The 1857 Uprising, Migration and the South Asian Diaspora

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DRAFT PAPER – NOT TO BE CITED

While there have been a number of studies of the native armies during British rule, particularly around the time of the uprising, few have devoted much space to a consideration of the prospects and predicament of ‘disbanded’ and ‘mutineer’ sepoys in the aftermath of the revolt, aside from those leaders and convicted murderers who were killed or transported. The present paper assesses the responses of British Indian officials to the ‘problem’ of dealing with rebel sepoys, and considers the contrasting attitudes of a number of representatives of colonial interest groups to the question of reception of potential transportees. For many disbanded sepoys, and villagers in regions affected by the uprising, socio-economic dislocation resulting from the protracted struggles surrounding the insurgency may well have played as important a role as considerations of disaffection and fear of punishment, in the decision of unprecedented numbers of individuals and families to migrate in search of employment and for many of them to leave India to work in sugar producing colonies overseas. Any consideration of the role of the uprising in fostering the marked increase in migration is complicated, however, by the issue of overlapping geographies, in particular links between traditional regions of recruitment for inland and overseas labour, and those severely affected by the military actions. The immediate post-mutiny years, when emigration to the sugar colonies peaked, also coincided with an exceptional hike in the global market value of sugar, thereby creating an unprecedented correlation in both push and pull factors. With these caveats in mind, this paper will suggest some avenues of further research for the elucidation of the role of migration in the aftermath of the 1857 uprising.

1. The Disposal and Dispersal of Disbanded and Mutineer Regiments

Within a few weeks of the outbreak of the mutiny, in mid 1857, British Indian officials began considering what to do with the regiments of disarmed sepoys, particularly those who had shown no proclivity to join the mutineers. Neville Warren, agent of the Scinde railway was quick to suggest that ‘such regiments be employed to execute earth works on the railway for 2 years, with the condition that if during that time they have behaved in a manner to be approved of, they shall be restored to their rank in the army, and their length of service for pension. They may then be drafted into other regiments, or otherwise dealt with as Govt may see fit.’

The Commissioner of Scinde, forwarding Warren's proposal to Lord Elphinstone, considered the suggestion worthy of attention, and widened the debate to take in the convicted mutineers, whom he thought should be temporarily transported to one of the Kooria Mooria islands as ‘they would hardly attempt escape to so inhospitable a coast as the neighbouring mainland, very few guards would be required and they might be fed from a Store Hulk moored at some distance. They might then at leisure be removed to some other place of permanent imprisonment or punishment.’ He considered that ultimately such men could be placed under guard and employed on
harbour works and fortifications in India and at Aden. Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay, suggested instead that mutineer sepoys would be better employed at Perim [an island near Yemen] ‘in building, levelling, and constructing reservoirs.’ For those sentenced to transportation, Elphinstone recommended ‘that the opportunity should be taken to establish a settlement on the north coast of Australia. The climate of this coast is unsuited for European colonization, and for this very reason it is well adapted for the occupation of settlers from India. I believe that a sepoy colony might be established on some points of this coast, and that it might be made the nucleus of a penal settlement for India. Penang and Singapore would not lose, I imagine, by this arrangement, which would develop the resources of tropical Australia, and extend the limits of our colonial empire in the east.’

F.J. Mouat, Inspector of Prisons, opined to the Bengal Government in October 1857 that he did not consider it desirable to send ‘turbulent refractory individuals’ from the Western Provinces or the Punjab to either Arracan [Burma] or the Straits Settlements once order had been restored in those areas, adding ‘if speedy steps be not taken to form a Convict Settlement on the Andaman Islands, the best means of disposing of them would probably be to send them to the West Indies as compulsory labourers. There they would be removed from all Indian associations, and would have no inducement in a population who have no sympathy with them, to plot mischief, or commit crime’.

In early 1858 the question of what to do with disarmed corps who were committing ‘no outward and visible act of mutiny or disobedience’ was again discussed by the Fort William government. The President in Council pointed out that such men were no longer considered ‘trustworthy with arms’ and could be considered ‘simply incumbrances with the power of doing much harm so long as they are kept together in organised bodies.’ He favoured their discharge, believing that they would ‘soon merge into the ordinary mass of the population.’ He also remarked, ‘these men are now in a state of desperation, fearing punishment for the general crimes of the Native Army by not knowing what is to happen to them.’

The President's colleague, J P Grant, echoed these sentiments when he wrote ‘What we have now to guard against is no longer the hope of success and dominion, but the insanity of fear and desperation – It is said and I believe truly, that the disarmed, but organised bodies of men at Barrackpore are in dread of some sudden stroke such as transportation en masse? …I am still of opinion that whilst an organised body of Hindooastanee Sepoys in these times is an element of great danger, the individual men composing it, when separated and dispersed, are not dangerous at all; or at the worst are not more dangerous than many of their village brothers and cousins’. However, another voice warned against simple disbandment and dispersal of the native regiments, contending that to ‘set loose all over the country from 16 to 20,000 disaffected men, trained to arms and without the means of gaining an honest livelihood would be most dangerous’. He contended instead that ‘they should be banished at least for a time to some other place where they may become peaceable and useful members of society’, and suggested the West India colonies, under terms very similar to those then offered to indentured labour migrants. Grant responded to these suggestions by pointing out that there was no evidence to suggest that discharged sepoys had been ‘banding together to commit outrages’. He was also concerned about the prospect of mass forced emigration:
I fear if we were to transport 20,000 men who have committed no offence our reputation for fairness and justice which has been no immaterial element of strength to us even in the late terrible times, would hardly survive. The common sense of every people allows in dangerous times, for the necessity of securing a few prominent individuals, or it may be a whole family whose very pretensions mark them as sources of danger. But it won't make the same allowance in the case of myriads of the brothers and cousins of common village cultivators.\textsuperscript{10}

In practice, of course, Grant and his ilk soon won the upper hand and attention turned to amnesty and quiet dispersal, rather than mass transportation. However, the terms of the various proclamations issued to this effect were themselves the subject of exhaustive scrutiny and reinterpretation, particularly at district level where local officials had to oversee the measures. In Shahabad, for example, with its large contingent of sepoys, the practical means of dealing with mutineers promised an amnesty if they would return to their homes and to ‘peaceful pursuits’ posed several problems. The local magistrate, A. Money, contended that returning sepoys had no interest in reporting themselves to the local authorities unless penalties for non-compliance were invoked, and consequently ‘I thought it necessary to point out to sepoys at their villages that by retaining their arms, and failing to comply with the conditions of pardon, they rendered themselves liable to punishment.’ Moreover, he wondered, how did the government propose that he should act to disarm the ‘budmashes’ and ‘ryots’?\textsuperscript{11} E A Samuells, the Commissioner of Patna division, supported Money, explaining, in January 1859, ‘none of the villages which have been notorious during the last year and a half for their adherence to the rebel cause have given up a single weapon under the disarming act, though we know that every man belonging to them possesses arms.’\textsuperscript{12} By the end of January 1859, Money had taken it upon himself to appoint his European assistants to disarm the districts, with instructions to demand information about arms in their villages from chowkidars – on pain of dismissal and imprisonment, and by instituting police searches of villages where arms were suspected of being concealed.

