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MIGRATORY PATTERNS

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INDIAN LABOUR EMIGRATION TO BURMA (C.1880-1940): RETHINKING INDIAN MIGRATORY PATTERNS

Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal

'Every important commercial and industrial country in the world depends for its progress and prosperity on the adequacy and free supply of labour and in this respect some countries are more dependent than others on immigrant labour. Probably no country is so dependent on external labour as is Burma. The Indigenous population is unable to meet the ever-growing demand for labour necessary for her steadily developing commerce and Industries.....'

E.L.J Andrew (*Assistant Protector of Immigrants and Emigrants, Rangoon 1919-1923 and 1926-30; Labour Officer 1923-4*)

The First Anglo-Burmese war saw Indian emigrants to Burma who were primarily traders, apart from Indian sepoys in colonial troops, as the East India Company ended the monopoly enjoyed by prior Burmese government over major articles of commerce. However the 2nd and 3rd Anglo-Burmese war which brought about the complete annexation of Burma (lower and upper respectively), and more specifically the opening of Suez Canal by 1869, opened up Burma more vibrantly to the 'outer' western world and its huge demand for Burmese rice. Labour needs of the southern rice cultivation areas were initially met by migrant labourers from Northern Burma. However this proved to be insufficient to meet the burgeoning labour demands of expanding rice cultivation and exports. In 1874, the colonial state made an effort to settle a class of zamindar-agriculturalists from Bihar by bestowing upon them land grants, which was not much successful.

The 1880's were marked by sugar crisis in West Indies colonies which led to decline in Indian overseas emigration as well as British revenues. This led to the promotion of emigration to colonies where other commodities such as tea, coffee, rubber, tobacco, rice were grown. It was in this context that the newly annexed regions of Burma the caught attention of colonial officials.¹ The British in their quest to reap economic benefits, by developing agricultural and industrial enterprises in Burma, turned towards the surplus pool of cheap Indian labour. Efforts were made by the colonial government by appointing a Recruiting Agent and setting up the Coconada Recruiting Agency in East Godavari district of Madras Presidency in 1876 under the Burma Labour Act. Under this system the labourers were recruited and dispatched to Burma by entering into a *contract* with the government which provided them with a fixed wage, whether they found employment in Burma or not, along with food and shelter for the labourers as

well as their family. However the scheme was not successful because of multiple reasons, the most important being that majority of the mills in Rangoon met their labour demands through native contractors or *Maistries* which was seen as easier to manage.²

The British Indian government however continued with efforts to promote Indian labour emigration by introduction of fortnightly/weekly steamer services in the 1870's from the Coromandal coast, as well as offering subsidies to Indian shipping, apart from the shipping companies themselves reducing fares to increase traffic.³ Roads and communication networks from Chittagong to Akyab and other parts of Arakan were also being improved to promote brisk emigration via the land route.⁴ Most importantly by the 1880's we see that labour recruitment, emigration as well as life in Burma came to be informally regulated by the network of kin intermediaries called *Maistries*. The 'comfort' of recruitment and work under networks of family and friends coupled with miserable living conditions in colonial India and luring dreams of better socio-economic life in Burma were some important reasons which marked the beginning of a great Indian influx to Burma. In the period 1900-1938, which was a phase of high mobility, a total of 1,15,15,000 Indian migrants went to Burma.⁵ Who were these migrants? Which regions did they come from? Where did they find employment? These are some of the question which we shall attempt to examine.

The 'Kala' Indian: Zone of Reproduction and Production

'...He [the south Indian labourer in Burma] tills the paddy fields... mans the railways... handles the cargoes at Rangoon. He functions largely in the domestic service, clerical employment claims him and there is nothing to which he cannot put his hand with acceptance...

