


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The privilege of the Indian passport (1947–1967): Caste, class, and the afterlives of indenture in Indian diplomacy

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Abstract

This article examines the postcolonial Indian state's 20-year-long discretionary passports policy until 1967, often in collaboration with the British government in its efforts to limit growing numbers of Indian immigrants. While a vast scholarship has shown the racialized limits to mobility perpetuated by the passport and visa system against 'coloured immigrants', this article considers the Indian state's own restrictions over the emigration of a particular category of its 'undesirable' citizens. This passport regime was based on Indian diplomatic notions of the 'international' realm as one shaped by the journeys of migrants and imbued with discourses of indenture *qua* caste. The Indian state sought to prevent the mobility of 'lower' caste and class migrants who were deemed to be legatees of the dreaded 'coolie' and therefore unworthy of travelling abroad as representatives of India. Such a reading of the postcolonial Indian passport as a document of caste and class privilege goes beyond the existing literature which largely focuses on its use in the context of partition. In so doing, this article posits the histories and afterlives of indenture as a constitutive element in the making of Indian diplomacy, demonstrating that a focus on indenture facilitates a much-needed recovery of the narratives and euphemisms of caste in Indian diplomacy.

Keywords: Passports; indenture; caste; migration; diplomacy

Introduction

The passport is a political document and one which the State may choose to give or withhold. Since a passport vouches for the respectability of the

holder, it stands to reason that the Government need not vouch for a person it does not consider worthy.¹

In 1967, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India held in a landmark judgment that the right to hold a passport and travel abroad was a fundamental right of every Indian. They noted, in a narrow 3:2 ruling, that by granting passports as per its discretion until then, the executive had ‘patently violate(d) the doctrine of equality’ of the Indian Constitution. Yet, as the remarks quoted above from the dissenting statement of two judges show, a passport was also considered a document of privilege that would offer its holder the recognition of the state—it could therefore only be offered to those deemed ‘respectable’ or ‘worthy’ enough to represent India and uphold its honour abroad.²

This article explores the discretionary granting of Indian passports from 1947 to 1967, a highly restrictive and discriminatory system shaped by particular notions of the ‘international’ realm and the ideal migrant capable of representing India in this sanctified space. In contrast to histories of Indian diplomacy that have long viewed their remit as limited to the high politics of conflicts and conferences that seemingly take place in a bounded, abstract ‘international’ space, I draw on the work of critical and postcolonial scholars to argue that ‘the international’ was a space produced by the history of Indian migration and imbued with the afterlives of indenture.³ Thus, where Itty Abraham has perceptively noted that ‘diaspora is foreign policy as a caste-class boundary’, I argue that the postcolonial Indian state’s regulation of the *very act of migration* produces the ‘international’ as a space replete with the markers of caste and class.⁴ This was a space defined by the journeys of migrants who were long regarded as unofficial representatives of India overseas: as Jawaharlal Nehru had pointed out, ‘wherever in this wide world there goes an Indian, there also goes a bit of India with him ... By his actions India will be judged.’⁵ These were journeys where the ‘self-respect’ and ‘izzat’ (honour) of India was at stake and could only be undertaken by those possessing the right ‘bit of India’ in them, so to speak.⁶ The ‘international’ was therefore a space of anxiety where India’s reputation had been besmirched by the shame of some of the earliest Indian migrants—indentured ‘coolies’ widely regarded as belonging to the lowest class and caste backgrounds. Indeed, Nehru’s vision of the ‘international’ had long been inescapably intertwined

¹ Dissenting arguments of Judges M. Hidayatullah and R. S. Bachawat. *Satwant Singh Sawhney vs D. Ramarathnam*, assistant Passport Officer, Government of India, 1967 AIR 1836. Available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1747577/>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

² *Ibid.*

³ In particular, Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁴ Abraham, *How India Became Territorial*, p. 78.

⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘To fellow countrymen in Malaya’, 4 June 1937, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (SWJN hereafter), Vol. 8 (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1976).

⁶ Vineet Thakur, ‘Liberal, Liminal and Lost: India’s First Diplomats and the Narrative of Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45, no. 2 (2017), p. 248.

with the figure of the 'coolie' whose status was understood as a commentary on a subjugated, colonized, emasculated nation:

You ... may be largely acquainted with the Indian 'coolie' as he is called with some contempt. It is true perhaps because India herself has sunk to the coolie ranks among nations, and perhaps that contempt is justified, but remember that if India has gone down, she has also the vitality to rise again.⁷

India's attempts to 'rise again' as a postcolonial diplomatic actor therefore required redefining and limiting the accessibility of the 'international' only to the most 'suited' Indians. Widespread narratives of the 'coolie stain'⁸ on Indian identity long continued to shape the postcolonial state's regulation of the very act of migration, marking 'unskilled', 'undesirable', 'pedlar class' Indians as successors of the much-maligned 'coolie', deemed likely to similarly embarrass the newly independent Indian nation abroad.

The control of passports was therefore a means through which the Indian state sought to actively construct its diaspora by not permitting the 'undesirable' Indian citizen to emigrate: embarrassing 'lower' class and caste Indians were deemed best contained within the territorial limits of India. The granting of passports was a mechanism through which the imperative of upholding India's international reputation and status filtered down to the individual passport-holder and potential migrant. Such a conception of the international reiterates the mutually constitutive nature of the domestic and the foreign: 'lower' caste and class Indians on the margins of Indian citizenship at home would not be permitted to trespass on the international. That is, I read the origins and practice of Indian diplomacy through the legacies and vocabularies of *indenture qua caste*.

While Mahmood Mamdani has thoughtfully argued that 'a passport is essentially a class document',⁹ this article will show that the Indian passport was essentially a document of privilege, embodying the intersections of caste and class. By recovering the salience of caste in shaping Indian ideas of the international realm and those that were deemed eligible to traverse it, I seek to open up the field of Indian diplomatic history to a more rigorous interrogation of the omnipresent narratives of caste. India's diplomatic mediation of the very process of migration and its discretionary granting of passports was a discourse whereby the Indian government perceived every passport issued as an act of inscribing national identity onto an international stage. These discourses of identity shaped by histories of indenture had grave consequences for thousands of postcolonial migrants—'lower' caste and class Indians deemed 'unsuitable'.

⁷ Nehru's address to Indians in Singapore, 26 May 1937, *SWJN*, Vol 8.

⁸ Heena Mistry, 'Settler Citizenship and Indigeneity: Indians Overseas and the Claim to British Imperial Citizenship, 1918–1940', Paper presented at the Global Conference on Indian Diaspora, The Hague, 2017.

⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Uganda Asians Come to Britain* (Cape Town: Fahamu/Pambazuka, 2011), p. 29.