The question of how to deal with villagers in areas which had supported the rebels continued to preoccupy British officials throughout 1859. The Governor General of India issued a circular, aiming to secure villagers from legal actions launched by ‘their plundered neighbours’ by offering a general pardon to them, ‘it being implied that the acts of plunder were committed in a district where rebellion was at the time uncontrolled’. Similarly, village communities would not be fined for offences committed, but might be required to fund the cost of restoring public buildings destroyed by them.\textsuperscript{13}

Whilst the varying responses of British officials to the problems of disbanded sepoys, dispersed mutineers and their village followers, reveal a general trend towards reconciliation as opposed to punishment, the conflicting messages – as the British moved from wholesale plunder of rebel villages, and massacre of mutineers, to the issuing of general amnesties – left those involved in the uprising, in whatever guises, in positions of acute social and economic insecurity.

\textbf{2. Plunder and Destruction: Villages in the Conflict Zone}
The 1857 uprising impacted upon the lives of subaltern Indians in a number of ways. Villages considered rebel strongholds were liable to be set alight and razed to the ground by British troops, while those associated with loyalist zamindars were routinely plundered by rebel forces. More generally, months of conflict took their toll on the poor as traditional employments were disrupted, dispossession and plunder wrecked rural livelihoods and the fear of oppression prompted the mass desertion of villages. There is abundant evidence of the effects of the mutiny on ordinary village Indians, particularly those which can be statistically shown to have provided significant numbers of internal and overseas migrants.

In 1857, British retribution against village communities identified as having ties to rebels was immediate and striking. The following report, by a British judge, W. Wynyard, about the Rajput village of Bugheend in the Azamgarh district, was not atypical:

The village seemed to me to be one of which an example should be made, arson, murder, theft, were all as clear as day against them... the village was thoroughly destroyed. ... Large quantities of plundered stores, the property of Europeans and the 17th Regiment Native Infantry were found... I cannot but regret the loss of life of many doubtless innocent people; but these are not times for mock humanity, towards people whose brethren's hands are still red with the blood of our countrymen, women, and their children.  

Lieutenant Colonel T J Wroughton who was also present at the surprise attack on Bugheend, on 25th August, reported that the ‘inhabitants were well punished’ and that many had run away on their approach. According to him, their offence was having ‘harboured the Pulwars’. Wernyor Smith, Commandant of the 8th Oude Irregular Infantry, who took charge of the Gurkha attacking party, claimed that he had taken care to oversee the removal of women and children previously ‘to firing the village’ and offered his assurance that ‘none but men deserving it, met with death’. He reported a total of 60 men killed, and 16 taken prisoner.

Some villages were destroyed despite little evidence of actual support for insurgents. Captain Boileau, commanding a Gurkha force, reported to the magistrate of Azamgarh on 8th September that he considered the destruction of the village of Heeraputtee ‘imperative in a military point of view... it is situated close to the entrance to the town, is surrounded by dense jungle, entrenched by the insurgents’. It was also ‘levelled to the ground’. Boileau also requested to be allowed to ‘remove’ the village of Murreea, it being ‘dangerously near our southern entrenchment’, and, so he believed, had ‘long been a refuge for thieves, and other bad characters’.

In districts like Shahabad, where many sepoys in the Bengal army had originated, it was inevitable that ties with mutineers would be strong, and that links with rebel groups would bring down British opprobrium, and the usual firings. In describing his participation in the burning of the village of Mussar, in July 1858, the British magistrate of Shahabad remarked that it had ‘assisted and harboured the rebels, and contains many sepoys’ houses.’ To his distress, ‘owing to the great size of the village and the un inflammable nature of the houses, the burning was not so satisfactory as I could have wished; in fact not half the village was fired’. On such occasions, some proof of rebel atrocities was usually sought out, as justification of the action. In Mussar, reported Brodhurst, ‘a coat belonging to a soldier of HM 35th,
probably one of those who fell on April 23rd, an officer’s sword, a tent, of European manufacture were found’. 18

The transfer of control of villages previously under the jurisdiction of rebel-supporting zamindars to British loyalists - was another likely cause of disruption to villagers. One such beneficiary, Mr Peppe, an estate manager and indigo planter in Gorakhpur, provided information about his own participation in the destruction of villages linked to the rebels, in order to strengthen his claim to acquisition of new zamindari status. One of his statements read: ‘on 26th June I attacked the village of Sauseepore, and destroyed it by fire… On 3rd July I destroyed the large village of Mowah Dabar … a few days after this I went and burned down the village of Tiljah’. As a reward for his actions, he was led to expect that three villages which the rebellion had placed at the disposal of government would be leased to him.19 Another indigo planter in the Shahabad district, R.W. Bingham, was granted the confiscated estate of Kutchoowur and lease of the villages Ramdeea, Perrureah, Sevahhee and Kowreearee, all in the Rhotas Hills, and formerly rebel leader Amar Singh’s hunting grounds. Mr Bingham was said to have ‘boldly attacked and routed a body of rebels and to have kept the troops ‘well supplied with guides and correct information of the movements of rebels’. Of course, loyalist Indians were also rewarded. The village of Nonore, also in Shahabad, was granted to Radhay Singh for his assistance to Europeans in rebel hands. His property had reportedly been plundered by the rebels. Radhay Sing was said to have always resided in the village which his father ‘had in farm from Kooer Singh’. 21

Whilst attention is usually given to mutineer sepoys, many of the rebel parties were joined by ordinary villagers. In the district of Shahabad, for example, John Hamilton, reporting on rebel activities, described the marauders as a combination of sepoys, and ‘budmashes’ whose numbers, in June 1858, were greatly increased by recruits from nearby villages. Significantly John Hamilton admitted, that when some villagers joined the rebels, others felt they had little option but to do the same: ‘as they see they are let in for it by the conduct of a few, the whole of the Gohmer and Barrah men are reported to be arming themselves, and intend to fight, and are joining the sepoys at Gohmer.’ 22 By the end of July 1858, indeed, it was reported that one of the local rebel leaders, Meghur Sing, had very few sepoys with him. His followers, estimated at between 400 and 500 were ‘nearly all villagers from the vicinity of Guhmar in the Ghazeepore district’.23 In August 1858, the Shahabad magistrate, Brodhurst, described the rebel force in Arrah as consisting of ‘about 200 sepoys, 6 sowars and 400 other budmashes, principally residents of Tuppa Kurrumaree’ 24