Census Commissioner of Madras (1931)

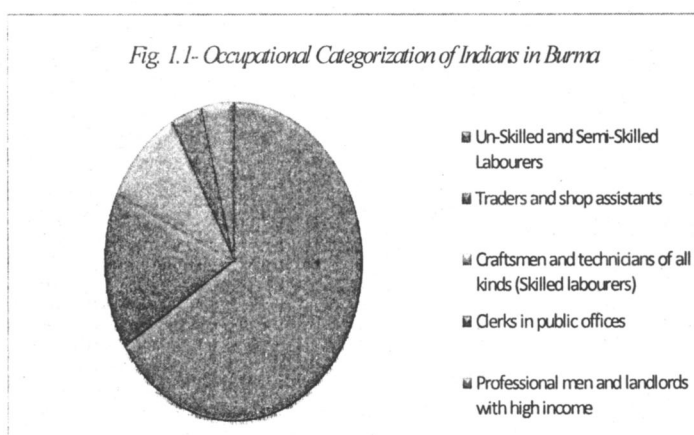
The Burmans often referred to the Indians as *kala* whose etymology is not very clear but can be taken to be derivative of Burmese words *Ka La* which meant foreigner par excellence or one coming from overseas. The children of mixed marriages were called *Zerbadi* or 'Child of Gold'. Inter marriages between Indian, mostly Muslim men, and Burmese women was despised by Burmese as it led the offspring to adopt father's religion and lose 'their religion' and induced a sense of cultural loss. The *zerbadis*, however, preferred to call themselves *Burman-Muslims* so as to distinguish themselves from the Burmese in religion and identify with them otherwise.⁷ To get a better sense of categories of Indians that were emigrating to Burma we can divide them into six major groups.⁸

Table 1.1

Indian Emigrants	Ports and Areas from where emigration occurred	Spheres of Production in Burma
<i>Telugus</i>	Coromandel ports namely Coconada, Vishakhapatnam, Bimlipatam, Calingapatam, Barua and Gopalpur. They belonged Ganjam, Godavari and Vishakhapatnam regions of Andhra	As unskilled labour employed in mills, factories and shipping companies. As porters, rickshaw pullers and hand-cart men. In crop-cutting operations of the agriculturalists. Telugus from Nellore district provided bulk of the sweepers found in Rangoon, and its suburbs.
<i>Oriyas</i>	Ganjam district of Madras Presidency (about 66% of Oriyas) and coastal districts of Orissa through mainly Coromandal ports. Few came from Bihar and Calcutta.	Provided the bulk of the labour required by the Railway and Public Works Department for construction and earthwork. They were also employed in Mills, Dockyards and Foundries both as skilled and as unskilled workers.
<i>Tamils</i>	Southern districts of the Madras Presidency like Ramnad and Tanjore	The middle class Tamils were employed in Government clerical works as well as railway and mercantile offices. The lower middle as well as the lower classes were involved in the rice mills and as agricultural workers. <i>Chettyars</i> came from Chettinad in Madras
<i>Hindustanis</i>	United Provinces (Sultanpur and Fyzabad districts). Emigrating via Calcutta port	Comprised of Hindu and Muslim <i>chaprasis</i> , peons or <i>darwans</i> . Many were exceptionally successful as petty vendors also.
<i>Bengalees</i>	1) Calcutta port - mostly educated men 2) Inland route or through Chittagong port - Mostly Muslim peasants and agricultural labourers. Fewer Bengalees.	Employed in a subordinate capacity in railway or local fund service, or in mercantile offices mostly in the clerical line and some were even as shop-keepers and traders. They were largely employed as ship and launch crew labourers as well as <i>sampun-wallah</i> and small craft traffic. They were also employed as Paddy harvesters and in mills and dockyards as drivers, tindals, oilmen or <i>khalasis</i> .
<i>Others</i>	1) <i>Punjabis</i> who came from the Punjab Doab. 2) <i>Marwaris</i> , <i>Gujratis</i> and <i>Multanis</i> 3) <i>Nepali</i> and <i>Bhutia</i>	<i>Punjabis</i> - found employment chiefly as artificers, turners, overseers etc in railways, motor workshops, dockyards and foundries. Merchant-Bankers were confined to urban areas - Mandalay, Prome, Rangoon and Moulmein; Principally traders.