This article first intervenes in the existing literature on the Indian passport by tracing the little-studied postcolonial continuities of the passport regime and argues that the Indian state's narratives of curtailing the mobility of 'undesirables' are reliant on the intersection of caste, race, and class. In so doing, it provides a new reading of the Indian passport as a means of understanding the centrality of indenture and discourses of caste in Indian diplomatic history. It then investigates how this strict control over the granting of passports was an effort undertaken in collaboration with British officials who were keen on restricting the influx of Indian migrants into Britain—their little-known, entangled status as Indian citizens *and* British subjects as per the British Nationality Act (BNA) of 1948 enabling them to enter Britain freely long after Indian Independence.¹⁰ This was therefore a joint exercise in marking out a mutually overlapping set of 'undesirables'. For the Indian authorities, this meant preventing the mobility of 'unsuitable' 'lower' caste and class individuals—seemingly the legatees of the 'coolie', who were most likely to embarrass India in the West. For British officials, this was defined by grave concerns about the increasing numbers of 'coloured immigrants' of 'Indian race' in general, and by the lowliest 'pedlar class' of Indians in particular. Finally, the article investigates the ways in which the oppressive control over the granting of Indian passports led to a proliferation of forged passports utilized to bypass the restrictions imposed by the state, a crisis that both British and Indian officials viewed as proof of their notions of the 'lower' class/caste migrant as an innately suspicious and shameful representative of Indianness in the international realm.

Regulating 'undesirable' mobility

The regulation of migration and mobility was intrinsic to the making of the modern nation-state—a process that simultaneously delineated those 'undesirable' to the body politic and standardized ways of curtailing their mobility. It has been well established that the development of immigration control and the particular mechanisms utilized to restrict 'coloured' migration emerged from a specific settler colonial context.¹¹ This is perhaps most evident in the form that immigration restriction took, creating what Alison Bashford has called

¹⁰ I have written about this in detail elsewhere. See Kalathmika Natarajan, 'Entangled Citizens: The Afterlives of Empire in the Indian Citizenship Act, 1947–55', in *The Break-Up of Greater Britain*, (eds) Stuart Ward and Christian Damm Pedersen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 63–83.

¹¹ Notable works include Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Jeremy Martens, 'A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896–97', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34, no. 3 (2006), pp. 323–344, Alison Bashford, 'Immigration Restriction: Rethinking Period and Place from Settler Colonies to Postcolonial Nations', *Journal of Global History*, 9, no. 1 (2013), pp. 26–48, Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and A. McKeown, 'Global Migration, 1846–1940', *Journal of World History*, 15, no. 2 (2004), pp. 155–189.

the ‘world’s worst-kept open secret’: the consciously ‘raceless’ laws adopted by colonial governments to restrict the entry of non-white migrants without mentioning race.¹² Such legislations were the collaborative result of a transnational network of white settler nations: the United States served as an exemplar with its anti-miscegenation laws and literacy tests, the latter going on to shape the infamous ‘Natal formula’ of migration control.¹³

The paradigmatic status of the 1897 Natal Immigration Restriction legislation owes much to its utilization of a seemingly neutral educational test—requiring immigrants to write an application ‘in any language of Europe’—to achieve its long-standing goal of restricting Indian immigration.¹⁴ In so doing, the legislation assuaged Whitehall’s concerns about the impact of explicitly racial legislations on the British empire and was therefore adopted by a number of settler colonial governments keen to address the ‘Asiatic question’.¹⁵ Such laws were not only structured as neutral and ‘raceless’, but were also endowed with vast discretionary scope and bureaucratic leeway for immigration officers to discriminate as needed. Indeed, as Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie has argued, the individual subjectivity and personal lives of immigration officers such as Clarence Wilfred Cousins were central to their work: ‘the desirable in his life framed the undesirable, both within his own subjectivity and in a working life that revolved around exclusion’.¹⁶

A bevy of techniques, beyond literacy tests, continued to be used to effect racial discrimination without naming race: monetary requirements, public health regulations, and even recourse to climatic explanations, with the Canadian authorities expressing much concern for the health of migrants unsuited to the brazen cold. Canada eventually sought to prevent the entry of Indians by permitting only those who ‘come from [their] country of birth or citizenship by continuous journey’—a formula confronted by the doomed voyage of the Komagata Maru, a chartered ship carrying ‘undesirable’ Indian migrants from Hong Kong to Canada in 1914.¹⁷

Even as the racialized delineations of the ‘undesirable’ are central to the production of immigration control, this category manifested the multiple anxieties of the colonial state and thereby encompassed the intersections of race, gender, and the body. Legislations aimed at tackling undesirable migrants

¹² Bashford, ‘Immigration Restriction’, p. 44.

¹³ McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, p. 193. See also Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, p. 129.

¹⁴ Martens, ‘A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction’, p. 334.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324. On the extent to which control of Asian migration was central to immigration control, see McKeown, *Melancholy Order*.

¹⁶ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ‘The Desirable and Undesirable in the Life of the Chief Immigration Officer in Cape Town, Clarence Wilfred Cousins, 1905–1915’, *Itinerario*, 42, no. 1 (2018), p. 52. See also U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ‘Betwixt the Oceans: The Chief Immigration Officer in Cape Town, Clarence Wilfred Cousins (1905–1915)’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, no. 3 (2016), pp. 463–481.

¹⁷ Anjali Gera Roy, ‘Making and Unmaking of Strangers—The Komagata Maru Episode and the Alienation of Sikhs as Undesirable Persons’, *Sikh Formations*, 12, no. 1 (2016), pp. 67–86. See also Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018)

always included eugenic mental health and public health requirements, producing ‘catch-all’ immigration acts aimed at those likely to become a public charge.¹⁸ The European-language dictation tests we have discussed had a multipurpose utility that enabled colonial regimes to just as easily target a range of ‘undesirables’, including the ‘feeble-minded’, the ‘idiots’, ‘imbeciles’, ‘prostitutes’, and ‘procurers’. Indeed, several French and Italian women ‘of ill-repute’ were deported from Australia as ‘prohibited immigrants’ after being made to take a dictation test in a European language they did not know.¹⁹

Public health anxieties were also articulated through immigration control wherein quarantine laws were immigration laws, designed to protect the nation from foreign germs of all kinds.²⁰ Katherine Mayo’s infamous *Mother India* produces a reading of India itself as a public health hazard ‘that should elicit more fear than sympathy’, a ‘world menace’ infecting foreign nations through contagious immigrant bodies.²¹ Yet it was not just settler colonial governments that designated Indian ‘undesirables’. As the colonial and postcolonial history of the Indian passport demonstrates, the discretionary granting of passports was based on the Indian government’s own delineation of those ‘undesirables’ who could not be permitted to travel abroad.