In areas where the rebels were strong, villagers could hardly be expected to put up much resistance, and suffered equally, whether local authority was vested in the hands of British loyalists or their opponents. As the Metcalfs have pointed out, ‘although many among the peasantry had won title to their lands in 1856, to the dismay of the British they threw in their lot with their former landlords – to have boldly confronted them would have been foolhardy’. 25 Landlords themselves could do little against the depredations of rebels: noting that a number of villages in Sirgoojah district had been plundered, J S Davies commented, in December 1858 ‘it would appear that the Zemindars unable to oppose the rebel sepoys, are quite at their mercy, and are compelled by force to furnish supplies, etc. When the demands of the rebels are not promptly met, the villages are forthwith plundered without hindrance; in fact
that portion of the district occupied by them is entirely disorganised’. 26 An insight into the likely mindset of villagers at this time was attempted in a despatch from the magistrate of Shahabad to his superior officer:

Numbers have joined the rebels from a belief that they had established their hold on the district; larger numbers still, because a course of unchecked plunder and license presents irresistible attractions to the Asiatics. The villagers are beginning to think they may have made a mistake. Each time the Govt troops defeat or even disperse a body of rebels, much good is done. The prestige of the mutineers receives a blow, and the villager sees that his companionship involves danger and death, as well as loot and lawless liberty. Even now many villagers are anxious to avoid the coming storm by returning to their homes. The fear that they will there be seized and hanged, alone keeps them away, … At present the sight of a soldier empties every village. We are looked upon simply as avengers, and get neither assistance nor information.27

In a further statement, that rather supported the suspicions of the villagers than the opposite, Money proposed that a list of rebel villages should be made which he proposed should be ‘levelled to the ground’. The result, he continued, would be that ‘the inhabitants would have to remain with the sepoys, whom they have been with for months, and would share their fate.’ With such a view prevailing as late as the end of 1858, it is not difficult to imagine that scores of former residents of ‘blacklisted villages’ are likely to have been on the move.

Another source of potential migrants would have been escaped prisoners. One of the first acts of rebels on entering a town was to release those held in British jails – as they did, for example, at Arrah in August 1858 28. Clare Anderson’s work clearly shows that only a small proportion of escaped prisoners were ever recaptured – more than two-thirds of escapees in the North West Provinces, and over half of those released from prisons in Bengal remained at large several years after the mutiny ended. Many were thought to have died in the disturbances, and Anderson reports some evidence of liberated prisoners ‘being found starving’, but many more were widely believed to have migrated – both within India, to ‘jungles bordering the Himalayas’ or beyond, perhaps joining traditional Muslim pilgrimages, or finding their way to the emigration depots of the sugar colonies where few questions were asked in the drive to feed the labour hungry and lucrative plantations of the British Empire.29

3. The Socio-Economic Impact of the Mutiny

Preoccupied as they were with crushing the pockets of rebellion which continued through 1858 and into 1859, the British paid less attention than ever to the socio-economic distress which swept across northern India in the wake of the uprising. By July 1859, however, even the plight of the disbanded sepoys was exciting sufficient attention to provoke some anxiety as to their future prospects. The Magistrate of Sarun reported that ‘two sepoys came into his Court and begged for employment, saying they were starving. Another sepoy gave a petition begging the Magistrate to authorise a Zemindar to employ him’. Fergusson, Commissioner of Patna district, added that a large number of former sepoys, mainly resident in Shahabad and Sarun, were ‘without ostensible means of livelihood….. If they do not find honest occupation, suitable to their taste and habits, they will become robbers and
He explained that local zamindars and mahajans believed that the law prohibited them from employing ex-mutineers and suggested that magistrates be empowered to issue a proclamation declaring that the crime of ‘harbouring’ sepoys was no longer in effect. This was rejected by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, who commented, ‘the one thing to be now of all others most carefully avoided, is giving the pardoned Sepoys the least reason to imagine that we are afraid of them.’ What he went on to suggest, astonishingly, amounted to a tacit move to condemn an entire class of the population of India – a hitherto advantaged one – to a generation of ‘pinching poverty’:

The great majority of sepoys belong to families in one way or another connected with the land. The loss of service is to such men doubtless a great and distressing loss. But …. it will be of political advantage to Government, half a century hence or more, if the pinching poverty which is the natural result of the ingratitude and unfaithfulness of the sepoys of this generation, should be such as to become a byeword in the next. 31

The Lt. Governor went on to stress that the attitude of the government should be to implement the amnesty, ‘but not step beyond it’. As a result, officials would only be instructed to explain, verbally, that the sepoys were pardoned men, and therefore ‘all people are free to deal with them as with any other men of any class whatsoever’ without being accused of harbouring criminals. It was this very watered-down policy that was also preferred by the Government of India regarding requests for the provision of further written confirmation of the amnesties announced in the previous year, summarised in a despatch of 8 August 1859. 32

It is not difficult to conclude, from the above, that life for the rebels in Shahabad, and other regions with formerly large sepoy populations, was never going to be easy in the years following the revolt, and that the British undoubtedly pursued a policy of, at best, neutrality with regard to the foot-soldiers of the mutiny. Some idea of the numbers affected can be gleaned from accounts of magistrates in the Shahabad district, who estimated that of a rebel force numbering 3,000 sepoys, and 10,000 general recruits to the cause in late 1858, about 1,000 had been killed during the conflict, around 2,000 fled the district, and the remainder, some 9,000 returned to their homes. In the early months of 1859, small bands of sepoys reportedly appeared in Sarun and Shahabad, but then were said to have ‘gradually melted away’. 33

A better idea of the scale of misery can be found in petitions and other vernacular sources. Hoormut Khan’s words convey a far more striking sense of the devastation and desperation affecting the conflict zones, than any number of official reports and statistics. On 24 August 1859 he represented to the authorities that:

the North Western Provinces had been reduced to ruin and desolation, and that hundreds of people have died from starvation, while others have committed suicide; that no-one is in a state of contentment, and that oppression is daily on the increase; that Her Majesty’s subjects have been brought to utter ruin, and that it is to be regretted that His Excellency the Governor General does not take any notice of it; that notwithstanding the promulgation of Her Majesty’s Proclamation of pardon and amnesty, no confiscated estates have been restored, nor are prisoners released, but that on the contrary many are thrown into prison; that from the promulgation of Act IX [the Forfeiture Act], the provisions
of which are entirely in opposition to the Royal Proclamation, it would appear that the Government is inclined to support oppression.34

The words of Hoormut Khan and others like him went unremarked – at least, no orders were issued upon their receipt. By November of the following year, famine was described as ‘severe’ in the region.35 As Bhattacharyya has noted ‘after the Indian Mutiny agriculture remained unsettled for several years over a large part of the country. The monsoons during 1858-60 were also unfavourable. In 1860 a famine spread over the UP, Ajmer and the eastern districts of the Punjab and continued well into the next year. There was large-scale unemployment and starvation’.36 Having established sufficient causes – both political and socio-economic – to indicate why large segments of the population would have been on the move, seeking subsistence, it is now time to turn our attention to colonial attitudes to the potential arrival of mutineers – whether as transportees or as escapees.