So we notice that Indians of different classes and professions, coming predominantly from districts of Southern India formed the bulk of migrants to Burma during the British period. However majority of the emigrants were Telugu unskilled labourers coming from Ganjam and belonging to 'untouchable' castes and 'lower caste' *sudras*. The bulk of them settled down for employment at Rangoon. In the early 20th century in Rangoon alone about 80,000 Indian labourers found employment in various industries, of this number about 55,000 were Telugus. At the other end of the spectrum, an important category were the upper class prosperous *Chettyars*. The *Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee* stated that 'the Chettiars are the mainstay of the agricultural finance...without their support the internal and external trade of the country would break down and the rice crop could not even be produced'. Despite being

few in numbers they had immense economic strength in Burma which is very visible from the fact that 83% of bankers and moneylenders in Rangoon were Indians, that Indians at 25% were second only to Europeans (70%) in overall tax payment in the financial year 1931-32 of which 15% was contributed by the *Chettiars* alone.⁹ Moreover the networks of this prosperous community were spread not only in Burma but even to other countries like Malaya, Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, Siam, and Mauritius.¹⁰ It remains beyond doubt that Chettiars capitalists and entrepreneurs through their finances and money lending activities played an important role in aiding the functioning of the Maistry intermediaries and stimulating the flow of labour as well as capital to the colonies in which they operated.



An important point to note here is that though about 75 percent of the Indian emigrants to Burma were labourers (See *Fig. 1.1*), the distinction was that the Indian labourers formed a relatively small proportion of the total population directly involved as plantation labourers or cultivating tenants on the (rice) plantations in Burma (See *Table 1.2*).¹¹ The Indian labourers instead largely manned the industry, dealt with transport development, cleared the streets and built the sewage system in the cities of Burma. They were involved in tasks connected with the new export-oriented rice cultivation such as packing, loading, transporting, bagging, weighing etc. Agent of GOI in Burma conveys that while he undertook tours throughout Burma in 1939 to get firsthand knowledge of the conditions in which Indians were living, he found the leading role which Indian labour and enterprise had played in the construction and maintenance of roads and railways. The steamers were almost exclusively commanded and manned by Indians.¹² Searle, Commissioner of Settlements and Land records in Burma, stated that '...with rapid increase in the area cultivated with paddy in Lower Burma, there was a strong demand for agricultural labour and this was filled by Burmans. Simultaneously the growth of rice milling and shipping Industries

called for labour in Rangoon and other urban centres and this (demand) was met by immigrant labour from India...'. Thus it would not be wrong to state that *the demand in Burma was not mainly for agricultural but for urban labour, not for raising of a crop, but for its disposal and for the large commercial and industrial needs of the town.*¹³ However an important point to note is here is that though Indian labourers were not directly involved in significant numbers in the development of plantations, but Burma definitely owed its contemporaneous plantation development to Indian enterprise and Indian capital leased out to agricultural Burmans by the Indian absentee landowners and capitalists,—mainly the Chettiyars.

Table 1.2- Percentage of Indian cultivating tenants and agricultural labourers in the total population of Burma (1921 Census)

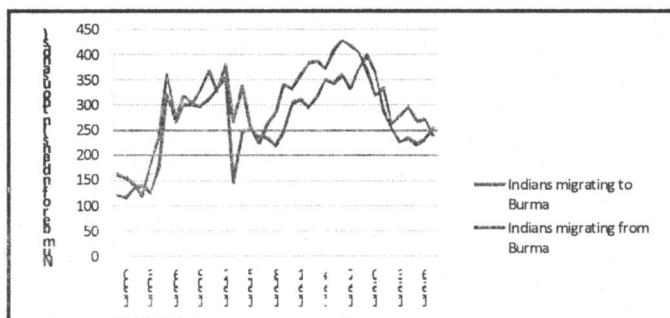
Race	Cultivating tenants				Agricultural labourers			
	Male	Female	Total	%	Male	Female	Total	%
Home Races	494,032	329,281	823,313	97	583,068	402,002	985,070	>96
Immigrant Indians	16,781	1,632	18,413	2	36,255	4,048	40,303	> 4
Total, all races	512,362	331,178	844,540	100	622,185	405,405 [#]	1,027,590	100

The total number of female agricultural labourers shows some minor error.

