Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia

Review Number:
1187
Publish date:
Sunday, 1 January, 2012
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ISBN:
9780521898355
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£50.00
Pages:
240pp.
Publisher:
Cambridge University Press
Place of Publication:
Cambridge
Reviewer:
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In September of 1934, an incredulous (or perhaps simply amused) Dutch official wrote from Batavia to his mentor in Leiden telling of the most incredible journey made by a family of Sundanese from West Java. Apparently the Dutch consul at Calcutta first met this family of four when they were *en route* for Mecca by bicycle, though they were back in the city two months later, having made it only as far as Delhi, where they had been converted by a Methodist minister!(1) Needless to say, this unlikely tale of curious locomotion, a half-finished pilgrimage and a much altered return was hardly the typical route for Indonesians to have taken for Mecca at that time, even a ?modern? family also said to have abandoned their sarongs in favour of short trousers. As the official in question knew full well from his work in the Dutch Office for Native Affairs, for well over six decades Southeast Asians had been convening at the numerous ports of the archipelago to take one of many affordable steamers for the Red Sea. Of course this did not mean that, while infinitely faster than the passages of old, the journey was without hardship. Officialdom had long battled with greedy operators eager to cram as many people onto their decks as possible, whether they were pious passengers destined for the Hijaz or the laborers in motion between the chain of cities and hinterlands stretching, in the high colonial age, from East Africa to Northern China.

It is precisely these journeys, on sea and land alike, and indeed their returns, that Sunil Amrith addresses in his book. In putting migrants and movement at the centre of his story, his aim is to transcend the usual

empire-driven narrative of Asian history, and to offer readers ? be they the general public, students, or yet the hardened curmudgeons of the academy ? an opening into what he proposes is the single largest drama that has unfolded over the past two centuries. In many respects he is successful, for with a lightness of touch over a scant 217 pages, and by sidestepping essentialist notions of the crucial ?wheres? of global change (i.e. Cairo and Bombay, or Batavia and Bombay), we are brought round to a view of contingent opportunities, of violence and agency, of cultural reproductions, national awakenings and communal memory. In short, a slice of modern, constantly mobile, and self-consciously global Asia comes into view.

This is no mean feat. For somewhat parochial reasons, I was rather pleased by how much of the narrative engaged with Southeast Asia. For it is here that so many of the stories of migration and empire have played out, as some sojourners headed south to the promising ports, plantations and mines of what many called the Nanyang or ?Southern Ocean?, while others travelled eastward across the Kalapani, the defiling ?Black Water? that stripped the elite of caste purity. Of course such movements were not always entirely (or even remotely) voluntary, often being imposed by the vicissitudes of poor harvests or by economic climates made all the harsher by the extractive demands of colonial trade and collapse. In this sense his work provides a link to that of Adam McKeown, who has tracked the stories of Chinese migrants on a global scale but with a Pacific focus, and between that of Sugata Bose and Philip Kuhn, who have each provided interesting ruminations on the rebounding sojourns of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.(2)

In addition, Amrith is very right to point out how some of the largest migrations of Asian history have occurred *within* the bounds of today?s nation states, as was the case with Manchuria into the turbulent 1930s or with Jakarta?s policy of transmigration in the 1970s, which saw the Soeharto regime attempt to deal with overcrowding on Java and Bali by encouraging Indonesians to embrace a future in the other islands of their shared homeland. For in moving and labouring self-consciously as domestic, rather than, say, imperial migrants, some could see themselves as parts of larger wholes, and even celebrate their contributions, despite the fact that their presence in the ancestral lands of other ?fellow? citizens had inflamed past histories or yet instigated new conflicts liable for repetition. One need only think here of Christian Filipinos or Han Chinese coming face-to-face with supposedly undeveloped Moro or Tibetan brethren of ?their? nations.

Amrith takes us back and forth over key periods in a narrative that begins with the observation that movement across Asia long predated the infrastructural revolution wrought by steam in the 19th century. Following an engaging introduction setting forth the temporal scope of the work, prefaced by the confession that migration constitutes for him a shorthand for many sorts of interconnected mobilities, his first chapter, ?Asia?s great migrations?, highlights the importance of the circulation taking place between 1850 and 1930, driven as much by Asian actors as by victims. This is followed by an extended discussion of the making of ?Asian diasporas? over the same decades, priming us for his argument about the relativity and interlinked meanings of such notions as citizenship and diaspora alike. For even if questions of sovereignty and the desire to control movement had long been raised by the often rival claimants to Islamic, Buddhist or even Hindu and Confucian legitimacies in Asia, how indeed can there be notion of border crossing, when there were, in fact, no borders? His third chapter, ?War, revolution, and refugees?, makes this all too clear, showing how crucial diasporic identity was to become once those borders, so long in the making, were enforced to deny the right of return as much as arrival, and to fracture the family-driven linkages that had seen Republican China?s struggles funded from the Nanyang, or pilgrims linger at various stops in the Indian Ocean while en route for Arabia. Such musings are a crucial part of his fourth chapter, which turns to the development-oriented efforts of the rising Asian states. These encouraged internal migration to supply labour for megaprojects or the burgeoning bureaucracies, and allowed some, perhaps hesitantly acknowledged as citizens, to reflect on the rhetoric of nation building and their place within it.