4. The Disposal of Convicted Mutineer Sepoys

If the reactions of British Indian officials to the question of dealing with rebels and their supporters ranged from the downright vengeful to the conciliatory, the colonial reaction was no less mixed. While far-flung, labour-hungry embryonic settlements were quick to see the potential benefit of transportees, Indian Ocean colonies with substantial Indian populations offered a more muted analysis of the likely effects of the arrival of convicted mutineers in their midst.

i. The Straits Settlements and Burma

Towards the end of 1857, the Governor of the Straits Settlements [comprising the principal territories of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca], on learning that it was proposed to send convicted mutineer sepoys to the peninsula confessed to feeling ‘greatly alarmed at the prospect of having to receive such characters into our Convict Jails’. He expressed an opinion that the mutineers would prove very different to manage compared with the usual convicts from India, who came from a variety of regions, and shared no common language or way of life.

These mutineers, on the other hand, are men bound to each other in a sort of tie of brotherhood, accustomed to act together, speaking the same language, and naturally entertaining the most deadly sentiments of hatred and revenge against us. To keep such men under control requires an amount of physical force not at our disposal. We have no Convict Guards nor have we any means of organizing any such Guards that could be depended upon. The ... supervision of the Convicts when at work outside, is entrusted to the Convicts themselves, that is, to men selected from their own body; but such a system cannot be applied to bodies of desperate mutineer sepoys, to whom death would prove a release from the miseries they will endure here.37

The Governor submitted a memorial from the merchants and other inhabitants of Singapore, protesting about the arrival of the mutineers and expressed a hope that it would be favourably considered by the Governor General of India, on the grounds that ‘these quiet, peaceable Agricultural Stations’ should not be subjected to ‘the dangers arising from the presence of large numbers of men lately in arms against us, dangers the very idea and apprehension of which will interfere most materially with the prospects and progress of these Settlements’. He pointed out that Singapore now a
large commercial city, was no longer ‘a proper place for the reception of the criminals of India and most especially for that of the late sepoys of the Bengal Army, men whose hands have been imbrued in the blood of women and children and whose hearts are full of hatred and revenge’. 38 News of the mutiny was also received with unease among the European community in Burma. Indian convicts arriving after the outbreak were said to bring exaggerated stories’ about events, and it was feared that convicts already in Moulmein might be inclined to get together with local Muslims and force the jail. 39

Fortunately for the peace of mind of Europeans in South East Asia, the decision had already to be taken to give preference to the Andaman Islands over other British settlements in the region, so that the Government of India was able to reply, in December 1857, that instructions had already been sent out ‘prohibiting for the present, the transportation of mutineers, deserters and rebels to the Straits Settlements’ and informing the Governor that ‘it is in contemplation to establish a Penal Settlement for all India on the Andaman Islands’. 40

Prior to the GOI’s instructions, a number of mutineers had already been shipped to Penang earlier during 1857, leading to remonstrations from the Governor of the Straits Settlements. The Superintendent of Convicts at Prince of Wales Island [Penang] produced further testimony that tended to differentiate the mutineer sepoys from the usual run of convict transportees, and sought to alert the authorities to:

… the great danger that exists of contamination of mind to the rest of the convict body, by the introduction into their midst, of such a poisonous material as so large a body of mutinous and seditious Sepoys – men too who are far more intelligent and full of intrigue than the ordinary run of Convicts, and who have amongst them those, so lately their superiors and of course possessed of considerable influence with them, and who will doubtless be very restless under the restraint now laid upon them and constantly on the watch for a favourable opportunity of attempting to shake off the yoke they are made to bear. 41

By early 1858, the decision had been taken and when word was received that arrangements were being made to ship Punjab convicts to the Straits from Karachi, the Government at Bombay was curtly informed by telegraphic message: ‘The Mutineer and Rebel Convicts must not be sent to the Straits. They may be sent at once direct to the Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal’. 42

ii. Australia

In December 1857, a letter was forwarded to the Government of India, from Bengal, forwarding a letter from Mr John Hutt, on behalf of a group of men with an interest in the development of the colony of Western Australia, and asking for an opinion on its subject – the transportation of mutineers. 43 John Hutt had also written directly to the Governor General in Council from London, on 26 November 1857. The thrust of his letter was a proposition concerning ‘the future disposal of the perpetrators’ of what he termed ‘outrages’ during the mutiny, who would be sentenced to transportation. He contended that the colony of Western Australia ‘offers peculiar advantages for the reception and safe keeping of this class of prisoners’. These advantages were described as follows:
The Community of that Colony are already accustomed to the presence among them of English Convicts, and the objections consequently to the same description of persons from India do not exist there as might be looked for elsewhere. The shortness of the voyage between the Colony and India will greatly facilitate the conveyance thither of prisoners. The climate is good, and as the Committee believe not very dissimilar from that of some of the Northern and Central Provinces of Bengal, and the position of the settlement surrounded, as it is to the South and West by the ocean, and to the North and East by a perfectly wild and in many places desert and uninhabitable country insures the safe custody of prisoners rendering their escape almost impossible.  

