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Migrant Histories in the Period of Decolonisation

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Boats in a Storm by Kalyani Ramnath is a historical account of decolonisation in former imperial colonies of South and South East Asia with a careful focus on its impact on migrant communities. The Second World War and shifts from imperial to nation states brought about new geographic and juridical transformations. Changing territorial and jurisdictional boundaries produced an extensive archive of legal cases that provide insight into the lived experiences of migrants. The book records changes and interconnections in legal orders and migration beginning with the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942 during the Second World War. The book traces the history of this transformative period across two interrelated registers. First, Ramnath examines the emergence of new legal structures that defined the shift from an imperial to a national order. Second, the impact of these changes is assessed through the legal entanglements in which migrants living and moving across different imperial colonies in South and South East Asia found themselves. The period after the end of the Second World War in 1945 and decolonisation from British, French and Dutch rule in South and South East Asia has largely been studied from the vantage point of new national histories or the diplomatic relations between the new nation states in Asia and Africa. *Boats in a Storm* offers a new reading of the legal archive by showcasing how the lives of ordinary migrants embroiled in legal battles were entwined with the end of Empire and new nation-building projects. The crucial period under study, bookended by the years 1942 and 1962, offers important insights into continuing concerns around new citizenship and refugee policies in the present day.

In 1942, the Japanese military occupation of the British colonies of Burma and Malaya and the threat to Ceylon propelled the displacement of hundreds of thousands of migrants across South and South East Asia. The case studies examined by

Ramnath showcase the impact of physical displacement on different sets of migrant workers. Migrants affected by the war ranged from affluent upper-caste firm owners, businessmen and small-scale traders, to workers in plantations, factories and mines. From 1942 onwards, new laws and bureaucratic orders were put in place in the different colonies to track and record the movement of people across India, Burma, Malaya and Ceylon. The emerging regulatory frameworks attempted to divide migrants based on their physical location during the war, which determined their legal status. Further classifications based on caste, gender, linguistic, ethnic, political and class positions were made to determine belonging and nationality. Tax liabilities, property ownership, money remittances between colonies and debt repayment were frequent subjects of legal disputes involving migrants. In the immediate aftermath of the war, new restrictions on migrant money remittances, new income tax laws based on resident status, and regulations on property ownership for foreigners profoundly affected the lives of migrants. By 1960, citizenship and travel across erstwhile colonies and the new nation states were monitored and closely guarded.

The Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, which for centuries connected the economic, social and political histories of the region, were reconstituted as an oceanic buffer of new laws of migration. Yet, the many legal cases, petitions and disputes resulting from new regulatory frameworks and restrictions betray the fragility of the newly imposed borders, legal categories, and geographies. Migrant histories captured in the case files that Ramnath has studied demonstrate the difficulties of defining people solely through their newly imposed national belonging. The stories expose the fragmentary nature of belonging. Ramnath brilliantly foregrounds the inability of legal frameworks to fully capture the identities, histories and future possibil-

* KALYANI RAMNATH, *Boats in a Storm: Law, Migration, and Decolonization in South and Southeast Asia, 1942–1962*, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 2023, XVII + 284 p., ISBN 978-1-5036-3298-1

ities of various migrant communities. For instance, Ramnath shows that the migrant as a legal category was in flux throughout this period of study.

The argument in the book unfolds through the exploration of the legal archive produced due to the changing and new juridical order during this period. Legal cases not only demonstrate the scope of these changes and the establishment of a new order in emerging nation states during the period of decolonisation. They also help us to trace the histories of ordinary people caught in the storm of war and decolonisation. Their claims on jurisdiction in cases filed in courts across the colonies show the complicated notions of belonging, nationality and citizenship of different migrant communities. For instance, due to restrictions placed on war-time currency called ›banana money‹ and its eventual demonitisation, Chettiar firms based in Burma and Malaya lost their wealth and working-class creditors their meagre savings. The regulatory policies on taxation and property solidified jurisdictional boundaries between the new nation states such as Burma and India. Leading up to the independence of Malaysia in 1957, debt recovery cases were filed by Chettiar firms in Madras, London and the Malaysian courts. They show that claims to jurisdiction or citizenship were often based on efforts to avoid tax liabilities. Political connections and histories of belonging were linked to economic attachments.