Much has been written about the role of the passport in identifying an individual as belonging to a nation-state and, in so doing, providing the documentary basis for the state’s successful ‘monopolization of the legitimate means of movement’.²² The seeming synonymy of identity and identification, or the ‘fact’ that identity could be verified through documents, was neither ‘natural’ nor a given. Instead, this was a complex and often contested process that brought with it ‘the expectation that a person should have an identity that a modern state could recognize, know, and demand to “see”’.²³ As an identity document, therefore, the passport both translates the identity of an individual onto paper and acts as a ‘state artefact’ of citizenship.²⁴ As a document ostensibly meant for travel, it nevertheless reflects the sovereign control over mobility that marks out certain travellers as ‘undesirable’ and their movement to certain areas as illegitimate or ‘illegal’. Thus the passport intertwines

¹⁸ Alison Bashford, ‘Insanity and Immigration Restriction’, in *Migration, Health and Ethnicity in the Modern World*, (eds), Catherine Cox and Hilary Marland (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 17.

¹⁹ Raelene Frances, ‘Sex Workers or Citizens? Prostitution and the Shaping of “Settler” Society in Australia’, *International Review of Social History*, 44, S7 (1999), p. 109. See also Bashford, ‘Insanity and Immigration Restriction’.

²⁰ Bashford, ‘Immigration Restriction’, p. 35.

²¹ Asha Nadkarni, “‘World-Menace’”: National Reproduction and Public Health in Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*’, *American Quarterly*, 60, no. 3, (2008), p. 806.

²² John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7. See also Mark B. Salter, *Rights of Passage: The Passport in International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

²³ Craig Robertson, *The Passport in America: The History of a Document* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 245.

²⁴ Kamal Sadiq, ‘Limits of Legal Citizenship: Narratives from South and Southeast Asia’, in *Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness*, (eds), Benjamin N. Lawrance and Jacqueline Stevens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)

national identity with the capacity for international travel; after all, it ‘connects the individual to the realm of the international’.²⁵ It is this very potential of the passport-holder to represent their nation in the international realm that shaped the Indian state’s discretionary granting of passports.

The Indian passport system was a necessarily exclusionary process: with financial guarantees and even educational qualifications deemed necessary in order to obtain a passport, the system was in many ways akin to visa regimes that permit the entry of only ‘highly skilled’ migrants. The applicability of the BNA of 1948 to Indians created a unique scenario where strict restrictions were imposed by the Indian government in coordination with British officials. Indeed, the BNA’s recognition of Indians as British subjects after 1947 had significant consequences for both ‘overseas Indians’ long resident in various parts of the British world, and those Indians resident within the borders of newly independent India. In the case of the former, the BNA produced Indians resident in British colonies and Commonwealth nations as ‘entangled citizens’ with multiple, contested claims to citizenship. Most importantly, due to their status as British subjects and Commonwealth citizens, as per the BNA, both these categories of Indians had the right to enter freely and live in Britain. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the complexities of the BNA at greater length, it is worth noting that this legislation had substantial repercussions for postcolonial India’s passport regime—stemming particularly from the British need to put a stop to prospective migrants ‘at the source’ in order to contravene the expansive nature of the BNA’s provisions.²⁶

The colonial history of the Indian passport demonstrates the extent to which this was a system that standardized the restriction and regulation of ‘undesirable’ mobility. In a fascinating intervention that excavates the passport as a product of empire, Radhika Mongia has shown that attempts to regulate the migration of ‘free’ Indians to Canada—‘coloured’ British subjects, but British subjects nevertheless—produced the passport as an ostensibly ‘national’ document concealing race.²⁷ This cemented the notion of a nation-state’s ‘inherent right’ to control immigration on ‘national’ lines: an ‘alibi’ to deny charges of racial discrimination.

This went hand in hand with the colonial state’s own restrictive guidelines as to who could be granted a passport—a process wherein, as Radhika Singha

²⁵ Salter, *Rights of Passage*, p. 1.

²⁶ While there is a vast literature on the BNA, there is less focus on its messy impact on the citizenship status of ‘overseas Indians’ or the fact that the BNA guaranteed Indians the right to travel to and live and work in Britain—a remarkable contrast to the widespread discrimination and immigration restrictions encountered by Indians in virtually every other part of the world. Notable exceptions include Sarah Ansari, ‘Subjects or Citizens? India, Pakistan and the 1948 British Nationality Act’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, no. 2 (2013), pp. 285–312, Deborah Sutton, ‘Divided and Uncertain Loyalties’, *Interventions*, 9, no. 2 (2007), p. 282, and Joya Chatterji, ‘From Imperial Subjects to National Citizens: South Asians and the International Migration Regime since 1947’, in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, (eds), Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 183–197.

²⁷ Radhika Viyas Mongia, ‘Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport’, *Public Culture*, 11, no. 3 (1999).

shows, the passport was constructed as a 'civic credential' meant 'only for Indians of 'means, education and standing'.²⁸ This was not a facility extended to either the 'non-regulated' labourers working in Malaya, Ceylon, and Burma, or the indentured 'coolies'.²⁹ Such a stark delineation effectively produced the Indian passport-holder as a state-sanctioned, 'desirable' representative of India, defined in opposition to the 'undesirable' 'coolie'—a narrative that substantially shaped India's passport regime after 1947. These afterlives of indenture and euphemisms of caste have rarely been studied in histories of the postcolonial Indian passport which have largely tended to focus only on the India-Pakistan passport system through which the new postcolonial states authorized mobility.³⁰ There is little focus on the remarkable 20-year period of the discretionary granting of Indian passports for those seeking to travel abroad, especially to the West, or the fact that until 1954, state governments were in charge of issuing passports. This was a process whereby Indian and British officials together constructed an overlapping category of Indians who were regarded—to varying degrees, by both sides—as 'undesirable' for entry into Britain.

A significant literature focusing on immigration and border control has traced the persistent racialized construction of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' immigrants in the twentieth century—terms laden with meanings of dirt, pollution, and fear of miscegenation.³¹ As the horrific practice of 'virginity testing' of South Asian women entering Britain in the 1970s exemplifies, the border of British immigration was a site where the bodies of migrants were subject to rigorous scrutiny and permitted to pass through only if they could prove their worthiness, value, and desirability for the British nation-state. In this reading, the border serves as a 'filter', a much-needed, racialized barrier that 'distinguishes between the desired and the undesired'.³² In the Indian context, however, discourses of the 'desired' and the 'undesired' migrant rely on

²⁸ Radhika Singha, 'The Great War and a "Proper" Passport for the Colony: Border-Crossing in British India, c.1882-1922', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 50, no. 3 (2013), p. 313.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³⁰ Fascinating examples of work focusing on the India-Pakistan passport system include Haimanti Roy, 'Paper Rights: The Emergence of Documentary Identities in Post-Colonial India, 1950-67', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39, no. 2 (2016), Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Joya Chatterji makes a brief mention of the discretionary granting of passports. See Chatterji, 'From Imperial Subjects', p. 193. Historical and sociological accounts of Indian immigration to Britain also discuss the passport system briefly. See Rashmi Desai, *Indian Immigrants in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), Dilip Hiro, *Black British, White British* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), Ian R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (London: Penguin, 2017).