He qualified support for the transportation of mutineers with the proviso that only life transportees would be acceptable, and that the costs of the penal settlement should be met by the Indian Government. However Mr Hutt was soon disabused of the notion that he and his fellow capitalists would be able to benefit from the free labour of mutineer sepoys. He was informed in January 1858 that it had already been decided to send transportees to the Andamans.

iii The Sugar Islands

Around the same time as John Hutt was beginning his hopeful correspondence, the India Board and the Colonial Office were in receipt of similar requests from groups and individuals representing West India interests. Sir Philip Wodehouse couched his proposal to remove mutineers - not convicted criminals - but those ‘against whom the fact of their having been in certain regiments at a certain time can be readily proved’ – to the West Indies, as a necessary act of punishment on the part of the British Indian Government. He proposed that they should be sent out as felons, although with their families, for, ‘every man in these regiments has rendered himself liable to the heaviest punishment, if not for murder and robbery, at any rate for mutiny and desertion. If we do not inflict that punishment upon them, it is a mere act of grace’. Interestingly Wodehouse also drew the attention of the British Secretary of State to the ‘possibility of great distress becoming prevalent in Bengal before long, and of large numbers of people being found without the means of subsistence. Might not the Emigration Agent at Calcutta receive authority to give aid to a limited extent by providing passages to the West Indies?’ he suggested, thus neatly seeking to place the burden of financing labour emigration from the West Indies colonial legislature onto that of the East India Company.

In late 1857, when the prospect of large numbers of transportees was an important question for the East India Board, a scheme devised by the legislature of British Guiana and supported by the Governor was given serious consideration. More openly commercial proposals to send mutineers to the West Indies, highlighting the economic requirements of the colonies, were made by Sir Henry Light, a former West Indian Governor, by the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Grenada, and by the legislature of St Vincent. Commercial agents for the French island of Reunion also sought to convince the authorities to consider sending mutineers there. At both Mauritius and the Cape however, early proposals which appeared to support the importation of mutineers, received adverse press comment and were speedily dropped. Mauritius in particular, as we shall see, received the lion’s share of immediate post-mutiny migrants in the years 1858-60 and may well have decided that
the best policy was to ‘see no evil, hear no evil’ in the interest of expanding sugar production.

iv. The Andaman Islands

Despite the decision of the Indian government to favour the Andamans over transportation schemes to distant colonies, attempts to derive benefit from the unpaid forced labour of mutineer sepoys continued to exercise the minds of local British officials. Even the miniscule Seychelles, then scarcely developed, was not immune: in July 1858, Charles Telfair, a newly appointed magistrate there, was describing it as ‘a perfectly new country like what Australia was some years ago. It requires labor to regenerate it – new faces – even the rebels of India – to instil new life, energy and industry.’ 52 In the face of such enthusiasm to welcome mutineers overseas why did the Indian government choose the Andaman islands?

Sending transportees to the Andamans fulfilled a dual purpose – not only did it provide a relatively economical solution to the transportation and control of rebel mutineers, it also offered an answer to the perennial problem of piracy around its shores. By the mid 1850s, several incidents of piracy affecting the Indian ocean trade, and instances of ‘outrages’ committed against shipwrecked sailors by natives of the Andamans, had brought to the attention of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, the desirability of bringing the islands under some form of control. 53 A penal settlement was mooted, and a survey was planned in 1856, but by the time it went ahead, the mutiny had occurred, greatly enhancing the importance of the islands as a ‘convenient place for the reception of convicts’. 54 Thus, when the memorials of John Hutt and others like him, representing the interests of colonies desperate for labour of any kind to develop their capitalist projects, landed on the desks of EIC officials in India, the choice was not a difficult one. The London Directors were accordingly informed:

even if no final arrangement had been adopted with respect to the locality to which those convicts are to be sent, we should greatly prefer the scheme of a penal settlement in the Andamans to that suggested by Mr Hutt. The importance of occupying the Andamans has been fully admitted … and it appears to us that the object can best and most usefully be carried out by converting them into a penal settlement for which they are admirably situated …. we have received your despatch on the subject of transporting mutineers to the West Indies, but we still think that the plan of founding a penal settlement for these convicts in the Andamans is to be preferred to any other. 55

By 1858, then, the Indian Government had made its own plans and the proposals from the various colonies were given short shrift. In March of that year, the Commissioners for the Affairs of India were requested to inform Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Colonies, that ‘Imperial Legislation in regard to the transportation of convicts from India to any of Her Majesty’s colonies, is at present unnecessary’. 56 So ended the flurry of activity on the part of various territories in the British Empire to either protect themselves from the arrival of transportees, or conversely, to secure the cheap labour of the exiled rebel sepoys.

5. The Uprising and the South Asian Diaspora: Correlations and Speculations
While thinly populated Australia had little to fear from arriving sepoys, one might have imagined that officials in Mauritius, already policing a large population of natives of India, would have been concerned – as was Singapore with its existing Indian convict population – about the potential of the mutineers to incite their compatriots to similar acts of revolt. A minute penned by the Governor of Mauritius in July 1857 provides some explanation for this surprising insouciance. Learning that some apprehension existed in the colony that ‘our Indian laborers … may become inoculated with the mutinous spirit which has broken out in the native army of Bengal’ he professed himself at a loss to understand

...what common purpose, or what possible ties of interest and of empathy, 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.

In my opinion, the causes, whatever they are, that have produced that deplorable revolt, can find no place here, nor can the aspirations or views which may have operated upon sepoys in Hindostan, whether engendered by fanaticism or thirst of conquest, be brought to bear upon coolies in Mauritius, even if there should be found amongst them wicked and designing men with sufficient influence and courage to make the attempt, which there seems no reason, that I am aware of, to anticipate.  

Thus, the Governor’s complacency was grounded in a stereotypical impression that the ‘coolie’ migrant had little in common with the revolutionary sepoys. In fact, as we shall see, the potency of such racist distinctions and explanations effectively blinded most contemporaries to a realistic appreciation of the links between these groups.

1. Sepoy and Rajput Migration

One of the prolonged gripes of the British against the ‘Bengali sepoys’ was his caste pretension. Historians have shown that British policy and perception was itself partly responsible but the myth of the ‘dread of kalapani’ has been remarkably persistent. In order to assess the role of sepoys in migration streams post-mutiny, it is necessary to investigate their presence among overseas emigrant communities in the pre-1857 period. A few examples will suffice. An examination of returning migrants from Mauritius as early as 1838, drew forth the case of Manick, who described himself as a ‘Mussulman [Sheikh]’ of Meergunj, Lucknow. He stated ‘I was formerly a sepahie in the Indre ka pultun (52d N.I.)’. Asked about his experiences in Mauritius, he stated that he would be willing to return. On the same ship was Boodhoo Khan, who described himself as a Pathan from Gya, who had formerly been a sepahie in the service of the Rajah of Morbaugh. Both men had been taken on as sirdars [overseers] of plantation labourers in Mauritius, and returned to India having been discharged for ‘insubordinate conduct’. The significance of this example is the revelation of how a higher socio-economic status in India [in this case the former position of sepoys] was used by the state in Mauritius to recreate authority figures over plantation labour there. Caste could be used in the same way, thus creating what they imagined to be a comfort zone for Hindus of higher caste who emigrated.

