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Book Review: Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State by Radhika Mongia

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Mongia, Radhika. *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. xi + 230 pages. Softcover, \$24.95.

Migration remains a controversial topic. Radhika Mongia's *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* analyzes the chronicled histories of cumulative migration control that evolved into a state monopoly, and its role in state development, relationships and conflicts between nations relating to migration and economy, and state sovereignty. Further, it showcases the authority that colonial macro-level structures had on subjugating the colonized. The British Empire tediously monitored the migration of Indian laborers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mongia describes the influence law, technology, and bureaucracy had in shaping the expansion of a global economy based on presuppositions of race, gender, and nationality. This obstructed identities of family, marriage, and labor in such places as India, Britain, Canada, and South Africa. She starts with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, and covers the complexity of Indian-Canadian migration in the early twentieth century, and the politics that shaped state sovereignty.

Chapter One examines the complexity of migration law from 1834 to 1917. Migration, whether forcible or through indentured servitude along with colonization, shaped labor law. The British abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, but this created a space for different forms of oppression including indentured servitude. This in turn, effected labor legislation, and evolved into a heavily-monitored and micromanaged bureaucracy that shaped transformations of the state. The author provides a timeline of the progression of labor and migration laws and analysis of different theorists and the proliferation of indentured servitude and its consequences on the state, and migrant laborers. The author linked events from slavery abolishment in Mauritius and the Caribbean, the colonization of India, economy, and politics, and the very events that shaped

not only state sovereignty, but contract and labor law. While indentured servitude historically has not been viewed as horrific as slavery, Mongia reveals the marginalization and oppression of Indian emigrants. Chapter One is a good, solid review of migration law, even if a bit cumbersome at times to maneuver through the technical text.

In Chapter Two, Mongia examines the various Acts and revisions in the law, the evolution of regulations under imperial nationalism, and the consequence this likely had on emigrant experience. Like many government systems, the reaction to problems in Indian migration was often solved through yet more bureaucracy by increasing rules, revising regulations, and the creation of more and more forms. Ironically, then—like now—causes efforts to focus more on the rules and forms and work processes than it does the efficiency or quality of services.

Indentured servitude in India was highly monitored through a complex, hierarchic management system, and the “well-being” of the emigrant was paramount to daily operations (or so it appeared so on the surface). However, a structure with so many rules and regulations without the proficiency to adapt quickly to change resulted in numerous cases of abuse and death of Indian migrants. Since every moment was regulated, they had little say on their lives as servants. Countless mid-level supervisors who served in the role of Recruiter or Plantation Manager had lineages that could be traced back to the slave trade. Thus, the “well-being” of the migrant was directly related to economic factors, rather than valid concerns about individual health. Rationalization correlates with oppression, and the ethnocentrism of the British rule in resulted in Indian subjects treated as lesser than, based upon the rigidity and logic of disciplinary power. This form of bureaucracy had a lasting effect on the Indian state.

Chapter Three details the results imperialism had on gender, marriage, and the Indian family. Holding tightly to their ideology of gender roles and family identity, the British created legislation that maintained this system. These changes not only suppressed the legal identity of Indian Muslim or Hindu women, but in turn, gave rise to the passive resistant movement. The definition of “wife” became controversial when the British rule ended polygamy and then for a time, refused to acknowledge Indian marriages entirely. Thus, Indian women were stripped of their identity as “wife,” and also lost the honor associated with that designation. Ironically, Indian women gained some power joining the passive resistant movement. Eventually, the British compromised somewhat through the 1914 Indian Relief Bill, wherein a man could have more than one wife but only one marriage would be recognized, yet monogamous marriage laws prevailed until later in the twentieth century.

Chapter Four chronicles the history of the passport in Canada as a mechanism of not only creating racial identity (as in defining which race an immigrant belonged—Indian, Chinese, or Japanese), but as a means to strictly monitor who was allowed into the nation. Canada and India were at opposing sides of this regulation—India seeing it as a means of restricting and reforming their rights and identities as British subjects; and Canada as a means of controlling its character as a white settler nation. The use of passports in Canada during the early twentieth century had a direct influence on the “colonial geology of the modern state” (p. 137), as it restricted acceptance of foreigners into the nation. This practice is used globally in modern times for the very same purpose.

Mongia brings new insight into the argument of formation of nation states. Historically, this has been viewed through a diffusionist model of modern state formation showcasing

imperialist and colonialist accounts of history. Yet, this process fails to consider the rich narrative of those whose “coordinates and determinations are temporally and spatially dispersed” (p. 3). As reviewed, many factors shape a nation-state’s development. In changing migration discourse from a simple analysis of melding one population into another, we can better understand the complexity that migration has on the formation of not only nations, but cultures. Overall, Mongia’s account is a fresh, fascinating explanation of the intricacies of migration and its impact on host-countries, nation-state and bureaucratic development, and at the heart of it all, the emigrant. There has been a steady change in academia to consider a more global and cultural perspective, and this book is relevant to many scholars, including those in political science, history, sociology, women’s studies, migration, Asian studies, colonial and post-colonial studies, and global issues.

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