The Pattern of Indian Emigration to Burma: Birds of Passage

In between 1911 and 1921 the total flow of Indian migrants to Burma accounted for more than two million, however the decadal census showed an increase of merely 1,43,789 Indians in the stock. The *Royal Commission on Labour* of 1930 mentioned that for the years 1922-29 the numbers of Indian emigrants to Burma were 25,60,000, but the surplus was merely 4,80,000 all of whom cannot be necessarily labelled settlers.¹⁴ Thus it would not be wrong to say that an important feature of almost 125 years of 'free' and 'unregulated' Indian emigration to Burma was that it was largely unsettled and temporary in nature and that the emigrants were Birds of Passage (See Fig. 1.2). Moreover the Agent of GOI in Burma stated in his Annual Report of 1939 '...the migratory labour force travels backwards and forward between India and Burma at intervals of 3 years or so throughout the Individual working life'. Most classes of labourers preferred to stay for some time, usually 3-5 years, because they could not afford more frequent trips and also because a sojourn of less than 3 years did not enable them to save 'sufficient money' to take back to their homes.¹⁵

Fig. 1.2- The Annual flow of Indians to and from Burma (in thousands) for 1900-1938



Since large numbers of the *unsettled* Indian emigrants kept *rotating or circulating* back and forth over a period of time, it can be ascertained that the numbers of new immigrants would have been considerably smaller. This pattern is evidenced by the Burma India Chamber of Commerce estimate that 'only 10 % of unskilled labourers at rice mills were composed of new recruits or first timers, rest were migratory i.e. men who went back and forth between Indian and Burma'. However since the system remained loosely documented it is impossible to ascertain accurate percentage of old and new circulating immigrants.

Further the census figures for the place of birth of the Indian migrant¹⁶ shows us that a large proportion of Burman Indians were born in India. The average percentage of Indian born out of Burma was 81.6% in Lower Burma excluding Arakan region between 1881-1931; and 79.8% in between 1901-1931 in Upper Burma. Rangoon, which constituted the bulk of immigrant Indians accounted for maximum number of born-out with 84.3%. If we look at the percentage of those born outside Burma among immigrant Indians it was maximum among oriya (97%) followed by Telugus (94%), Hindustanis (84%) and Tamils (72%). These figures further confirm the pattern of Indian emigration to Burma being unsettled. One can question here why is as to the Indian labourers did not wish to settle down in Burma, despite the fact that most of the immigrants were young and single males, aged between 20-30 years?

A very significant explanation for the existence of such a pattern, which shows us yet another pertinent characteristic of Indian emigration to Burma - the desire of the majority of labourers to earn and return¹⁷ which rested on the dynamics of separation from family and women. Women never formed more than 10% in the annual flow of male emigrants to Burma which led to highly imbalanced sex-ratio. The average of male female ratio of Indian immigrant communities in Burma was 19F:100M, worst being the case with Oriyas (3F:100M) and Chittagonig immigrants (9F:100M), and 'best' among the Tamils

(43F:100M).¹⁸ Societal norms, religious ideals as well as the employers in Burma, natives of immigrant territory and more importantly the Maistries—all played a essential role in regulating family emigration and promoting a ‘non-reproductive’ unsettled immigrant labour force in Burma.

Moreover the Maistry system with its ubiquitous debt-contract, induced through networks of recruiting-supervising intermediaries, functioned to maintain the apparently self adjusting or unsettled emigration pattern. Based on the advance debts owed to the Maistry, the system mobilised labourers only to render them immobile through low wage jobs in Burma, irregular deductions and payment, high commissions and interest rates- which led to formation of a vicious cycle of ever-persisting advance-debt. *Breach of Contract Act, 1859* with its vaguely defined clauses for criminal prosecution, punishments and fines was an important tool not only to strengthen the immobility and bondage of the labourers but also to enforce their return to Burma in cases when they were allowed to go home for a sojourn or some urgent work. Many a times a family member or relative worker was held back as hostage by the Maistries to ensure the return of the labourers to repay debt. Moreover the shifting/seasonal nature of employment, improper facilities for medical aids, housing and accommodation (especially at Rangoon), rigorous conditions of work provided and the exclusive powers upheld by the Maistries of selection and dismissal of labourers and distribution of wages- which was conveyed to intending emigrants through networks of family, friends and returnees- were important reasons lesser new recruits as well instability of emigrants. By 1930's the rising anti-Indian and anti-immigration sentiments as a result of conditions created by depression, the Baxter Commission called for regulation on emigration of Indian labourers through passports, visas and permits by the *Immigration Order of 1941*. However the Order could not come into effect as Burma came to be occupied by Japan by this time and it led to huge returns, marked by deaths and casualties on way, as well as an abrupt end of Indian emigration to Burma and the decline of Maistry system.

