This paper aims to set a new agenda for research on Indian migration. So far, migration history has concentrated almost exclusively on emigration or immigration. Statistics present migration as a one-way process, ignoring the fact that many “emigrants” returned after relatively short periods of time abroad. Indentured laborers, who are the focus of this paper, often migrated multiple times for short periods. The result was a constantly circulating regime of migration, based on village and familial units, which requires focus not on the land of destination, but on the social and economic transformations within the regions of migrant origin. This novel approach is particularly important for studies of South Asia, where migration has only recently become an historical subject.¹

Adam McKeown has pointed out that migration from South Asia and coastal China was part of a global migration gaining momentum all over the world from the middle of the nineteenth century onward. Although many refer to Chinese and Indian migrants as “indentured laborers,” McKeown compares the South Asian and southern Chinese migration, which amounted to about 52 million, to European migration to the Americas (58 million people) and to northeastern Asia and Russia (51 million migrants). These numbers indicate that migration was an evenly shared global phenomenon and not restricted to the transatlantic migrations which dominated research until the end of the twentieth century.² But indentured servitude is insufficient grounds for linking South Asian migrants and migrants from southern China, for temporal labor contracts were common throughout the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans.

¹ Many thanks to Sadia Bajwa for critical comments.
The destinations of indentured laborers from China and India also differed extremely. More Chinese migrants went to work at the eastern rim of the Pacific in North and South America whilst Indian migrants sometimes travelled as far as the Caribbean, although the other way around the globe. Chinese indentured laborers also worked on the sugar plantations of Cuba where no Indians were employed. Roughly one-third of both migratory groups “met” in the Indo-Malayan Archipelago. However, here the majority of Indian “kulis” was indentured, while Chinese migrants came as merchants, traders, and peddlers, although also as “kulis.” In comparison to other world regions, migration from South Asia was fairly high and reflected the incorporation of the Indian labor force into globally expanding and shifting markets. That British India was not simply some sort of colonial periphery but a major player in the process of globalization from the 1860s until the end of World War Two has been pointed out convincingly in Thomas Metcalf’s latest book on India and the Indian Ocean.4

Although books on Indian migration appeared on the academic market already in the 1970s,5 only in the 1990s did Indian migrations and diasporas move to the top of South Asia’s economic, social, and labor history agenda. Scholars from all over the world now contribute to the emerging field of mobility and migration studies of “indentured laborers,” the juridical term for the “kuli” in the century between 1840 and 1940.6 Although studies of transatlantic migration from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries still dominate academic research, a unique archive of sources—far more detailed than what exists for the transatlantic migrations in general and for the slave trade in particular—is available for those interested in mobility in South Asia.7

3 For a definition and discussion of the linguistic origins of “kuli” as well as the term, “indentured laborer,” see n. 16 and n. 17.
6 See the monograph by Marina Carter, Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius 1834–1874 (Delhi, 1995) and the important edited volume by Crispin Bates, Community, Empire and Migration: South Asian Diaspora (Basingstoke, 2001).