



**University of  
Zurich**<sup>UZH</sup>

**Zurich Open Repository and  
Archive**

University of Zurich  
University Library  
Strickhofstrasse 39  
CH-8057 Zurich  
[www.zora.uzh.ch](http://www.zora.uzh.ch)

---

Year: 2019

---

**A review of Radhika Viyas Mongia, Indian migration and empire: a colonial  
genealogy of the modern state. - Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018**

Bhattacharyya, Debjani

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-236186>

Scientific Publication in Electronic Form

Published Version



The following work is licensed under a Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) License.

Originally published at:

Bhattacharyya, Debjani (2019). A review of Radhika Viyas Mongia, Indian migration and empire: a colonial genealogy of the modern state. - Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018. East Lansing, Mich.: H-Diplo/H-Net network on Diplomatic History and International Affairs.

**Radhika Viyas Mongia.** *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State.* Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018. 248 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-7102-1.

**Reviewed by** Debjani Bhattacharyya

**Published on** H-Diplo (June, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The refugee has reemerged in the past few years both as a political threat and the subject of humanitarian concern. The migration of Syrian refugees, the Rohingyas, projections of climate refugees, and the US-Mexico border wall among other issues have forced scholars to return to questions of statelessness in the twenty-first century. As war, political turmoil, and climate crisis redraw nation-state borders, politicians and humanitarian workers debate how and through what legal and bureaucratic regimes states should regulate people's movements. Radhika Mongia's methodologically innovative and theoretically rigorous book, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State*, reminds us that the state monopoly over migration was born out of contingent colonial practices of both enabling and constraining movements of certain bodies throughout the British Empire. Mongia documents the colonial genealogy in the making of the modern state by focusing on colonial Indian migration in the British Empire to trace how a world dominated by empire-states was transformed into one dominated by nation-states.

The abolition of plantation slavery in British colonies in 1834 generated a demand for cheap labor, which was met, in part, by the introduction of the Indian indenture system in order to displace recently emancipated slave labor. *Indian*

*Migration and Empire* takes the abolition of slavery as the starting point to document how a "logic of facilitation" enabled the movement of more than 1.3 million Indians across the world, "including Mauritius, Réunion, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Surinam, Fiji, Australia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa" (p. 2). However, as non-indentured Indians started moving across the empire-state, especially white-settler colonies like Canada, the United States, South Africa, and Australia in the twentieth century, a new "logic of constraint" began to frame the movement of people across lines of race. Mongia's book uncovers the fundamental colonial genealogy of the modern nation-state by focusing on the various techniques, technologies, and institutions for managing migration through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Challenging the dispersal and diffusionist theories of modern state formation, Mongia argues for a layered understanding of the emergence of various juridical and bureaucratic technologies that enabled as well as constrained movements—technologies that were spatially dispersed across the British Empire and born out of their local socioeconomic imperatives and political contingencies.

The chapters of the book are organized around the introduction of some key technologies and bureaucracies of migration: the juridical la-

bor contract in Mauritius, which by centralizing consent helped to distinguish indentured migration from the slave trade; the marriage license in South Africa which enabled nonindentured women to join their husbands; and, finally, the demands for passports for British Indians traveling to Canada, which Mongia argues was birthed from racial anxieties in white-settler colonies. Mining a rich archive of material strewn across continents, Mongia shows how the expansion of colonial Indian migration from 1834 to 1917 was coterminous with the expansion of the state apparatus across the various empires: British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Japanese. The book makes three major interventions. First, Mongia makes an intervention into the literature of migration studies by reorienting its nation-state focus. Second, by studying colonial Indian migration across the British Empire and white-settler colonies, she breaks through the conceptual silos of studying migration through free and unfree movements and instead focuses on the state, and its logic of facilitation and inhibition. Finally, she rigorously documents how gender, sexuality, and race played a critical part in naturalizing state authority over migration.