³¹ See, for instance, Imogen Tyler, *Revolted Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013) and Tamara Vukov, 'Imagining Communities through Immigration Policies: Governmental Regulation, Media Spectacles and the Affictive Politics of National Border', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, no. 3 (2003), pp. 335-353.

³² Evan Smith and Marinella Marmo, *Race, Gender and the Body in British Immigration Control: Subject to Examination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 11.

the intersections of race with caste and class, shaping an internal hierarchy of 'desirable', 'skilled', 'upper' caste and class Indians, and their 'undesirable', 'unskilled', 'lower' caste and class 'others'. These notions were shaped not just by stereotypes of the dreaded 'lower' caste/class 'coolie', but very much by the fact that the 'coolie' narrative became the paradigmatic, overarching discourse on Indian international identity against which other narratives of Indianness were articulated. As Marina Carter and Khal Torabully have pointed out, 'indenture was decried as the cause of a rise in anti-Indian discrimination throughout the Empire'.³³ Indeed, even when Indian nationalist leaders campaigned to put an end to indenture, their motivation was very much the fact that 'all of their compatriots would be tarred with the "coolie" brush'.³⁴

The 'free' 'passenger Indians' in regions of indentured labour emigration were especially keen to dissociate themselves from these 'coolies'. As is well known, Mohandas Gandhi had written to the British high commissioner in Natal, South Africa, in 1905 calling for an end to the usage of the 'offensive' term 'coolie' in the context of Indian traders—indeed, he had long bristled at being called a 'coolie lawyer'.³⁵ Sorabji M. Darookhanawala, an Indian engineer from Zanzibar, was speaking for many such elite Indians when he argued that the 'unclean...dirty' 'coolies' were 'entirely to blame because of their lack of manners' for provoking the dislike and disgust of the English. Thus, even as elite Indians protested against being treated as 'undesirables and niggers to be boycotted and got rid of', they themselves delineated a certain kind of Indian as more worthy of respect and fair treatment than others.³⁶ Gandhi himself articulated a distinction between the civilizationally superior 'free Indians' and the undesirable 'lower' class/caste 'coolies'. Even as he called for the end of indenture, Gandhi was most concerned about the benefits that this brought to India's reputation, and to that of 'passenger Indians', the most 'worthy' representatives of India abroad.³⁷

Such internal hierarchies were further complicated by the dynamics of race, wherein the African native was regarded as inferior even to the Indian 'coolie'.³⁸ This construction of what W. E. B. Du Bois fittingly termed 'a color line within a color line' shaped Indian self-perceptions of their racial identity, particularly in the case of overseas Indian communities.³⁹ These discourses relied on 'upper' caste and class elites as the upholders of Indian civilizational glories—a narrative that carried with it expansionist histories of British India as a 'sub-imperial' power with its own sphere of influence, an 'empire of the

³³ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁶ Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 59 and 69.

³⁷ Goolam Vahed, "'An Evil Thing': Gandhi and Indian Indentured Labour in South Africa, 1893–1914", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42, no. 4 (2019), p. 666.

³⁸ Sankaran Krishna, 'A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order: Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Construction of the International', in *Race and Racism in International Relations*, (eds) Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 147.

³⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess* (Minnesota: University of Mississippi Press, 1976), p. 22.

Raj'.⁴⁰ This was further amplified by notions, even among the British, that a 'better class' of Indians was in stark contrast to the 'coolie' and could act as 'settlers' or 'colonizers' and participate in the 'civilising mission' in African colonies.⁴¹

While it has become increasingly commonplace for scholars to point to the ways in which the supposed inherent genius of Indian civilization has shaped discourses of Indian exceptionalism, postcolonial identity, and foreign policy,⁴² it is equally important to reiterate that this rhetoric of civilization draws on Brahmanical narratives. Indeed 'upper' caste Indians in the United States identified themselves as Aryans in an attempt to circumvent the prevalent construction of the menacing, undesirable 'Hindoo' race and articulate their claim to citizenship.⁴³ This was a reiteration of the 'two-race theory' of Indian civilization, propounded especially by Max Müller, which produced binary categories of 'upper' caste Aryan Indians as Caucasians and 'lower' caste/Dravidian Indians as 'Negroes'.⁴⁴ This shaped perceptions of the hierarchies of being 'coloured', wherein elite Indians attempted to distance themselves as much from the infamy of the 'lower' caste/class 'coolie' as from the status of black Americans and Africans.

Writing in 1933, Lanka Sundaram, director of the Indian Institute for International Affairs, argued that the betterment of overseas Indians was dependent not just on a 'truly national' Indian government that could better represent their sentiments and concerns, but also on the ability of new generations of 'colonial-born' Indians to move away from the reputation of indentured labourers 'drawn from the lowest strata of the Indian social fabric and as such do not represent all that is fair and noble in our civilization'.⁴⁵ The discrimination faced by these 'better' category of Indians, regarded as far more ideal representatives of India in the international system, was attributed to both India's dependent status within the empire and the ignominy brought about by association with the indentured labourer. In the words of the academic and demographer S. Chandrasekhar, it was 'irrational to maintain that because the original Indian immigrants were of a labouring class, and hence of a low standard of living, no emigration of the people of a higher standard can be permitted today'.⁴⁶ This 'standard of living' argument utilized by British officials also irked the scholar P. Kodanda Rao, who decried the fact

⁴⁰ Both Krishna and Aiyar make this argument. See Krishna, 'A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order', p. 147 and Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*, p. 59.

⁴¹ See Robert J. Blyth, *The Empire of the Raj: India, Eastern Africa, and the Middle East, 1858–1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

⁴² Priya Chacko, *Indian Foreign Policy: The Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947 to 2004* (London: Routledge, 2012). Aiyar also discusses the ways in which the discourse of Indians in East Africa conflated civilization with race. See Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*, pp. 22–69.

⁴³ Hemant Shah, 'Race, Nation, and Citizenship: Asian Indians and the Idea of Whiteness in the U.S. Press, 1906–1923', *Howard Journal of Communication*, 10, no. 4 (1999), p. 262.

⁴⁴ Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁵ Lanka Sundaram, *Indians Overseas: A Study in Economic-Sociology* (Madras: G. A. Natesan and Co., 1933), p. 174.

