and Gopalpur. By the 1880s a weekly steamer service ran from Madras, Pondicherry, Cuddalore, Karaikal, and Nagapatnam to Penang, Port Swettenham, and Singapore. Today many of these ports are faded provincial towns. Visitors might struggle to imagine them as thriving maritime centers, but for older people, the places' names, many of which have since changed, evoke another world: a Bay of Bengal world that encompassed eastern India and Southeast Asia. The annual number of passenger journeys between South India and Malaya in both directions grew from an average of 15,000 in the 1870s to nearly 40,000 by the end of the 1880s.¹² The traffic between Madras and Ceylon, even larger in scale, was dominated by ships on the short crossing (under two hours) between Talaimannar and Dhanushkodi; a supplementary steamer service between Colombo and Tuticorin ran twice a week.¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century, indigenous shipping was pushed to the margins of both legality and commercial viability.¹⁴ As the great rivers Kaveri, Krishna, and Godavari spilled into the Bay of Bengal, so

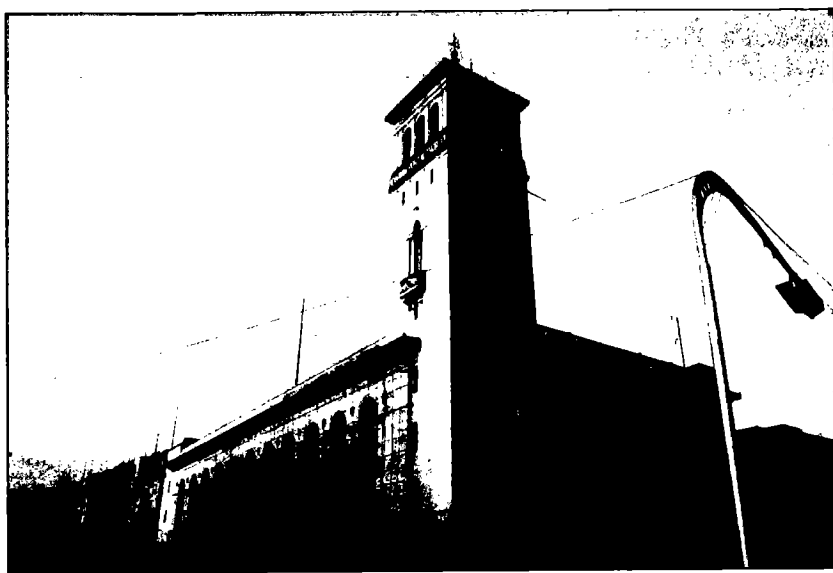


Figure 14 The Myanmar Port Authority building, previously the headquarters of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. Photograph by Sunil Amrith.

the sons of their valleys crossed it, pouring in their thousands into Burma and Malaya. The steamship changed people's sense of proximity. New routes linked port cities but also braided distant hinterlands—the Kaveri delta and the Malayan forest, coastal Andhra and the rice fields of Lower Burma. As families fanned out across the Bay, “the names of villages” were “plaited into one map.”¹⁵

The “breaking of the dam” redistributed power around the Indian Ocean. Although they began as coastal trading enclaves, European empires developed a terrestrial obsession in the nineteenth century; they pursued “whole continents of territory.” Dutch rule in Indonesia epitomized this shift. Desperate for revenue after the Napoleonic Wars, the Dutch administration put Java to work, instituting a system of forced cultivation and *corvée* labor. They retreated from inter-Asian trade, staking their fortunes on plantation production.¹⁶ After the Indian Rebellion of 1857—the most widespread revolt against British rule in India until the 1940s—the Raj consolidated its hold on the land as the basis of imperial rule: mapping, surveying, and assessing territory; settling nomadic peoples; and seizing commons and forests for the state.¹⁷ With lethal military technologies from the foundries and shipyards of industrial Europe, a renewed thrust of aggressive expansion brought almost all of Southeast Asia, with the exception of Thailand, under European control. Lower Burma fell to British conquest after the Anglo-Burmese War of 1852. The French assumed direct control in Indochina, piecemeal, a decade later. In the 1870s the British “forward movement” pushed into the Malay Peninsula, suborning Malay sultans in a series of treaties. By 1885 the British conquest of Burma was complete. The Dutch conquest of Indonesia took longer, provoking a bloody war of resistance in Aceh that lasted from 1873 to 1908.

