Mutating Identities? Military Recruits and Labour Migrants in Northern India, 1810-1857
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Introduction
By the early 19th century, the consolidation of British power in India had produced swingeing economic and social changes which impacted upon the nature and availability of labour. The emergence of a large pool of workers, progressively divorced from land and locality, and subsumed into the growing mass of colonial military recruits known as sepoys, and the menial labourers who came to be designated by the generic term coolies have traditionally been differentiated in the historiography. This paper assesses the shortcomings of such classifications and reassesses links between these migration streams using a case study of Mauritius between 1810 – when the island was conquered by a sepoy force – and 1857 – when the rebellion spawned massive disruption and transformation in the common recruiting heartlands of both military and plantation recruits.

The Mobilisation of Colonial Military and Plantation Labour
The scale and timing of late 18th and early 19th century labour recruitment operations for both military and plantation service were influenced by changes in rural production relations which resulted from intrusive capitalist development in the increasingly large swathe of India which was under British influence. The policies which the British in India introduced to stimulate economic growth contributed to deprive peasants of their land and artisans of their crafts. At the same time, the absorption of petty princes into the Company’s territories threw hundreds of traditional ‘lathials’ or armed retainers out of work. In this way a small floating population of seasonal migrants and rural proletarians was swollen by the new landless and unemployed. This potential wage labour force could then be directed to new mining or cash crop ventures, while those with military experience or traditions [such as village wrestling] found suitable employment in the Bengal army. Economic insecurity, coupled with natural calamities, pushed the migrant population still higher and provided overseas capitalists with recruits who could be induced to sign a five year
indenture contract in return for little more than a ready meal and the promise of future remuneration.

Whilst the historiography of labour in colonial India typically laid stress on the involuntary character of absorption into new employments of workers driven by hunger and desperation, more recent studies have prompted re-evaluations of the importance of subaltern agency in the driving and management of recruitment schemes by important employers. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to compare therefore, the tactics adopted by the recruiters for the Bengal army with those acting on behalf of the Mauritius sugar industry. In his discussion of the composition of the British army in India in the early 19th century Douglas Peers has pointed out that the company confined its recruiting efforts to certain castes and regions. Brahmins and Rajputs from Awadh and neighbouring areas of Bihar and Rohilkand dominated with recruits from these higher castes accounting for 80 per cent of the army. A further ten per cent was composed of Muslims, also principally recruited from Awadh-Bihar. The remainder was drawn from middle-ranking and lower castes. Peers adds:

The dominance of higher castes in the Bengal army was reinforced by the sepoys themselves taking charge of recruitment. When sepoys returned to the regiment from furloughs, they were expected to bring family and kin members back with them as prospective recruits. This was the principal method of recruitment in the Bengal army; only in times of extraordinary demands would the army actively seek out recruits itself. Participation of British officers was restricted to approving or rejecting the candidates. Hence, a self-perpetuating system was created in which the regiment and the village were linked together by the sepoys themselves. Although cost-effective, this system of recruiting reinforced the sepoys' sense of exclusivity and reduced the authority of English officers in the management of their regiments.

Significantly, recruiters acting for Mauritian sugar planters quickly adopted similar tactics and similar regional modus operandi. Was this merely coincidental? To date studies have not sought to compare and contrast the whys and wherefores of these contemporaneous recruiting schemes which have been treated separately in the literature. In practice, labour selection for both military and plantation labour was a prerequisite.
Age and occupation-specific work-forces are very much a hallmark of organised migration streams.² In the Mauritius case, the creation of a parallel to the sepoy experience derived in part from the use of returnees (sent back to India to recruit labourers and bring them to Mauritius). This system began informally within the first decade of indentured migration. The strategy of returnee recruiting was adopted because it was cost-effective, and avoided many of the problems associated with directly coercive methods of labour recruiting. It was also a means of maintaining a migrant stream to the colony in the face of rising competition between labour exporters. The study of returnee recruiting helps to explain the manner in which strategies for reproduction of the work force evolved over the indenture period (far from remaining static as previous studies of indenture have implied). Such recruiters, who often received sirdarships when they returned to Mauritius with a band of new immigrants, played an important role both in the management of labour on sugar estates, and as pioneers in land acquisition and settlement off estates. By integrating new arrivals into Indian social and economic networks in Mauritius which were increasingly independent of plantations, returnees fulfilled the function of attracting immigrants to the colony in spite of poor prospects for such workers.³