⁴⁶ S. Chandrasekhar, 'The Emigration and Status of Indians in the British Empire', *Social Forces*, 24, no. 2 (1945), p. 152.

that the reputation of the dreaded ‘coolie’ had resulted in ‘a racial solution ... being applied to an economic problem’.⁴⁷ Railing against the assumption of British and Dominion officials that all Indians were of low economic, social, and cultural status, he noted that there was ‘no economic justification for excluding an Indian Maharaja, even as there was none for refusing H. H. The Aga Khan a piece of land in the Kenya highlands because he was an Indian’.⁴⁸ While such discourses clearly indicate the ways in which elite Indians sought to distance themselves from the histories and legacies of the ‘coolie’, it is important to more explicitly examine the intersections of caste and race in such narratives.

Caste, indenture, and Indian diplomacy

Scholars of indentured labour migration have challenged widespread stereotypes of the ‘coolie’ as a passive, gullible, immoral actor bereft of any agency. In so doing, they have also stressed the diverse social and caste backgrounds of these labourers, confronting the notion of indentured labourers as exemplifying the lowest rungs of Indian society.⁴⁹ Caste has thus been an important part of the debate on indenture—both in terms of the possibilities it presented for seemingly transcending and losing caste by going across the seas, and in terms of its strange persistence nevertheless in indentured communities. The histories and afterlives of indenture thereby offer a valuable space to recover the centrality of caste in diplomatic discourse—a category rarely studied in accounts of Indian diplomacy and foreign policy that view the ‘international’ realm as untouched by the ‘domestic’, ‘social’ problem of caste.⁵⁰

The relegation of caste to the ‘social’ realm has a long-standing history evident in the formation of two distinct bodies before independence: the National Congress for ‘political reform’ and the Social Conference for ‘social reform’. The agenda of the Social Conference took a backseat as elite Congress Hindus argued that political reform to liberate the Indian nation from British rule could not wait until social reform was achieved.⁵¹ These debates had significant manifestations that continue to define the silences over caste

⁴⁷ P. Kodanda Rao, ‘Indians Overseas’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 233, no. 1 (1944), p. 206.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴⁹ This is a wide-ranging scholarship. Some notable examples include Brij V. Lal, ‘Understanding the Indian Indenture Experience’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 21, no. s1 (1998), pp. 215–237; Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Crispin Bates, ‘Some Thoughts on the Representation and Misrepresentation of the Colonial South Asian Labour Diaspora’, *South Asian Studies*, 33, no. 1, (2017), pp. 7–22; Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ See John Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore: The Gradual Disappearance of Untouchability 1872–1965* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) and Clare Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition*, 30, no. 1 (2009), pp. 93–109.

⁵¹ See Krishna, ‘A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order’, pp. 147–150 and M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007).

in Indian foreign policy discourses. Caste was placed in contrast to the struggle for independence, thereby defined as a problematic that questioned the capacity of India to be 'fit' for self-rule.⁵² These narratives resulted in grouping together the political and the international, and the social and the domestic: categorizations that reiterated the problem of caste as outside the purview of international relations and foreign policy. This conscious attempt to circumscribe caste as a uniquely domestic, Hindu issue within the sovereign borders of the postcolonial nation-state ensured that there would be no 'global opprobrium or attention associated with slavery or apartheid'.⁵³ Moreover, the Nehruvian developmentalist state's vision of the nation as 'an inclusive space of casteless and secular citizens' rendered caste invisible in its discourse.⁵⁴ The apparent absence of the word 'caste' itself should be viewed as striking; as Mongia has argued in the case of race, 'the "guilt" of racism is evident ... in the general policy of not naming race'.⁵⁵

These narratives permeate the elite Indian conception of the 'international': not so much as a distant, casteless realm, but more so as a sanctified space in which the honour of the nation-state was at stake. Indeed, the almost normative recognition of the 'upper' caste/class Indian as the ideal citizen and passport-holder is unsurprising. As M. S. S. Pandian has shown, not only did the colonial experience produce the Brahmin as both the authentic representative of Hinduism and the true Indian most capable of achieving modernity, the transition to the postcolonial era reiterated 'the Brahminic as the national ... a move which implicitly reduced non-Brahmins and religious minorities as being inadequately Indian'.⁵⁶ This produced vocabularies of privilege and humiliation that permeate discourses of Indian foreign policy and function as euphemisms of that often-unnamed word: 'caste'. Yet centring the experience of indenture makes the salience of caste all the more visible: a fact most evident in the earliest elite Indian narratives about the 'coolie' that relied on more familiar meanings of caste—effectively a 'transcoding' of caste, class, and race, to borrow Sankaran Krishna's phrase.⁵⁷ As M. K. Gandhi put it:

We have become the untouchables of south Africa ... The word coolie ... means what a pariah or untouchable means to us.⁵⁸

It is worth interrogating the 'we' and 'us' in this statement: Gandhi's reading of the term 'coolie' did not simply mean that the 'coolies' were the Untouchables of South Africa, but that all Indians, including elite, 'upper'

⁵² Gopal Guru, 'The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception', in *Dalit Studies*, (eds), Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 39.

⁵³ Krishna, 'A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order', p. 155.

⁵⁴ Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, 'Introduction', in *Dalit Studies*, (eds), Rawat and Satyanarayana, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Mongia, 'Race, Nationality, Mobility', p. 546.

⁵⁶ Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Krishna, 'A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order', p. 145.

⁵⁸ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of my Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1926), p. 350.

caste Indians like Gandhi himself, were, by extension, enveloped in this Untouchable status. Indeed, Gandhi wrote that this was 'retribution' for the fact that Hindus had excluded a 'section of their own kith and kin as ... untouchables'.⁵⁹ He was far from the only one framing indenture through the rubrics of caste. Charles Freer Andrews and William Pearson's 1916 report on the conditions of indenture in Fiji is an archive of anxiety about 'lower' caste, 'immoral' 'coolies' and what was, in their view, the inexplicable presence of 'upper' caste individuals in these communities. For Andrews and Pearson, these indentured communities were comprised of individuals of the lowest caste and social status in Indian society—a problematic demographic profile further compounded by what they viewed as the tragedy of losing caste by travelling outside India. They held that such factors had created chaotic societies bound by few rules or morals. This was most problematic, in their view, since these communities had humiliated the 'fair name of India' in the international realm:

Fiji is, at present, like a great flaring advertisement, saying, in big letters, to all who travel to and fro across the Pacific—"This is India." ... We found ourselves protesting every day of our journey to our fellow passengers—"This is not India." But the patent fact remained ... It was the only 'India' which the travellers in the Pacific saw.⁶⁰

Writing many decades after Gandhi and Andrews, Kodanda Rao reiterated a familiar analogy whereby 'Indians overseas are treated by the local whites as untouchables are treated in India or Negroes are treated in the United States', arguing that the increasing restrictions faced by Indian emigrants was due to 'India's dependent status, the colored racial character of her nationals, and the fact that the bulk of her emigrants have been unskilled coolies'.⁶¹ Many other scholars of Indian emigration too were unanimous in lamenting the steadily deteriorating status of the Indian abroad and what they viewed as the lasting stain of indenture—a discourse laden with meanings of caste and class, as we have seen. In Lanka Sundaram's view, the increasing discrimination faced by Indians across the world was clearly a legacy of the 'coolie':

Even after the abolition of indenture, the psychological as well as the social environment, which held sway for nearly a century, persisted in continuing. Hence, today problems of Indian emigration in distant countries are not so much the products of current difficulties but the net result of accumulated prejudices and hatred of over ten decades. The indenture concept is still present in the 'coolie-swamy' phraseology of colonial administrations.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry* (Calcutta: Star Printing Works, 1916), p. XVII.