First, the para-imperial and global framing of the book breaks fresh methodological ground, to counter what Mongia calls the “methodological nationalism” of migration studies (p. 4). Instead, Mongia takes on the task of historicizing the tools and regulatory regimes that organize both migration and the space of the nation-state. In that manner, she is able to denaturalize the territoriality of the nation-states, which reveals that “nationalization of migration has taken a piecemeal and uneven trajectory, pointing to the fact that processes of nationalization are ‘temporally heterogeneous’” (p. 6). Turning our attention to the transformation in European contract law in the wake of the abolition of Atlantic slavery and the attendant changes in regulation governing Indian indentured labor, Mongia argues that consent was emerging as a central tenet in the making of

“free” (colonial) labor; and since this consent had to be regulated and surveilled by the state, it left an enduring effect in the very definition of state sovereignty. She places the transformation in the contract, or *girmit* (agreement), within the larger migration bureaucracy involving a whole host of characters including medical workers, health inspectors, police officers, recruitment agents, and immigration officers, and the vast network of epistolary communication that buttressed it.

Second, instead of focusing on free, unfree, or semi-free migration as separate units of analysis, Mongia focuses on how states facilitate, inhibit, and create various modalities of freedom and consent in the movements of bodies across the globe. Offering a different genealogy and new theorization of the modern state, *Indian Migration and Empire* overturns assumptions about state control of migration as a peculiarly twentieth-century phenomenon. Indeed, the book convincingly shows that neither did state control of migration emanate in Western European and North American contexts, as is dominant in the literature, nor did the early origin of state control over migration operate through a logic of constraint. What was at stake in the emergence of a contract to regulate the movement of “free” labor and the “experiment of transporting Indian indentured labor to replace slave labor was the very future of liberalism” (p. 23). By turning to various sides of the legal and economic debates about transporting indentured Indians to Mauritius and elsewhere in the British Empire, Mongia documents the dilemma confronted by the officials who sought to protect the liberty of the subject, i.e., the Indian migrants, on the one hand, and on the other hand restrict their very entry into Mauritius to protect former slaves-turned-apprentices. Moreover, protection was also necessary to shield the indentured laborers from deceiving and guileless “native crimps” (recruiters) (p. 35), producing a paternalistic state that both condoned the unequal

labor contracts and extracted “free consent” (p. 39) from the indentured laborers.

Finally, her book documents in granular detail how gender, sexuality, and race structured both migration regimes and the modern nation-state. Analyzing the controversy around polygamous marriage in South Africa between 1911 and 1914, Mongia argues that a raced regime of migration began to emerge and that this regime was deeply invested in and “saturated by the dynamics of gendered nationalism” (p. 20). In a brilliant analysis that places the discussions around Indian marriage in South Africa with those of Gandhian *satyagraha*, Mongia shows how the nature of the modern state was remade, as regulation of marriage was wrenched “from the jurisdiction of religious authority into the jurisdiction of state law ... [helping] redefine marriage and nationalize kinship relations” (p. 87). Anxieties around race galvanized beyond the regulation of polygamous, diasporic marriages, and these included the redefinition of a “legal wife” (p. 93) and the production of the “nationalized migrant body” (p. 113) through the concrete technology of the passport in the early twentieth century. Indeed, she argues that constraining Indian (and Asian) migration to Canada and other white-settler colonies was managed through the passport system. Overturning arguments that migration helps us see the disruption to the contours of nationality, Mongia documents the political work done by the early passport regime to show how migration produced nationality as a strong territorial attachment.

Mongia has written a pathbreaking book. In the wake of this work it will no longer be possible to tell the story of border-making without a scrutiny of how human labor was dehumanized on an imperial and global scale. Moreover, her theoretically rigorous reading of nineteenth-century labor contract and legal debates about polygamous marriage show that a history of modern state-making must be told from the seams of the Western Hemisphere by tracing the routes through

which consent was bureaucratized. Such a formalization of consent was at the heart of regulating plantation and sexual labor in the British Empire from the nineteenth century onward. Her book will be of interest to scholars of migration studies and empire studies as well as those interested in theorizing race and state-making.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Debjani Bhattacharyya. Review of Mongia, Radhika Viyas. *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53256>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.