With the opening of the Suez Canal, India became the “nodal point” of the Indian Ocean, allowing the projection of British power eastward, to Southeast Asia, and westward, to the coast of eastern Africa. Indian systems of governance (varieties of indirect rule), Indian legal regimes (the Indian Penal Code), and Indian district officers moved out across the Indian Ocean. English officials, schooled in the Indian administration, implemented and adapted Indian models of rule in the Straits Settlements, in Egypt, and in East and West Africa. Indian soldiers secured the ocean's rim for the British Empire.¹⁸ Above all, Indian laborers

fanned out to sustain the capitalist transformation of the land—they cleared bush, planted trees, built railways. By far the greatest numbers of them moved to just three destinations across the Bay of Bengal: Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya. Ceylon's mutation from a strategic trading post to a plantation colony set the stage for a sweeping change around the Bay's littoral; within decades the region became one of the world's foremost suppliers of raw materials. The conversion of its forests into monoculture plantations and its valleys into acres of paddy fields set in train a migration of labor so vast that it dwarfed the earlier movement of indentured workers to Mauritius and the Caribbean.

Proximity, precedent, and policy explain why migrant labor to South-east Asia came almost entirely from particular regions of southern and eastern India. The "uninterrupted intercourse" between South India and Ceylon, and between South India and the Malay world, provided a base on which to build. Networks of transportation, methods of recruitment, and sources of finance already existed, ripe for expansion under the power of steam. In the second half of the nineteenth century the channels of communication between South India and Southeast Asia deepened. Ceylon's planters, accustomed to working with Tamil labor, maintained this source of supply when they moved across the Bay to Malaya. Colonial officials, accustomed to seeing India as a land of too many people, turned to the subcontinent when labor was scarce elsewhere. The concept of race, accustomed to conflating circumstantial behavior with immutable traits, held Tamil labor to be, always and everywhere, "docile"—feckless, but amenable to discipline. As migration reached massive proportions, drawing in many from inland communities not previously connected with the world of the Bay of Bengal, the churning effects of colonial capitalism clashed with enduring forces of immobility.

South India had long been a place where people moved around: priests and mendicants, artisans and warriors. In his classic work on medieval South India, Burton Stein wrote of the "peripatetic ways of many in South Indian society," highlighting the succession of migration and conquest, and the gradual integration of newcomers. Initially the circulations that knitted South India together were small in scale but culturally significant: they involved the movement of Brahmin ritual specialists, poets, and scribes. Military mobility gained in importance—throughout the medieval era, communities of Telugu peasant-warriors

invaded and settled in the Tamil country. Under the rule of the Chola Empire in the second millennium, "expanding trade and agrarian systems" enmeshed lower peasant groups. Urban settlements clustered around large temples. Religious change both shaped and responded to economic transformation. The rise of the Saiva devotional movement saw the growth of wealthy temple complexes supported by peasant groups. The twelfth century "introduced the great age of religious pilgrimage in the Tamil country": a widening circle of itinerancy that stretched across the southern peninsula.¹⁹

The natural environment shaped circulation and exchange. The Tamil country encompassed three distinct ecological regions: the river valleys, based on irrigated rice cultivation, wealthy temple towns, and Brahmin ritual authority; the plains, where a harsher climate encouraged herding, hunting, and the cultivation of hardier grains; and the Konku region, a frontier that combined characteristics of plains and valley societies and had interactions with both. The valleys had long looked outward, exporting rice to Ceylon and to Southeast Asia, and importing luxuries from distant shores, so it is no surprise that they would dominate the mass migration to Southeast Asia after 1870. Plainsmen exchanged specialist services for surplus food from the valleys: short-term migration from plains to valleys became widespread, for military service or for construction labor. Over time, distinctions "broke down the land and sea boundaries which had kept Tamilnad in relative isolation": greater internal mobility between complementary environments interacted with the greater external mobility between the coast and the other side of the Bay of Bengal.²⁰

But movement took place amid servitude. The most common form of immobility in the Tamil districts was the *pannaiyal* system of "permanent farm servants," compared by British commentators at the time to European serfdom. Servants were tied to the land, but there were instances when *pannaiyals* could be sold independently—sold, on most definitions, as slaves. Such forms of tied labor, according to Dharma Kumar's account, "spanned a wide range from near-freedom to near-slavery." Often bondage came with a corresponding entitlement, even a right, on the part of the servants to demand employment, access to land, and support for subsistence. Inevitably such customary rights came under greatest strain during periods of dearth and famine. At the turn of the nineteenth century bonded agricultural laborers made up a

"sizeable proportion of the total population"—up to 20 percent—of many Tamil districts. The British abolitionist movement focused its attentions on Indian "domestic slavery," yet the interventions of the colonial state did little to change the structure of agrarian society until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.²¹ Alongside these ancient institutions, newer forms of immobility spread with the consolidation of colonial rule over South India. For weavers, artisans, and professional soldiers, among many others, British conquest brought economic ruin. Cheap Lancashire textiles flooded the Indian market. The traditional mobility of Indian weaving communities declined as their productivity fell behind that of Britain's mechanized textile mills. Contrary to the predictions of contemporaries including Karl Marx, South Indian society underwent a process of deindustrialization, rather than modernization, in the nineteenth century. It experienced a shift toward lower-quality, lower-value-added production and a decline in hand weaving, which was particularly important in securing women's livelihoods. Urban residents were thrust onto increasingly marginal lands, where they found a hardscrabble subsistence. South India's acute vulnerability to famine in the nineteenth century was one result of this enforced decline.²²