In 1845, a British Indian civil servant, taking leave in Mauritius, visited the immigrant depot there for the purpose of interviewing departing Indian labourers. His findings were striking. He found a number of high caste migrants, including a ‘stout,
hale and handsome Rajpoot possessing a proprietary right in some villages… he left his home in consequence of an affray which took place near his house: in all probability some lives were lost’. Also in the depot was a ‘Rajpoot of the King of Oude’s territory… came here because he thought the labour light, now finds it otherwise. In his own country, as he says, his cumea [Kamia], or bond-servant held the plough, while he sat down and watched instead of working.’ On another visit to the depot, the official, Neave, interviewed two Brahman emigrants. The first was, ‘by his own account a roving character, as he left his own home some years ago on teerhat or pilgrimage and visited Madras before he came round to Calcutta and embarked for the Mauritius’. The second, Matadeen Panre of Benares, was thought by Neave to be a priest. Another man, Bissesur Sing of Arrah, a Chouthan Rajpoot, and a small landed proprietor, stated that he had left home in a fit of anger, in consequence of a family quarrel. He was now intending to be reconciled with his family and to return with them to Mauritius. Finally Rade Sing of Chuppra, a Rajpoot, about 30 years old, had lived away from home since the age of 10, and been a lathial.62 These anecdotal examples serve to indicate how migration streams could begin, generally through service as a sepoys within India, or some other event, entailing a break with home, and could then lead on to more distant forms of migration. Returnees, often, in the case of high caste men, with sirdarships - which brought the promise of substantial sums and influence - made frequent trips to their natal villages, which encouraged others to join them. Accordingly, migration traditions evolved – initially with Mauritius, the first colony to gain Indian government sponsorship for emigration – and later with the West Indies and South Africa, according to which specific regions, even specific villages supplied recruits to a particular destination for a sustained period, building ties between both locations.63

ii. The Uprising and its Effect on the South Asian Labour Diaspora

The 1857 uprising, which created widespread socio-economic dislocation, disrupted more than one important source of employment for the so-called purbbeas.-seasonal migrant labourers, of whom a significant number were Bihari Rajputs. Naturally many would have been pushed into overseas migration. Emigration officials in Bengal stressed the ‘unsettled condition of the country, about Patna, Shahabad and Gaya, especially during the last year when large bodies of a [physically] superior class of people crowded into the Depots unaided and offered to emigrate, representing that they were reluctantly driven to such a course from absolute want arising from the difficulty in obtaining employment in their own country’. These voluntary migrants comprised many ‘higher-caste hindu people from Shahabad districts’ who were believed to belong to ‘the disbanded native army who were denied a job in the British Indian Army which was the only honourable work to this people in the country’.64 Migration would have been resorted to particularly from those districts where this was already a source of longer term economic resort for certain members of the community. An indication of how this occurred was provided by the official who oversaw labour emigration at the port of Calcutta in early 1862:

Emigration, as now conducted, is by no means confined to the agricultural population, as during the past two years a widespread impetus has been imparted to other classes, who have been taught to look to Emigration as a relief from the disturbing effects of the Mutiny, the disbandment of the Native Army, and, lastly, from the sufferings occasioned by the recent famine, all of which have more or less contributed to swell the list of applicants for Emigration.65
The same official alluded to the high rates of wages obtainable overseas, compared to India. Pointing out that the islands of Mauritius or Reunion could be ‘often reached in the time occupied by a voyage to Assam or Cachar’ he noted that migrants frequently returned to India after a stay of ten years with savings of several thousand rupees, ‘a knowledge of this fact is sufficient of itself to encourage Emigration’.

Some indication of the enormous leap in emigration figures from India post-mutiny, and of the overwhelming importance of Mauritius as a destination at this time, can be seen from the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Emigrants</th>
<th>Destinations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>7242</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Grenada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>13539</td>
<td>ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>26672 [21,273 to Mauritius and 5,158 to West Indies]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859-60</td>
<td>24575</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IOLR P/188/62 Secy Govt India to Secy Govt Bengal, 13 Oct 1860; P/188/59 No 23 Secy Govt Bengal, Return of Emigration 1858-9.

The Geoghegan Report on Colonial Emigration noted that the peak year for emigration was 1858, and that in the years 1856-9 an annual average of 31,000 emigrants left India, of whom 27,000 went to Mauritius, chiefly from Calcutta. David Northrup states categorically that “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”.

The impetus given to emigration was not driven solely by factors originating within India itself. Indeed, the emigration agent for Mauritius at Calcutta, had received requests to ‘send as many labourers to Port Louis as he could collect’ from early 1857. This was due to the sudden rise in world sugar prices, driven up by a combination of factors, and which remained exceptionally high until the early 1860s, producing a frenzy of land clearances and increased acreage under cane, and competition for imported labour. It was the combination of increased demand from sugar producers with the disturbances occasioned by the uprising, which produced the upsurge in migration. As Walton Look Lai has observed: ‘Mauritius was the main destination of the increased tide, but Demerara [British Guiana] also experienced a significant jump in immigration. Trinidad was less affected, but by no means totally immune from this politically inspired surge in emigration from Calcutta’. A glance at the following figures gives a good indication of the ebb and wane of migration in the immediate post-mutiny years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total migrants</th>
<th>Destinations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>14,555</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Grenada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>20,805</td>
<td>ditto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>45,838</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Grenada, St Lucia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>43,057</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Grenada, St Lucia, Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>22,838</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, St Kitts, Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>31,493</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, St Vincent, St Lucia, Grenada, Natal, Reunion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>14,766</td>
<td>Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Reunion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Significant numbers of these migrants came from the particularly troubled areas of Shahabad, Ghazipur and Shahebgunge.

\[ \textit{Regional Breakdowns in Emigration from Calcutta, Post-Uprising} \]

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
                  & 1857-58 & 1858-59 \\
\hline
Total Migrants   & 9864     & 20,166  \\
Number from Shahabad & 2229     & 5522    \\
Number from Ghazeepore & 1658     & 2921    \\
Number from Shahebgunge & 1388     & ?       \\
Number from Gya   & ?        & 3378    \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

Source: IOLR P/188/60 Secy Govt Bengal to Secy Govt India, 29Oct 1859.

Once the trend was in place, favourable reports of returnees and high wage rates, together with the prospects of direct employment on particular sugar estates in Mauritius where known kin and caste groups were working through colonial legislation passed in 1858 helped to sustain migration streams.

When, in the 1880s, George Grierson conducted his report into colonial emigration from the Bengal Presidency, he was able to conclude that ‘more than nine tenths of the total colonial emigration from the Bengal Presidency comes from the districts of Patna, Shahabad, Saran and the 24 Parganas’.

