

THE CIRCULATION OF COMMERCIAL MANPOWER IN AN
INDIAN WORLDWIDE TRADING NETWORK IN THE
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The existence of a significant worldwide circulation of commercial manpower from India has been little noticed in the existing literature. In India itself, those employed in shops and other commercial establishments are largely absent from standard accounts of labour history, although they probably represented and still represent altogether one of the largest segments of the overall labour force. Labour historians have tended to focus their attention almost exclusively on agricultural and industrial labour, to the detriment of a category that suffers from an ambiguous socio-economic position, straddling as it does the boundary between lower middle-class and working class, and has attracted little attention from colonial rulers, resulting in a paucity of source materials. As regards the circulation of Indian labour outside India, the existence of a sizeable movement of commercial manpower is also generally overlooked by historians of the South Asian diaspora. Their focus has been mostly on the movement of indentured and *kangani* labour (two forms of contract labour) that flourished between 1834 and the late 1930s, resulting in the emigration of millions of Indian workers towards the sugar-producing countries of the Caribbean (Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Martinique, Guadeloupe) and of the Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Reunion, South Africa), as well as the tea plantations of Ceylon and the rubber plantations of Malaya. These migrations are particularly well documented in the colonial archives, and have given rise to a vast secondary literature.¹ However, in addition to this migration of workers strongly regulated by the Indian colonial government in coordination with the imperial government (inasmuch as 90% of the indentured workers and 100% of the *kangani* migrants made their way to British colonies, less than 10% going to French and Dutch territories), there has existed another movement, much smaller in volume but nevertheless significant, of traders and commercial employees. That particular

¹ On this migration, see, amongst a vast and growing literature, two classics: Tinker *A New System* and Northrup, *Indentured Labour*.

stream has origins that go back to the medieval and early modern period, but was considerably amplified in the nineteenth century when British India was integrated into the world capitalist economy and new trading circuits were created linking India with the Far East (China in particular), while already existing circuits connecting India with the Middle East and East Africa were reorganized and significantly expanded. It remaining largely unrecognized in the literature has to do with the fact that the colonial government of India did not organize it directly or even monitor it closely, with the result that there are few official sources available.

In a previously published article,² I used some little-known published material to evaluate the importance of that movement, that belongs to the universe of circulation rather than of permanent migration, and I came up with a global figure of some 1.5 million men (it was an almost exclusively male stream) for the period 1830–1950. I found that it was characterized by a great diversity in the geographical origins of its participants, most of whom however hailed from coastal regions of the subcontinent, in particular Gujarat on the West Coast and Tamilnadu on the South-eastern coast. Surprisingly, I came across evidence that some inland areas and towns also sent commercial migrants abroad on a significant scale. This was the case in particular of the town of Hyderabad in the province of Sindh (not to be confused with its better-known homonym, Hyderabad-Deccan), that belonged to British India from 1843 to 1947 and was then made a part of Pakistan. Although situated inland on the lower valley of the Indus at a distance of 150kms from the seaport of Karachi, Hyderabad was the cradle of a particularly dynamic trading network that, between 1860 and 1914, extended its operations practically to the entire world.

The Rise of a Worldwide Trading Network

I have given in a book³ a detailed historical survey of the rise and growth of that network, which I shall here briefly summarize. The origins of the network go back to around 1860, when some Hindu merchants from that middle-sized town with a population of 40 000 (a majority of them being Hindus, while Sindh as a whole was a Muslim-majority province) started going from Bombay to Egypt on annual voyages. In Egypt, they sold a certain kind of craft goods produced by the (Muslim) artisans of Hyderabad

² Markovits, "Indian Merchant".

³ Markovits, *The Global World*.