The power of steam promised the conquest of the monsoons. Less than a decade after the opening of the Suez Canal, the monsoons demonstrated their enduring power over human life—they failed. The failure was global and catastrophic. The El Niño–Southern Oscillation in 1877–1878 was the worst "since records began." The rains failed across lands as far apart as southern India, China, Java, Egypt, and northeastern Brazil. Primary producers were already vulnerable when the drought came—jolted by the burst bubble of American railroad stocks, the global economic depression of the 1870s caused a downward spiral in commodity prices and squeezed producers who had expanded too far and too fast into cash crops, often at the expense of food production. Drought turned to catastrophe in part because of the economic orthodoxies of the British Empire: British officials, loath to interfere with market forces, were niggardly with relief, having dismantled many preexisting systems of social support.²³ In India, the famine was worst in the South and across the Deccan plain. William Cornish—a doctor and humanitarian, harshly critical of British famine policy—wrote that

"we saw children of all ages in such a condition of emaciation that nothing but a photographic picture could convey an adequate representation of their state."²⁴ "When the dead are so numerous that they lie unburied," Cornish lamented, "when people leave their villages by wholesale and when village officials fly from their posts in panic, we can never get accurate accounts of vital statistics." Even in their absence, the death toll is estimated in the millions.

At the time and subsequently, observers assumed a direct connection between the famine of the 1870s and the increase in Indian emigration, which accelerated at that very moment. **Famine was the ultimate "push factor,"** to use a term first popularized by the American geographer Harry Jerome in the 1920s. George Grierson—folklorist, linguist, and colonial administrator—toured Bengal and Bihar in early 1883, charged with investigating the causes and consequences of Indian emigration. "Surely emigration may be looked upon as an engine of immense power for good to India," he wrote, as "the more safety-valves there are for a pent up population in time of famine, the greater chance there will be of saving life." Migration, on Grierson's account, was a natural flow of population governed by economic and environmental conditions. He correlated the price of rice with levels of emigration and found that the "agreement between these two lines is almost complete." Emigration, on this view, was a "vent" for India's surplus population: as the New World absorbed Europe's poor in increasing numbers, so the frontiers of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia promised to do the same for India. The governor of the Straits Settlements wrote that clearing the forests of the Malay Peninsula would open new opportunities to "numbers of labourers of a country already greatly overstocked, and which is periodically visited by famine to a most lamentable extent."²⁵

The link between famine and migration was, in truth, more complex. Faced with a chronic shortage of labor, British administrators across the Bay of Bengal saw opportunity in the famine. One official in Burma wondered, in March 1877, if "in view of the prevalence of very widespread famine in the Presidency of Madras, an impulse could not be given, by special arrangements, for a more extended emigration of labourers from the distressed tracts to British Burma, partly as a measure of relief from the famine, and partly in promotion of the settlement of population in this province."²⁶ The plans failed. A year later the

different areas

government of Burma again offered work on public construction projects to famine victims in Madras, but the scheme was suspended because only 800 people volunteered. Numerous other schemes to resettle famine victims overseas faltered.²⁷

By contrast, Ceylon did see an upsurge of migration because of the famine. The number of Indian laborers arriving in Ceylon doubled between 1875 and 1876 and exceeded 160,000 in each of the two worst years of the famine, 1876 and 1877; return migration from Ceylon to India fell significantly. The migrants to Ceylon came almost entirely from those regions "already accustomed to short-term labor migration": the dry regions of Thanjavur and southeastern Madurai. That is, those who saw emigration to Ceylon as a means of survival came from regions that **already had close connections with the island**. Migration to Ceylon had begun decades earlier and was already well established by the 1870s. "In view of the severe and protracted nature of the famine," David Arnold concludes, "it might be asked why the exodus from Madras was not even greater." Obstacles stood in the way of those who migrated—panicked officials tried to stop them from leaving their villages, and recruiters at the emigration depots rejected them as unfit for labor. The relative paucity of famine-induced emigration showed the "limited extent to which rural labor in Madras had ceased to be tied to the land and villages."²⁸

Economic opportunity and cheaper transportation eased the way for young men, and a smaller number of women, to leave their homelands and seek their fortunes in Southeast Asia at a time of catastrophe. But they did not react blindly to the furies of nature. What appears to be natural takes work: policies and legislation, chance and intention, technology and energy—not famine alone—combined to "push" migration across the Bay of Bengal. Migration was not simply a natural movement of population between regions of surplus and deficit population, or rainfall, or land; each act of migration arose from the hopes of individuals or the grim calculations of family survival; as often as not, migration was spurred by the coercion enshrined in laws written in distant chambers.

The essential link between crisis and opportunity was provided by what today we would call the "migration industry." Labor recruiters, shipping agents, petty financiers, and speculators worked together with—and, at