Conclusion

In the studies on Indian migration there has been a strong tendency to view the migratory patterns as largely indentured in *form*, predominantly Northern Indian or Bhojpuri region as its *source*, plantation labourer as its *composition*, mainly directed towards British overseas colonies in the Caribbean, the Pacific as its *region of production/destination*, and *stimulated* mainly through the agency of Europeans. Through this paper I have attempted to challenge and complicate all these parameters which conventionally define the characteristics of Indian migration during the colonial period.

Moreover we notice studies on global migration patterns have ‘other-ised’ and largely undermined the immense significance and the phenomenal

mobility of Indian and broadly all Non-European/Asian migration that occurred during the colonial phase by an over-emphasis on the transatlantic system of migration *quantitatively*, while dismissal of the 'other' flows as insignificant; Secondly, while the transatlantic migrations are seen as integral to the expansion and integration of the world economy the Non-European migration was seen as a direct product of European intervention and expansion.¹⁹ Through this paper I have attempted to complicate such Eurocentric bias by *deconstructing* the narratives which form the basis of establishing a dichotomy of distinctive *forms* and *characteristics* of migratory trends. The emigration to Burma accounted for millions of mobile Indians thus being quantitatively very significant but at the same time it had an ephemeral character. Further it is undeniable that British colonial expansion into Burma was directly responsible in stimulating Indian labour emigration and that the colonial rule even made some direct attempts to promote emigration to Burma, but it was the non-European indigenous players like maistries, shipping agents, village moneylenders, merchants and bankers like Chettiyars and their capital which played a very crucial role not only in stimulating large scale Indian emigration to the colonies with great success but also in the expansion and integration of the global economy.

Notes and References

- ¹ Ceylon for tea, coffee and rubber plantations, Malay for rubber and Sumatra for tobacco were other places where Indian labour emigration was being encouraged, *Emigration of Tamils from Ceylon to Sarawak*, Revenue & Agriculture (hereafter R&A) Dept., Emigration Branch, Fno. 75 of 1886, Pros. No. 12-14, Jan 1887, NAI.
- ² *Unlicensed recruiting of labour in Madras for British Burma*, Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce Dept., Emigration Branch, Pros. No. 15-17, July 1878, NAI.
- ³ Return passages cost were kept as they were, keeping in mind immigrants earnings and savings, *Emigration to Burma*, R&A Dept., Emigration Branch, Pros. No. 28-9, Fno. 13, Feb 1882, NAI; *Unofficial Note in Burma Riot Inquiry Committee, Interim Report*, Education, Health and Lands (hereafter EHL) Dept., Overseas Section, Fno. 61-1/39-Os, Jan 1939, NAI; *Burma Round Table Conference*, Nov 1931-Jan 1932, London, p. 83.
- ⁴ However Hugh Tinker argues that British in order to preserve the buffer role played by Burma between South Asia and China and against French activity in Indo-China and Thailand did not develop railway communication between India and Burma, Tinker, Hugh, *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, OUP, 1977, p. 140.
- ⁵ Compiled from *Confidential Note by Dr. H Bernardelli* (Professor and Statistician acting as Secy. to the Baxter Committee), Jan 1940 sent to G.S Bozman, Deputy Secy of GOI, EHL, New Delhi in *Burma- Control of Immigration of Unskilled Labourer. (Part-III, pp. 144-298)*, Fno. 144-1/38- Land and Overseas Branch (L&O Hereafter), 1938, NAI. pp. 188
- ⁶ *Madras Census Report*, 1931, Vol.XII, Part I, pp.82 (Emphasis added).
- ⁷ Mahajani, Usha, *The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, Bombay, Vora & Co., 1960, p. 23. Ferrars, Max and Bertha, *Burma*, 2nd Edition, London and New York, 1901, pp. 159-162; Yegar, Moshe, *Muslims of Burma - A study of a Minority Group*, Heidelberg, 1972, pp. 29-36
- ⁸ Table is compiled after an analysis of Searle, H.F, (Commissioner of Settlements and Land records, Burma) *Notes on Indian Immigration*, 1935, in *Burma- Control of Immigration of*

