In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Southeast Asia was one of two main destinations of mass migration (the other being the United States) and Indian and Chinese labor migrants dominated migration flows. This movement was a defining feature of Asian globalization and Chinese and Indian immigration rates were comparable to transatlantic immigration rates during the same period. While the transatlantic migration flows are acknowledged as voluntary and resulting from economic, demographic, and technological transformations, Asian voluntary migration has largely been misrepresented as coerced and circular migration only. Asian immigrants’ experiences, their considerable impact on Southeast Asian economies and societies, and permanent overseas settlements must thus be seen through the lens of an integrated labor market, connections, and movement. This paper analyses the important pathways linking the British Empire, the complex exchanges, and opportunities associated with the global trade in commodities, and labor crossings in the region. It also examines the forces that shaped Indian emigration to Southeast Asia against the backdrop of India’s pivotal role in the region and the interconnections between different societies in Asia. The focus is on Indian Ocean crossings and Indian labor migration to Burma and Malaya to establish and explain these imperial and global connections.

Introduction: Britain, Metropole-Colony Connections and Indian Ocean Crossings

European political expansion in Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century provided the conditions for major economic transformations in the region. The growth of the international economy and related demand for Asian commodities for the world market coincided

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1 Prior to 1948 Malaya included the Malay Peninsula and Singapore.
with the region’s greater integration into the new globalised system of production, trade, and investment. Concurrently, the circulation of commodities within and beyond the region shaped colonial labor policies and migration across national and international boundaries.

The establishment of European administrative structures also led to the redrawing of the political map of the continent and the organization of expanded connections between the different states. In Southeast Asia the resulting modern geographical frame comprised six major states—Burma, Malaya, Indochina, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. With India as the nexus of Britain’s imperial power in Asia, the British expanded into Burma and Malaya. In Burma, the English East India Company had obtained Upper Burma from the Burmese rulers following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–6) and the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–3). Following a third War (1885–6), the British extended their jurisdiction over Lower Burma and effective control over the whole of Burma was achieved in 1895. Thereafter, Burma was administered from India as an adjunct of the British Indian empire until 1937, when it became a separate crown colony. In the Malacca Strait, Britain took over the East India Company’s Straits Settlements possessions (secured between 1786 and 1824) and brought the Malay states under formal protectorate status between 1874 and 1914. The Malay states were effectively governed as colonies, though they were labeled protectorates and still nominally under their own rulers.

British control of Burma and Malaya facilitated their transformation into important production sites for empire industrial commodities (tin, rubber, petroleum) and foodstuffs such as sugar and rice. In turn the two states became important commodity and investment markets for metropole manufacturers, contributing to Britain’s ongoing industrial revolution. The British also established modern bureaucratic, administrative and legal codes that facilitated creation of spaces and networks in the new empire. These interconnected political and economic structures provide new frames for conceptualizing and investigating the considerable flows of trade, investment and population movements in the region.

*Indian Migrants—Crossings and Magnitude*

Trans-Asian migration was a key component of an imperial labor policy that was intended to provide workers on a temporary basis to