In reference to Shahabad, he remarked upon the fact that emigrant registers revealed that ‘higher castes do migrate in large numbers’. He found continuing trends there of family migration of Rajputs.

On a visit to the district, he met one Rajput family awaiting departure from the local labour depot, consisting of ‘husband, wife, 2 children [infants] and 2 nephews, full grown … . The husband is a younger brother of a well-to-do family owning 16 bullocks and corresponding ploughs and land’. He added, by way of explanation, that the relationship between the two brothers was strained, and that ‘two months ago two Rajputs returned to their village from Mauritius, and in consequence of their success the family determined to go there also, and walked 40 miles looking for a recruiter’. The returnees were Ajodhya Singh and Dwarika Singh.

Some Rajputs and ex-soldiers also went into the recruiting business. In Dharbanga, Grierson found that the majority of both recruiters and recruits were either Muslims or Rajputs, while in Alipur, he found that one of the Mauritius recruiters was Bahal Singh of Mirat, formerly a sowar.

In the North West Provinces and Awadh, a similar report was conducted in 1882 by Major D.G. Pitcher. He also found that Azamghar remained an important recruiting district as a result of numerous returnees from Mauritius. A similar phenomenon was evident at Gorakhpur, where, however, reports of declining wage rates in Mauritius had prompted a recourse to alternative local and colonial destinations.

\textit{iii. Mutineer Escapees}

Many ex-British servicemen took appointments in the colonial service – it was not uncommon for magistrates to be ex Indian Army, particularly in sugar colonies like Mauritius and in the West Indies where the increasing proportion of Indian as
opposed to Creole workers on estates meant that a knowledge of Indian languages was a huge advantage. Hence, staff of the Immigration Department, magistrates, and possibly even their employers on sugar estates, might all be ex-adversaries of those migrants who had supported or been active with rebel forces. Under such circumstances, concealment was paramount, and it is rare to find documented cases of escaping sepoys post-uprising. Indeed, it seems likely that officials charged with emigration did little to deter suspected mutineers from leaving the country. For example, it was only following an enquiry into a threat of mutiny amongst Indian migrants aboard the *Clasmerden*, which sailed from Calcutta to Demerara [Guyana] in 1862, that the West Indies Emigration Agent volunteered the information that ‘about twenty-five or thirty of these men who possessed evidence of military training, may have probably belonged to mutinous Regiments or the Rebel Force, a fact which … was generally carefully concealed by them.’ Most of the migrants aboard the ship were from Awadh and the North West Provinces.\(^74\)

As we have seen, the Governor of Mauritius at the time of the mutiny was little concerned about the spirit of rebellion amongst his labourers, and no measures were put in place to investigate the possibility of mutineers being among immigrants at a time when high sugar prices made immigrant labour – of any description – the chief priority. However, the suppressed knowledge that mutineers were likely to be among the many thousands who left India in the mid 1850s and early 1860s resurfaced from time to time whenever the security of the West Indies or Mauritius was deemed under threat. For example when riots occurred at sugar estates on Guyana in 1869, and succeeding years, sepoys tended to be blamed.\(^75\) At one inquest into the deaths of 5 men following police shootings at rioters, it was reported at the inquest by several deponents that ex-sepoys from India had been involved. This was never proved, but served to indicate the generalized suspicions of the presence of ex-mutineers in the colony, with sensationalist press reports claiming that the rioters were intending to recreate ‘on a small scale in British Guiana the part their country men played in the terrible drama at Cawnpore, sixteen years ago’.\(^76\)

In Mauritius, a decade after the uprising, in September 1870, when insecurities in Europe and the threat of war again briefly loomed, the Governor at the time noted the presence on the island of ‘a vast number of Indians, some of whom (indeed a considerable number) are known to have been among the mutinous sepoys of India’; they were, he concluded of ‘but doubtful loyalty, and in the event of war could hardly be depended on’.\(^77\) A British official on the island with considerable experience of dealings with the migrant community blamed the presence of large numbers of ex-mutineer sepoys on Mauritius for high levels of absenteeism among the immigrant workforce, in a statement made during a police enquiry held in 1872:

\begin{quote}
I have met many old soldiers who, to my personal knowledge, must have been actively concerned in 1857 in the mutiny of an army in which they and their forefathers had for a century eaten the salt of the Honorable East India Company ... it requires but little knowledge of the Bengal sepoy and his history to show he would not emigrate to work as a coolie from choice, on the contrary, he would, if he did leave his country, naturally finding the work distasteful, I may almost say impossible, run off, and pass his time vagabondising, preying on his neighbours.\(^78\)
\end{quote}
The Catholic Bishop of Mauritius, Vincent Ryan, also made a passing reference to the presence of mutineers when he lamented the extent of criminality among Indians in the colony, in a long, rambling letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in September 1871:

Brought from all parts of that peninsula - escaping in many cases, as after the Mutiny, the consequences of their crimes - with a small proportion of women to the men - becoming possessors of more money than they ever had before, they form a population so troublesome and lawless ... that there were more murders committed in Mauritius than in any other part of the Queen’s dominions of the same amount of population’. ⁷⁹

Ultimately, with British rule at its apogee in the last quarter of the 19th century, no systematic attempts were ever made to rout out or investigate the presence of mutineers among overseas Indian workforces, and instances of suspected mutineers were usually only revealed when ex-British Indian officials, like the Royal Commissioners inspecting sugar estates on Mauritius in 1872, happened across instances of individuals with somewhat murky pasts. For example, on one sugar estate which had been purchased by a successful Indian indentured migrant – Ramtohul – they came across ‘an old and sickly-looking man’ who said his name was Parsad, but that it had been changed to Parushram, in Mauritius. The man was from Ghazipur. ‘He said he had left in 1859 or 1860, been a short time in the Bottlewallah’s service in Bombay, and then was deceived into coming to Mauritius; a story suggestive of suspicion in itself’. Enquiring into his case it was found that he had arrived on 3 February 1860, and that his given name was Parushram Bene at that time. On another estate, they interrogated Mahadoo who first declared that he came from Kolapore, but then changed his story, saying his native village was Chiploon. ‘On being questioned as to his means of livelihood in India, he admitted, after some prevarication, that he had been a sepoy, but that he could not remember the number of his regiment. 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.’ ⁸⁰