- Unskilled Labourer*, EHL Dept., L&O Branch, Fno. 144-1/38-L&O, Part- IV, pp. 299-374, 1938, NAI; *Emigration to Burma*, R&A Dept., Emigration Branch, Pros. No. 28-9, Fno. 13, Feb 1882, NAI; Pillai, E. P. (*Labour Member of the Burma legislative council*) & Sundaram, Lanka (*specially appointed to investigate labour conditions in Malay, Ceylon and Burma*), *Memorandum on Indian Labour in Burma (Confidential)*, Vizagapatam, EHL Dept, L&O Branch, Delhi Records, Fno. 239/34-L&O, 1934, NAI; Andrew, E.L.J., *Indian labour in Rangoon*, London, OUP, 1933, Chapter-V; Baxter, James, *Report on Immigration of Indians into Burma*, Rangoon, 1941, Chapter- III.
- ⁹ *Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report*, Vol. I, 1936, p. 190.
- ¹⁰ Mahajani (1960), op. cit., pp. 17-22; By 1936 Chettyars owned 25 % of agricultural land in Burma , Lal, Brij.V; Reeves, Peter and Rai, Rajesh (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, OUP, 2007 p. 169.
- ¹¹ Baxter shows that Indians as non-cultivating owners, cultivating owners, tenant cultivators and agricultural labourers further dropped to 2.7% if we exclude Arakan whose population of settled Chittagonian Muslim agriculturalists was included in the category of emigrant Indians, Baxter (1941), op. cit., p. 26.
- ¹² Unofficial note in the advance copy of *Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in Burma for year ending Dec 1939*, Fno. 43/39-Os, 1940, GOI Press, Simla, 1940, NAI. *Extract from the Report of the Agent of GOI in Burma on his visit to upper Burma and Shan states*, Nov-Dec, 1939, NAI.
- ¹³ This division of labour was largely, according to him, due to difference between character of Indian and Burman, Searle, H.F, *Notes on Indian Immigration*, 1935 in *Burma- Control of Immigration of Unskilled Labourer* (Part- IV), 1938, NAI, pp. 338-9, 342.
- ¹⁴ *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, EHL Dept., General Branch, Pros. No. 17-18-B, Sep 1931 NAI, Chapter XXIII, pp. 426. The census 1931 taking into account Port Commissioners records stated the surplus for these 8 years to be 263,00, Para 14, Vol. I, *1931 Census*. Though both the reports are not unanimous in their figures, but they show synonymous pattern of emigration and help prove the argument.
- ¹⁵ *Extract from the weekly notes of the Labour Commissioner, Burma, published in supplement to the Burma Gazette*, 9th Nov 1935, EHL Fno. 189/36-L&O, 1936, NAI.
- ¹⁶ A special Industrial census taken in 1921 of labourers employed industries such as rubber, minerals, wood, metal, rice, oil refining and construction of means of transport revealed that only 4.25% of the total Indian labourers born outside Burma intended to reside permanently in the country, Baxter (1941), op. cit., pp.3-4.
- ¹⁷ *Memorandum of information concerning immigrant coolies in Rangoon furnished by Mr. C.H Jones of the preventive service, after enquiry from the Maistries and coolies employed in Rangoon*, R&A Dept., Emigration Branch, 1882, NAI.
- ¹⁸ Andrew explains that disparity in the sex ratio can largely be attributed to the nature of jobs too, vide Andrew (1933), op.cit., pp.16-19
- ¹⁹ Introduction in *Migrations across Time and Nations: Population Mobility in Historical Context*, (ed.) Ira Glazier and Luigi De Rosa, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986, pp. 5; Introduction in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, Yans-McLaughlin, Virginia (ed.), New York: OUP, 1990, p. 3; Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 366 and Chapter 15; Pieter Emmer, 'Was Migration Beneficial?' in *Migration, Migration History, History, Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, (ed.) Lucassen, Jan, Lucassen, Leo, P. Lang, 1999, p. 113.