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**Book Review: Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State-- by
Radhika Mongia**

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*Indian Migration and Empire:
A Colonial Genealogy
of the Modern State*

by Radhika Mongia, Durham: Duke University Press,
2018. 25,95\$, 248 pp

reviewed by

LOUISE THATCHER

Radhika Mongia's *Indian Migration and Empire* is an important contribution to the growing body of work historicising what "seems an unremarkable fact" (p. 1)—that in the present, states hold a monopoly over the international movement of people.¹ Much of what we take for granted is actually very new; the global order of passports, visas and the inherent right of a nation-state to control entry at the border is not timeless, but arose only at the start of the last century. Mongia examines the question of how this happened via histories of different forms of state regulation of colonial Indian migration. She traces the shift in the ideologies and systems of the British Empire from the 1830s, when regulation of the movement of indentured workers was conceivable of only as a limited exception to the general principle of free movement, to the 1910s, when the right to control immigration was synonymous with national sovereignty.

Much work in migration studies and history is still bound by methodological nationalism and by what Mongia calls "methodological statism" (p. 5). This book is an important and useful critique of

both of these presumptions. Further, Mongia's post-colonial perspective challenges existing scholarship in which the modern nation-state takes shape in Euro-America and spreads outwards over time; she proposes instead "a world produced through processes of relationality and coproduction" (p.147). This perspective on global entanglements should make this work of interest more generally to global historians.

Like the late Adam McKeown's *Melancholy Order* (with which, as Mongia notes, her study "shares important resonances" [p. 156]), this book argues that the history of the emergence of the modern border regime is also a history of the development of the modern state.² Both writers argue that nation-states did not first form and then enact control over immigration but rather that the process of asserting the right to exclude particular immigrants was part of the development of modern sovereignty. Where Mongia differs from McKeown is in her attention to the specifically colonial history of these simultaneous formations. She thus presents a reevaluation of the relationship between colonial and metropolitan state formation: they are far more intertwined, she argues, than has been thought.

As the book's subtitle suggests, this is a Foucauldian genealogy, seeking to illuminate how systems emerged in their present form through "chance occurrences,

1 For example, Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Alison Bashford, 'Immigration Restriction: Rethinking Period and Place from Settler Colonies to Postcolonial Nations', *Journal of Global History* 9, no. 01 (March 2014): 26–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174002281300048X>.

2 McKeown, *Melancholy Order*.

peculiar configurations, contingent forces” (p. 13). She traces how a legal regime and a thick bureaucracy predicated on ideals of rationality and the rule of law emerged via ambiguity, arbitrariness and a muddle of conflicting rules. Mongia’s argument for the role of contingency and peculiarity in history is echoed in the book’s structure. It does not give a continuous linear history, but instead presents a series of snapshots of particular moments that together illustrate her argument. The official archive of Indian migration is vast and unwieldy; Mongia skillfully brings together sources from India, Mauritius, South Africa and England.

The first half of the book deals with how controls were first developed over the movement of indentured Indian workers. This was justified as an exception to normally understood principles of free movement via appeals to the ‘exceptional’ nature of colonised subjects, who were considered incapable of guaranteeing their own freedom. (After the abolition of slavery, this ‘freedom’ was supposedly to be guaranteed via the contract.) Central to her analysis is Partha Chatterjee’s concept of ‘the rule of colonial differences’ in which the “peculiar situation of the colonies” (p. 11) could be called on to justify diversions from a liberal ideology that was, outside of and despite these exceptions, still held to be universal.³ Ad hoc restrictions

developed and then came to be standardised, leading to a web of disciplinary regulations presented in great detail in Chapter Two. This “thoroughly modern bureaucratic formation” (p. 84) was not a template imported from Europe, but emerged through complex transactions between different sites across the globe, such as immigration bureaucracies, jails and military institutions.

The inclusion of these chapters take up Mongia’s argument against relying on state categories in our historical analysis, including the classification of migration as either ‘free’ or ‘unfree’. If only ‘free’ migration is thought of as part of migration history, this can lead to thinking about state control of migration only in terms of restriction, and ignoring the historic role states have played in promoting and managing migration.

The last two sections are about the rise of ‘nationality’ as a defining factor of the management of mobility. Chapter Three is about debates around the Indian ‘Marriage Question’ in South Africa. Indian women’s right to travel to South Africa was connected to the status of their husband. From the early 1910s South African authorities, seeking to discourage Indian migration, prevented a number of women from coming as wives on the grounds that their marriages were polygamous: or on the grounds that even monogamous Muslim or

3 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Hindu marriages had the potential to be polygamous, and thus were not valid marriages. This chapter is about the arguments of South African officials and also about the key role that this question, and the emotions mobilised around it about national female honour, played in the development of Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha movement. Mongia's analysis traces how gender and sexuality are connected both to feelings of national identity, and to the procedures of identification that police the limits of nationality.

The final chapter deals with the introduction of passports in Canada in the early twentieth century: another mechanism used to restrict Indian immigration within a context that required some semblance of equality among British subjects. This was necessary partly because of attachments to an ideology of liberal universalism, but mostly because of pressure from Indian nationalists and other agitators for equality. Nationality "served as an alibi for race" (p. 111) and explicit racism against Indians (sometimes) disappeared behind arguments about the right of a nation to control immigration, making the passport "a document that has effectively naturalized the rule of colonial difference" (p.139).

In analysing how it is that states came to control human mobility Mongia also addresses the "differential access to mobility" available to different categories of people. More specifically, she examines how this differentiation

enforces the "global colour line"—even under liberal regimes which disavow explicitly race-based discrimination.⁴ This is a book about mechanisms that states developed in specific contexts in order to be racist without naming race. Mongia argues strongly that this ongoing concern with not *appearing* racist shows the flaw in any narrative that sees racism as simply 'the spirit of the times', or as simply diminishing over time. Rather, she argues, "the racist state developed in cognizance of its racism" (p. 129).

In her conclusion, Mongia brings this into the present. She mentions the radical analysis of activist groups such as No One Is Illegal that challenges the fundamental logic of the modern state, and thus the unjust divisions produced between those classified as 'citizens' and those classified as 'migrants.' However, she is somewhat dismissive of the work they do in practice, arguing that their critique is blunted because activists are forced to negotiate with the state in which they find themselves. I would suggest that this underestimates the capacities of activists. Work by activist and scholar Harsha Walia, among others, shows that activists can be aware of and able to negotiate these contradictions,

4 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); The concept of the colour line is taken from work by W. E. B. Du Bois originally published in 1903: W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Routledge, 2015).

maintaining a sharp and systemic critique while mobilising against particular state structures in solidarity with individuals in struggle.⁵

Many historians feel a responsibility to the present (and the future). For historians of migration this weight—the question of how to be useful, and the question of how the present related to the past— can seem especially urgent. De-naturalising the current regime of borders is a contribution to the struggle against its racist violence. In her attention to the particularity of the past, Mongia goes further, providing tools for a critique of the present that can make it more possible for us to articulate “futures that are not merely versions of, or smoothly continuous with, the past” (p. 14). In its argument against a teleological view of history this book is also an argument for a different future, a future that has not yet been determined.

5 Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2013).