Geoghegan’s report on colonial emigration, published in 1874, stressed that the bulk of immediate post-mutiny emigrants went to Mauritius. Noting that some 90,000 emigrants left India in 1858 and 1859, he concluded ‘the increase was, we may say, altogether due to Mauritius. Inquiry was made as to the cause, but with no very definite result. I believe the sugar plantations were prosperous at the period, but it was shrewdly suspected that the mutiny had much to say to it, and that many of the emigrants crossed the kala pani to Mauritius to avoid a compulsory sea trip to Port Blair’. ⁸¹ In 1882, Major Pitcher noted in the Mauritius depot at Benares ‘a fine looking Muslim from the Punjab who had lately returned from the Andamans’. Elsewhere he stated his conviction that ‘no small proportion of these wanderers have left their own province or district under the shadow of some misdeed’. ⁸²

An additional reason why sepoys would wish to conceal their military background was because, increasingly, emigration agents and medical inspectors at the ports of embarkation sought to weed out recruits without adequate experience of the hard agricultural labour required on overseas plantations. In the case of Guyana, Mangru has noted that following earlier riots ‘the tendency of estate management was to cast aspersions on high-caste Indians or Sepoys who might have landed under
disguise. Consequently the planter-dominated local legislature instructed the emigration agent at Calcutta to prevent Brahmins, Thakurs, Fakirs and other non-labouring castes from embarking for the colony'. Similarly, the emigration agent at Madras took pains to demonstrate that even men pointed out as being ‘martial looking’ and those who admitted to being ex-sepoys were put to a test of fitness. He pointed to the case of Mooneesamy, who admitted that he had served ‘seven years as an orderly boy in a regiment, and five years as a sepoy but since that, he has worked as a carter, and a field laborer, I have had him tested in my garden, where he not only ploughed, but did a good day's work in digging and levelling’. Of course, since many sepoys from both northern and southern India came from rural backgrounds, military employment did not necessarily indicate an unwillingness or an inability to perform agricultural labour.

Conclusion

Despite the evident problems of identifying ex-mutineers, escaping prisoners, and those hordes of ‘budmashes’ - as the British tagged Indian villagers who supported the rebels - from among men with every reason to conceal their role in the mutiny, it is highly likely that participants in the 1857 uprising figured amongst the huge surge in post-mutiny migrants to commercial enterprises both within and beyond India’s borders. Amongst the thousands of men, women and children who ended up on estates and plantations far from home in the late 1850s and 1860s were surely also many victims of those bloody events – families whose homes had been fired by the British or whose livelihoods had been disrupted by the many months of lawlessness and disorder in the conflict zones. Currently the literature has provided only supposition and anecdotal evidence of the presence of mutineers overseas. The way forward, therefore, as proposed in this paper, is rather to identify those villages and communities targeted during the uprising, or that suffered significant socio-economic dislocation and attempt to track their arrival overseas or their regroupment elsewhere in India. In the case of overseas indentured migrants, one crucial statistical source may be of help. Indentured migrants were registered both on departure from India and on arrival in the colony, with details of names, castes and villages of origin all recorded. Data from surviving registers in the Mauritius and Guyana archives may yet, therefore, yield up precious clues to the resettlement abroad of villagers from particular areas within the conflict zone. This research may, in so doing, shed light on some particular features of the indentured migration streams. As we have shown, the British were determined to make of the rebel sepoys a generation of disgraced, impoverished men, and in 1858-9 many thousands of the residents of Shahabad and other regions known to have been key recruiting grounds of the Bengal army fled to Mauritius. Is this a key to understanding the presence there of a large and today prosperous community of Bihari Rajputs [now known as Babujis] and other high caste immigrants?

Certain oral histories speak of ancestors who fought with Bihari rebel leaders before migrating to Mauritius, and further research into the timing of their migration and of their own folk traditions may yield new insights into the continually evolving story of the Indian Uprising.

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Ibid., Bell Under Secy Govt Bengal to Grey Secy Govt India 13 Aug 1860.

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Ibid., Grey, Secy Govt India to Young, Secy Govt Bengal, 8 Aug 1859.

Ibid., Secy Govt Bengal to Secy Govt India, 5 Sept 1859.
The famine of 1860 was intimately related to the exhaustion of the countryside in 1857-58 and the resulting lack of food grain reserves in rural areas. Some 19 million were affected (13 million according to R.C. Dutt), over 25,000 square miles in the area of Delhi, Agra and Allahabad, with approximately 5 million suffering from serious starvation. The resulting crisis was as bad as the great famine of 1837, although the final mortality figures were lower. See Loveday, A., A History of Indian Famines (London, 1914, reprint New Delhi: Usha 1985), p. 45.

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IOLR Major D.G. Pitcher, Judge, Small Cause Court, Lucknow to Secy to Govt NWP and Oudh, 17 June 1882, pp 84-87.

IOLR P/188/67 E. Eden, Sec Govt Bengal, to Scy Govt India, 24 Apr. 1863 Encl, Hunt Marriott, Emigration Agent for Demerara, to S. Walcott, Sec to Government Emigration Board, n.d. [I am indebted to Dr Clare Anderson for drawing my attention to this report.]

See the discussion of the 1869 riots in B. Mangru Indenture and Abolition Sacrifice and Survival on the Guyanese Sugar Plantations, TSAR, Toronto, 1993.


NA CO 167/528 Smyth to Kimberley 16 Sept 1870 (Conf).


Mauritius Archives [MA] PL 41 Emigration Agent, Madras to Protector of Immigrants, 3 June 1879.

PP 1875 Royal Commissioners Report Appendix B visits to estate of Mon Choix, Pamplemousses, l’Union, Moka, September 1872.

PP 1874, Geoghegan Report on Colonial Emigration, p. 75.


B. Mangru Indenture and Abolition, 1993 op. cit, p.86


A micro study of bhumihar migration from Bihar to Mauritius provides some useful background data about the post-mutiny high caste exodus – Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff “From India to an Indian Diaspora to a Mauritian Diaspora: Back-Linking as a Means for Women to Feel Good Locally” in Meenakshi Thapan ed. Transnational Migration and the Politics of Identity, Women and Migration in Asia, vol 1, Sage, New Delhi 2005, pp 63-98.

See for example, the assertion of T.S. Ramyead, in ‘Of India’s History and her Sepoy Mutinies’ Mauritius Times, 17 Nov 2006 that ‘my grandfather used to remind me that our ancestor was a sepy mutineer who had fled for dear life from Bihar in 1859. He had fought under Kunwar Singh’. Ramyead has traced his ancestors – the first member of his family in Mauritius left Bihar with his wife on Christmas day, 25 December 1858 - and asserts that the family was from a village fired by the British: ‘years later the husband would relate to his Mauritian born son of the acrid sulphur fumes the British pumped into the huts of Kowarah village’: T.S. Ramyead, The Indian Sepoy Mutinies 1764-1859, Mauritius Times 1 Dec 2006.