⁶¹ Rao, 'Indians Overseas', p. 201.

⁶² Sundaram, *Indians Overseas*, p. 170.

These afterlives of indenture shaped the discretionary granting of Indian passports and the exclusion of 'lower' caste and class individuals—now euphemistically referred to as 'unskilled', 'undesirable', 'pedlar class' Indians and deemed as unpleasant reminders of the 'coolie', thereby humiliating for the nation-state. The claim to represent India in the international realm seemed far more 'natural' for 'upper' caste and class Indians, given that other marginalized castes and communities had long been delegitimized as 'imperfect' Indians within the nation and as particularly shameful representatives of Indianness overseas. Indeed, the very articulation of the Indian nation had been 'imbued with Hindu Brahminical consciousness championed by Western educated caste Hindu elites'.⁶³ As we have seen, such elites had consistently sought to distance themselves from the reputation of the 'coolie'—a strikingly persistent term, as evident from the remarks of South African politician Oswald Pirow in 1953:

Nehru is just another coolie ... He knows the West, is a good speaker and a sharp debater, but immediately he opens his mouth it is all too clear he is only a coolie ...⁶⁴

Thus even while Nehru's elite upbringing and Western education could not, in Pirow's eyes, absolve him of 'coolie' status, such criterion were central to Indian notions of those who could represent India on the international stage. This is evident in the profile of most Indian diplomats, almost all of whom were Western-educated and drawn from the "the upper middle class" or "well to do semi-feudal segments of... Indian society", and came from wealthy families'.⁶⁵ Suraj Yengde has argued that this preponderance of the Brahmanical class ensured the reiteration of the postcolonial Indian state as the successor of the British Raj by keeping 'the foreign policy stance the same by excluding the marginalized community from its deliberations'—thereby ensuring that 'the internal strife between the majority and minority communities remained muted on international platforms'.⁶⁶ Elite 'upper' caste Indians had long positioned themselves as 'authoritative interlocutors between their societies and the white international system', and defined the 'lower-class/caste Indians and Africans as bringing up the rear of this hierarchy'.⁶⁷

Such notions are evident in India's representative Sir B. N. Rau's apparent suggestion in 1949 that a solution to South Africa's 'India problem' involved

⁶³ Chinnaiah Jangam, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 11.

⁶⁴ Goolam Vahed, "Nehru is Just Another Coolie": India and South Africa at the United Nations, 1946–1955', *Alternation*, Special Edition, no. 15 (2015), p. 55.

⁶⁵ Kate Sullivan, 'Exceptionalism in Indian Diplomacy: The Origins of India's Moral Leadership Aspirations', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37, no. 4 (2014), p. 647.

⁶⁶ Suraj Yengde, 'Ambedkar's Foreign Policy and the Ellipsis of the "Dalit" from International Activism', in *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, (eds), Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde (New Delhi: Penguin, 2018), p. 105.

⁶⁷ Krishna, 'A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order', pp. 146–147.

providing the full rights of citizenship to a ‘small number of ... the cultured and best type of Indians’.⁶⁸ According to a remarkable memorandum sent by G. P. Jooste, South Africa’s representative to the UN, Rau had noted that Indians who went to South Africa were not ‘the best type’ and had given India a ‘bad name’. Vineet Thakur draws on Rau’s reference to his discomfort with the growing anti-caste movement in India to show that his ‘euphemistic reference to Indians of the “best type” was really a proxy for the upper castes’. Indeed, as per Jooste, Rau had gone on to suggest that India did not mind the discrimination against undesirable, ‘lower’ caste Indians who were not ‘the best type’, as long as ‘it was not based on racial lines’.⁶⁹ As we shall see, India employed similar logics of interpretation in 1961 to assure British officials seeking to legislate the discriminatory Commonwealth Immigrants Act that restriction against undesirable ‘lower’ caste/class migrants was permissible, even understandable, and did not amount per se to ‘racial discrimination’ as long as ‘skilled’ elite Indians were permitted to enter Britain.

Even though Rau’s overt mention of caste may be unexpected, long-standing narratives over the shame of the ‘coolie’ make evident the inherently casteist meanings of such euphemisms and the fact that ‘upper’ caste diplomats utilized their elite societal status to articulate a form of solidarity and proximity with whiteness. Such narratives are evident in the remarks of S. K. Patil, a leading Congress politician who headed a 1955 delegation to East Africa organized by the Brihad Bharatiya Samaj, an organization that aimed to champion the cause of overseas Indians and served as an unofficial diplomatic channel. While Patil called for solidarity between Africans and Indians in public meetings, the internal report circulated by British officials after private conversations with Patil quoted his views on segregation in East Africa:

Speaking candidly there was some justification for the desire of the more advanced communities in East Africa to have a measure of social segregation from the more primitive peoples (he admitted to a similar antipathy on his own part towards eating with, living in close proximity with e.g the ‘adivasis.’)⁷⁰

This alarming intertwining of race and caste reiterates the ways in which Indian understandings of race, particularly regarding the place of Africans in the international realm, relied on more local meanings and perceptions of ‘lower’ castes and tribes. These intersections of caste, class, and race also shaped British views of certain categories of Indians as particularly

⁶⁸ Vineet Thakur, ‘When India Proposed a Casteist Solution to South Africa’s Racist Problem’, *The Wire*, 4 April 2016. Available at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/exploring-casteism-in-indias-foreign-policy>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Letter from D. J. King to R. C. Ormerod, 3 October 1955, DO 35/5307, ‘Activities of Shri Brihad Bharatiya Samaj (Indian Overseas League): tour by its leader, S K Patel to East Africa and Fiji’, The National Archives at Kew (TNA hereafter).