Ramnath traces the sharpening of fears of ›illegal immigrants‹ during the period of war and decolonisation. In the British colony of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), distinctions between Indian and Ceylon Tamils appear in the political discourse to identify foreign migrants. Colonial census reports contained these ethnic categories, which in reality were blurry racial designations. With independence from colonial rule, new citizenship laws not only affected the mobility of migrants between India and Ceylon, but many residents were also deemed stateless due to their citizenship claims being rejected. Ramnath points out the irony that so-called illegal and undocumented migrants produced large amounts documentation to support their claims, which were deemed by the courts to be either insufficient, fabricated or wrong. Ethnic identities compounded by religious difference became a source of ascertaining belonging and citizenship in Sri Lanka. Ramnath recounts a question raised by Ceylonese politicians: ›Could a Tamil-speaking

migrant Muslim be a loyal Ceylonese minority citizen?‹

Citizenship applications were initially decided on the whim of adjudicating officers until more standard procedures were put in place in the 1950s. Despite the increase in regulations and policing of ›illegal migration‹, the movement of migrants could not be contained. The new immigration regimes set up by India, Ceylon, Burma and Malaysia could not stop poverty-induced displacement nor the influx of migrants looking for economic opportunities outside their national jurisdictions. Further, Ramnath identifies early signs of the Cold War in cases related to the detention, deportation and rejection of citizenship claims of allegedly communist migrants. Habeas Corpus applications filed by detainees in India contain details on existing ideas of loyalty and political belonging in the early years of Indian independence. In a famous case examined in the book, laws for public safety were used against alleged communist migrants who were detained in Madras and had to prove their political loyalty to the new Indian nation state. Such legal cases offer a glimpse into the intertwined notions of territory and political loyalty, as well as global geopolitical shifts during the period of decolonisation.

While the book identifies 1942 as a watershed marking major shifts in the juridical and geographical reordering of colonies, the processes of building new national boundaries, nationalities and citizenship were set in motion in previous decades in various iterations of anti-colonial national imaginings. For instance, contours of belonging, indigeneity and nation states were being formulated in British India from the late 19th century. The forces of decolonisation already in motion were given an impetus by the economic and political pressures brought about by the Second World War. The legal archives examined by Ramnath intervene in existing scholarship on this period by capturing the histories of ordinary people caught in a storm of changing territorial and jurisdictional boundaries. The displacement of migrant workers in the colonies of British India, Burma, Malaya and Ceylon was deeply connected to the movement of capital. As such, the migrants' political allegiance and their social location came under scrutiny of the imperial and later national governments in these places.

The second section of the book draws attention to national and international debates on questions

of citizenship during the period under study. These debates reveal the contours of shifting jurisdictional and political boundaries from imperial to new national states and its impact of migrants whose livelihoods, families and businesses were spread across multiple new nations. After independence, India prohibited dual citizenship due to the large-scale communal and territorial clashes with Pakistan. Similarly, Burma and Ceylon prohibited dual nationality. Migrant workers in Ceylon discussed possibilities for dual citizenship for workers in India and Ceylon. However, the jurisdictional and territorial boundaries of the new nation states were solidified by laws of citizenship that prohibited any crossovers. The definition of citizenship in all these new nations solidified and sharpened distinctions between different groups coded as majority versus minority, indigenous versus migrant, insider versus outsider. These markers impacted people's ability to establish a livelihood, led to the loss of rights to land and property, and often resulted in deportation orders where people became stateless. Rehabilitation policies were introduced for returning migrants which labelled people as refugees, evacuees or

repatriates with increased policing and surveillance of those registered as such. The Ministry of Rehabilitation in India was introduced in 1948 to deal with the large exodus of people from neighbouring Pakistan. The same legal framework and relief programme was extended for returning migrants from Burma and Sri Lanka. During this time, the earlier cases related to taxation regimes or debt recovery appear less in the records, whereas citizenship-related cases increased. The book's concluding chapter shows how repatriation and resettlement policies in post-colonial India were intertwined with developmental strategies. Such strategies included the housing and employment of incoming migrants in specific regions and sectors. This was accompanied by political organising around race, ethnicity, religion and class. Ramnath eloquently points out that »in the context of decolonization's modernizing tendencies, an appeal to what appeared to be ›ancient‹ and ›timeless‹ was critical« (206). In the new nation states of South and South East Asia, religious, caste, and ethnic identities were central to developmental, legal and political projects. ■

Matilde Cazzola

The Ideology of Greater Italy: Absolving the Guilt of Empire*

The Italian context still appears characterised by a puzzling gulf between an excellent, growing scholarship on the history of Italian colonialism in Northern and Eastern Africa, on the one hand, and a collective consciousness which promotes crypto-negationist ideas of Italians as humane colonisers and of the Italian Empire in Africa as a benevolent domination, on the other. In view of such problematic public memory, which is impervious to the results of specialist literature, the new book by Emanuele Ertola – which reconstructs the origins of that memory in the ideology supporting

the process of Italian empire-building – is a much needed one. The work sheds light on the *fil rouge* which, amid historical ruptures and major changes, connected the colonialist aspirations in the aftermath of the unification of Italy in the early 1860s with the rampant imperialism of the fascist regime, as well as the first colonial conquests of the pre-fascist Kingdom of Italy with the post-fascist imperial nostalgia of the Italian Republic. From their very beginnings, Italian imperialist ambitions and achievements have been informed by an incredibly long-lasting notion. This notion has not

* EMANUELE ERTOLA, *Il colonialismo degli italiani: Storia di un'ideologia*, Roma: Carocci 2022, 191 p., ISBN 978-88-290-1505-4