In the wake of the state-centred stabilization of post-colonial borders, attained all too often through extreme violence, the way is prepared for Amrith?s last chapter, ?Asian migrants in the age of globalization?. This explores the rise of Asian megacities, and points as much to the rapid expansion in Southern China as to the reinventions of the Gulf States, where thousands of Indian migrants have laboured on the towers of Dubai, reflecting both on a new age of movement and the constant flows and returns that continue to energize all these regions. One need only look at the homes of the returnees, their furniture, foodways, and, in many

cases, new family connections, to see national distinction written in tandem with the cosmopolitan.

Taken as a whole, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* is an accessible introduction to a broader field that often posits colonialism as the primary cause of disruption and immobility for Asians in the past without necessarily pausing, as he does, to ponder the enduring cultural translations that were engendered by steam and the penetration of global capital. Amrith shows all too effectively how the rise of the modern nation state has hardly resolved, or even stabilized, the status of many of Asia?s sojourners. In many cases it has exacerbated their suffering. This is not to say, by the same token, that one should celebrate the past, or pay mere lip-service to the violence and coercion that lay at the heart of the imperial project. Rather one should connect past to present, as Amrith does. For even if the slaveries of old have long been formally abolished, he is at pains to point out the extent to which coercion and debt bondage, and certainly the language of slavery, have remained at the heart of our global system today, making the older movement of Tamils to the rubber plantations of Malaysia comparable with the travails of the guest workers who now find mixed welcomes in the Middle East.

Of course motion is always constrained. As noted above, perhaps Amrith?s most important insight is that diasporas were really only crystalized once the imperial configurations no longer allowed for movement, whether by design or under the threat of economic collapse and war. Henceforth, then, the temples and mosques that once echoed or pointed to sites of home, and which may well have been monopolized in the colonial era by more narrow interests, could be held up as substitute sites of honour and an expanded nationhood that could transcend class divisions effaced by distance or expatriate success. For rather than seeing localized ancestral vectors from, say, Guangzhou to Sulu, or Tamilnadu to Malaka, one speaks now with confidence of Indians seeking equal citizens? rights vis-à-vis the privileged indigenes of Malaysia, or Chinese at home as much on the east coast of Africa as the Moluccas.

Naturally it took quite some time to realize just who belonged where and when. As Amrith?s arresting discussion of the vagaries of a passport issued to one Subramania Natarajan in 1948 attests, the end of the Second World War and the nascent status of India and the Commonwealth alike complicated one?s origin as much as one?s options for movement or redress. Among the more striking documents that I have come across from this time are references in the Dutch archives to the frustrated subjects of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia appealing to the Dutch for aid in 1950 to trace run-away debtors in the former colony of Indonesia (where Natarajan was also able to travel freely for the moment) as though the right of colonial intervention remained.

Many histories have put people at the centre of their narratives before, but in choosing more elite interlocutors they have had the decided advantage of having access to the voices of their actors, sometimes even unmediated by rival officials or compradors. Amrith, by contrast, is hardly spoiled with a wealth of accessible (or perhaps communicable) memoirs or family histories of Asian pilgrims and sojourners. Indeed, in order to render his narrative less opaque, he, rather like Sugata Bose before him, has been tempted to allow the pen of a more recent Indian Ocean pilgrim to do its work. But while Amitav Ghosh is indeed a versatile and engaging interpreter of the sources of Indian Ocean history, as with his *Sea of Poppies* and the earlier *Glass Palace*, which chronicles the travails of an Indian teak merchant in colonial Burma, he remains an interpreter. In the same way, Indonesianists might do well to eschew their reliance upon the arresting tetralogy of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, whose more concrete exile and self-reflection on the island of Buru is an appropriate part of Amrith?s story.

In some sense Amrith?s modern Asia is most clearly manifested in the celebrations of the self. Empowered by narratives of transplantation and prospering among equals, he shows how many migrants ? domestic or otherwise ? have become colonists in their own way, looking back to a heroic past of nation- or diaspora-building as they transcend the challenges, and sometimes even the stigma, of foreignness. And of course there are the refugees to consider as well, though it remains to be seen whether some among those who have fled from Iraq and Afghanistan, and who now find themselves waiting in camps or for rickety boats at the southern ports of Java will make that jump and memorialize their translocations and transformations. At any rate, there are many signs that the notion of their respective disaporas will take root in and beyond Asia, as

they struggle for either a return to, or a recreation of, home.

Notes

1. Leiden University Library, Or 26.337, G.F. Pijper to C. Snouck Hurgronje, Batavia-Centrum, 15 September 1934.Back to (1)
2. Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order* (New York, NY, 2008); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: T he Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others* (New York, NY, 2008).Back to (2)

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment further.

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