‘undesirable’ members of the ‘coolie class’.⁷¹ As Martin Wainwright has shown, British notions of the ‘social rank’ of Indians in the metropole were often shaped by the caste and class ranking of Indians in their own society—hence their widespread tendency to view Brahmans ‘inherently as a respectable class’.⁷² This was further complicated by the fact that Indians resident within and outside India were British subjects as per the BNA—indeed, many even held British subject or United Kingdom and Colonies passports. The unintended ‘concealment’ of their racial identity within the broader ‘national’ rubrics of these passports was an issue of particular concern for British officials, compounded by their inability to legally prevent the entry of British subjects into the United Kingdom (UK).⁷³

Passport problems: Entanglements of the BNA

Histories of empire and indenture tied together newer ‘unskilled’ migrants travelling to Britain after 1947 and the ‘overseas Indians’ long settled in various parts of the ‘British world’. However, in a more direct, legal sense, it was the BNA that brought these two categories of Indian migrants, past and present, within one domain by delineating Indians as British subjects after Indian independence. The BNA provided for British subject or Commonwealth citizen status through the ‘gateway’ of local citizenship, making Indians ‘British subjects without citizenship’ until the 1955 Indian Citizenship Act was passed. This was far more complicated in the case of overseas Indians who could potentially fall into any of the following categories: Indian citizens, citizens of the newly minted category of ‘United Kingdom and colonies’ (UKC), or temporary British subjects without citizenship.⁷⁴ These complexities meant that the provisions of the BNA had to be negotiated by the Indian state in the making of its own citizenship legislation, shaping the entangled citizenship status of Indians within and beyond the territorial confines of the new nation-state. This entangled status necessarily meant that British officials acted as interim passport issuing authorities for many Indians until the legislation of the Indian Citizenship Act—be they overseas Indians resident in British colonial territories or those born and domiciled within India. This also included the granting of British passports based on racial ‘common sense and humane considerations’ to white persons born in India who were ‘obviously’ British even if they did not legally qualify within

⁷¹ The term finds reference in police reports about Indian and Pakistani immigrants. Report by F. W. Burgan, 27 April 1958, HO 344/151, ‘Police information about organisers of immigration. Replies to a Home Office questionnaire concerning race relations that was sent to police forces across the country’, TNA.

⁷² Martin A. Wainwright, *The Better Class’ of Indians: Social Rank, Imperial Identity, and South Asians in Britain, 1858–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 126.

⁷³ See Mongia, ‘Race, Nationality, Mobility’, p. 553.

⁷⁴ This last option was the definitive problem in the case of overseas Indians: if they, as ‘temporary British subjects without citizenship’, were not included in India’s citizenship framework, they would have to be either automatically included within the framework of UKC citizens—a possibility that British officials dreaded—or left stateless.

the parameters of the BNA.⁷⁵ Such 'commonsensical' and 'compassionate' bestowals of passports to white persons in order to extend UK citizenship to them also produced a new 'non-racial' term to describe them: 'British European'.⁷⁶ This curious term had first been introduced as a racial category in application forms for those seeking to register for UKC citizenship.⁷⁷ Indeed, given that millions of 'coloured' people could also lay claim to the term 'British', the new formulation of 'British European' race would assert the whiteness of those Britons who had a special claim to Britishness.⁷⁸ In one case where British officials recommended that an Indian seaman in much the same circumstances as white passport applicants be referred instead to the Indian representative for passport facilities, Cleobury noted:

The obvious grounds for differentiating his case from those who I have mentioned above are that of race or colour. I do not see how it is possible to avoid this although we cannot admit it openly!⁷⁹

Likewise, British attempts to understand the extent of the 'problem' of 'coloured immigration' in general had long been concerned with how 'obviously' British these immigrants were, and how 'assimilable' British subjects from the Indian subcontinent were in comparison to other races, notably the West Indians. These discussions often sought to clarify the level of desirability of Indians for the British nation-state. A 1958 internal report on the 'problems' arising from the influx of coloured immigrants noted the differences between West Indian immigrants who are 'mostly of a good type who fit fairly easily into British society', and Indians and Pakistanis who 'are greatly handicapped by their inability to speak English and their lack of any kind of skill'. The class backgrounds of immigrants entering Britain from the subcontinent, who were 'mostly unskilled simple peasants who know no English', seemed 'ominous' to the British.⁸⁰

The British need to define an 'Indian race' also stemmed from their persistent fear of the seemingly invisible and unaccounted-for number of Indians who utilized UKC and British colonial passports to enter the United Kingdom. The passport's role in subsuming race as a 'national attribute' now ironically meant that those who held UK passports were not classified by immigration officers as anything other than 'UK nationals'.⁸¹ British officials seeking to find out the exact number of those of 'Indian race' in the United Kingdom struggled to find such a number, given that 'only people traveling with Indian passports are

⁷⁵ F. C. Cleobury to Toy, 12 August 1949, DO142/252, 'Passport policy in India and Pakistan', TNA.

⁷⁶ Toy to Shepherd, 20 July 1949, DO142/252, TNA.

⁷⁷ Ansari, 'Subjects or Citizens?', p. 290.

⁷⁸ Cleobury to Ward, 29 June 1949, DO142/252, TNA.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Home Office Draft progress report to Ministers, 13 January 1958, HO 344/149, 'Trend of Indian and Pakistani Immigration', TNA.

⁸¹ See Mongia, 'Race, Nationality, Mobility', p. 529.

classified as “Indians” by Immigration officers’.⁸² Similarly, those Indians born in British colonies who either held British colonial passports of the colony in question or had UKC passports after registering as UKC citizens were also not counted as ‘Indians’ by immigration authorities. This created another problem for officials seeking to identify the exact number of people of ‘Indian race’ entering the UK:

Unfortunately, we have no statistics which will help, because as a general rule, a coloured British subject is classified for the purposes of the HO immigration statistics as belonging to the territory in which his passport was issued (e.g. Holders of Kenya passports are classified as ‘East Africans’), whilst those who hold United Kingdom passports are classified according to their places of birth.⁸³

The ‘winds of change’ engulfing British colonies and former colonial territories in 1960 spurred further fears among officials that this would prompt the increasing movement of Indians to the United Kingdom.⁸⁴ British officials frantically attempted to keep track of the movement of Indians from regions as diverse as Malaya, Singapore, Fiji, Uganda, and Kenya by calculating the number of colonial passports sent for endorsement to travel to the UK. Since colonial passports ‘generally are only endorsed for the holders’ immediate journey’, officials scrutinized them with fear that all those who held a passport were on their way to their ‘Eldorado’: Britain.⁸⁵ As Wickson noted, ‘I was somewhat shattered today to be presented with a large batch of 34 British passports (the majority of them colonial ones) for clearance prior to the holders (all Sikh) going to the UK.’⁸⁶ Moreover, officials viewed with great suspicion the fact that these passport-holders wanted to add the details of their children to their passports: ‘we often suspect these (children) are not their own ... (they are) making some money on the side taking three or four youths with them’.⁸⁷ Even as they discounted more paranoid suggestions that many Indians travelled to colonial territories simply in order to register for UKC status and travel to Britain, British officials feared that those ‘whose passports were not endorsed for the UK may have found their way here’ simply by virtue of holding passports.⁸⁸ As long as these ‘undesirables’ held any passport—be it an Indian passport, British colonial passport, or a UKC passport—‘there is (sic) not much to stop them’.⁸⁹

The possession of any passport as a British subject thus meant potentially being able to enter Britain; a prospect that terrified British officials who were

⁸² M. P. Preston to Chadwick, 30 September 1958, DO 35/1036, ‘Issue of UK passports by UK High Commission in New Delhi to UK citizens of Indian race’, TNA.