The Sepoy as Coolie and the Coolie as Sepoy
The presence of sepoys amongst labour migrants to the sugar colonies has been demonstrated from a range of sources. Evidence of sepoys emigrating voluntarily to Mauritius, often recruited as sirdars, is ample, well before 1857.⁴ It has long been known that a peak in labour emigration figures in 1858-1860 can be associated with widespread economic dislocation following the Rebellion. Christoph Hibbert has pointed out, for example, that by the end of November 1857 “tens of thousands of Indians were wandering homeless and hungry over the whole Delhi area” while David Northrup states categorically “the strongest case for British rule pushing people to emigrate can be seen in the correspondence between the peak in migration overseas at the end of the 1850s and the widespread disruptions associated with the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and its suppression”.⁵ To put this into perspective – in the years 1859 and 1860 more than 40,000 Indians migrated annually to the sugar colonies as indentured labour – more than double the figure in preceding and succeeding years. At the same time, the demand for labour in the sugar colonies was elevated by exceptionally high sugar prices in 1857-8. Walton Look Lai has asserted that evidence of a direct relationship between the events of 1857-8 and out-migration can be demonstrated by the fact that not only did higher numbers of emigrants go ‘voluntarily’ to the emigration depots, but many
were “high caste ex-soldiers from the disbanded native army denied jobs in the British Indian Army [and] mutineers fleeing from the prospect of arrest and deportation.”

That this was not highlighted or investigated closely at the time, does not seem to have been accidental. While Governors of British colonies employing large numbers of Indian labourers were warned to exercise vigilance in case of copycat disturbances in their own territories, they sought to play down the likelihood of sepoys arriving with the thousands of indentured labourers whose arrival brought the promise of huge economic benefits at a time of soaring sugar prices. The Governor of Mauritius, in charge of the territory that received by far the largest number of ‘mutiny migrants’, took particular care to differentiate between labourers and sepoys, claiming that:

“no possible ties of interest or of sympathy, can exist between the poor, low caste coolies who come here from Bengal and the Coast to till our soil and earn their bread, with the fanatical, haughty Mahomadan, the wily Brahmin, or the fearless, high-spirited Rajpoot, of whom the Bengal Army is almost entirely composed, and who are principally recruited from Oude and Provinces of the Doab”.

This facile dismissal of the common ground between the labourer and the sepoys was designed to allay fears, and was certainly not an accurate assessment of the likely presence of sepoys in the sugar estate workforce.

Conclusions

Interestingly, not until outsiders arrived to interrogate the conditions of the estate workers did some links with mutineers emerge. The old India hands serving as royal commissioners investigating conditions on sugar estates in British Guiana and Mauritius in the mid 1870s could not help pointing out cases of suspected mutineers among the workforce. On a visit to the Mauritian estate of Mon Choix, in September 1872, the commissioners investigated the case of one Parushram, on the grounds that the man was from Ghazipur, “he had come here soon after the mutiny, and it appeared possible that he had come under a false name”. A few days later, at l’Union estate, they interrogated Mahadoo, who “admitted, after some prevarication, that he had been a sepoy, but that he could not remember the number of his regiment.” They concluded: “there can be little doubt but that he had been a sepoy; and from his story, it appeared very probable that he belonged to the regiment of the Bombay army that mutinied at
Kolapore”. These were just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, scores, hundreds, even thousands of persons connected with persons and regions affected by the mutiny merged into the estate labour force. And just as sepoys could become coolies when it suited them, so too did striking labourers take on the menace of the “barbarous sepoys” in the columns of colonial newspapers from Guiana to Fiji. One man’s meat was indeed another man’s poison insofar as the crossing of boundaries between docile coolie and fanatical sepoy was concerned.

References

4 A number of case studies can be found in Carter, M. Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874, OUP, Delhi, 1995.
7 Indian Public Proceedings 188/49.
8 Royal Commission Report, 1875.