⁸³ M. P. Preston to D. W. H. Wickson, 5 November 1958, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁴ D. W. H. Wickson to A. H. G. Pope, 3 October 1960, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁵ D. W. H. Wickson to A. H. G. Pope, 3 August 1960, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁶ D. W. H. Wickson to A. H. G. Pope, 21 September 1960, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁷ D. W. H. Wickson to A. H. G. Pope, 3 August 1960, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁸ M. P. Preston to Chadwick, 30 September 1958, DO 35/1036, TNA.

⁸⁹ D. W. H. Wickson to C. H. Butterfield, 14 March 1960, DO 35/1036, TNA.

unable to prevent their entry legally and were already struggling to enumerate and negotiate the influx of Indians, whose racial status had seemingly been submerged within the 'national' identity of colonial and UKC passports. The solution therefore lay in preventing the acquisition of passports in the first place—a policy that British officials called on an amenable Indian government to follow, given the rising influx of Indian passport holders migrating to Britain.

The 'honour' of the Indian passport

In 1956, the extraordinary Garry Davis—self-proclaimed 'world citizen' who had renounced his American passport and citizenship—entered India carrying what he had termed a 'World Passport'. The World Passport had been carefully designed by Davis, certifying its holder as 'a world-citizen' who would 'try to recognize his responsibilities as a member of the World Community'. On his visit to India, he sought out an important fellow 'world citizen'. Presenting Jawaharlal Nehru with a 'World Passport' and declaring him a 'Sovereign Citizen of the World', Davis recalls telling the Indian prime minister that his 'basic principles are of course yours, one world and one mankind'.⁹⁰ These ideas, along with the quest for world government, had indeed long been a part of Nehru's vision of international relations.⁹¹ Yet, one must hope that Nehru was aware of the sad irony of being given a symbolic 'World Passport' at a time when the Indian government was actively denying passports to large numbers of its 'lower' caste and class citizens, deeming them 'unskilled' and 'unsuitable' to travel abroad as representatives of India.

Niraja Gopal Jayal has argued that the delay in passing the Indian Passport Act—as late as 1967—was due to the fact that 'the idea of a passport in the western sense had not ... been institutionalized or internalized, so that people acquired passports quite casually without realizing the implications of such an act for nationality and citizenship'.⁹² While she draws on the India-Pakistan passport system to make this point, it is highly unlikely that people struggling to get passports to travel to the West—resulting in a forged passport racket—were 'casually' acquiring passports. As the British Indian writer Dilip Hiro recalled, so 'stringent' were the 'educational and financial requirements for successful passport applications' that in 1957, 'in spite of good academic qualifications and financial references, it took the author (sic) six months to secure a passport in India'.⁹³ Far from being 'casual' acts of acquisition, access to passports was scarce and served as a mechanism through which the second-class citizen likely to embarrass India in the West was categorized and thereby contained.

From 1946, the Indian government issued passports only if guarantees of maintenance and repatriation were provided to ensure that the applicant

⁹⁰ Garry Davis, *My Country is the World* (London: MacDonald, 1961), p. 127.

⁹¹ See Manu Bhagavan, *India and the Quest for One World: The Peacemakers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁹² Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents*, p. 72.

⁹³ Hiro, *Black British, White British*, p. 107.

would not become 'destitute and require repatriation at (the) government's expenses'.⁹⁴ Such financial concerns would long shape the criterion on which an applicant's suitability to travel abroad was judged, with monetary limits in place to assess the 'solvency' of an applicant or their guarantor.⁹⁵ These strict controls based on colonial protocols meant that all those domiciled in India, including Europeans and Anglo-Indians—much to the chagrin of the British—would be subjected to these rules. Noting that such rules were being applied far too zealously by Indian authorities, British officials argued that these criterion were designed only for those 'Indian British subjects of a low standard of education and limited means'. Indeed, demanding financial guarantees as a means of denying mobility was a mechanism meant not for 'people of this sort, but people of the Indian pedlar class'.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, Indian officials continued to recommend to the British throughout the 1950s that they refuse leave to land for Indians whose passports did not have an endorsement—the more lenient equivalent of a visa at that time—for the UK. The British high commissioner in India, Malcolm Macdonald, approved of this course of action as a means to 'catch the undesirable Indians who leave India ostensibly for other destinations without having their passports endorsed for the UK'.⁹⁷ However, Home Office officials repeatedly noted that this proposal was a 'non-starter' since, regardless of the lack of endorsement for the UK, the passport itself served as sufficient proof of their nationality and therefore British subject status.⁹⁸ Therefore, 'there is no power under the present law to require him to satisfy the immigration officer of anything else as a condition of being allowed to land in this country'.⁹⁹ Officials also argued that this proposal would 'only nibble at the main problem' of 'coloured immigration', given that only a small percentage of Indians carried passports not endorsed for the UK.¹⁰⁰ They therefore rejected suggestions to include such a proposal in the draft of the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill that was in the process of being prepared. This would, in the words of J. M. Ross, be an 'extra mesh in an already awkward net, simply for the sake of catching a few extra fish'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, by outsourcing to other countries the power to approve the entry of British subjects to the UK, they feared that 'we might well find ourselves treating British subjects more harshly than aliens'.¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Copy of express letter from Ministry of External Affairs to the Home Secy of the United Provinces, 10 July 1946, India Office Records IOR L/PJ/7/11848, 'Passport for Anglo-Indians and Domiciled Europeans: Guarantees of maintenance and repatriation', British Library (BL hereafter).

⁹⁵ Letter from Flt Lt H. C. Varma, Regional Passport Officer, Madras to Chief Passport Officer, 20 April 1957, File 25/3/57-PVI, 'Indian citizens leaving India: form of guarantee to be executed by persons who hold passports', National Archives of India (NAI hereafter).

⁹⁶ Rumbold to P. J. Patrick, 20 November 1947, IOR L/PJ/7/11848, BL.

⁹⁷ C. W. Dixon to J. M. Ross, 25 July 1958, HO 344/152, 'Suggestion to refuse leave to land to Indians with passports not valid for UK', TNA.

⁹⁸ B. F. M. Samuel to A. H. G. Pope, 21 March 1961, HO 344/152, TNA.

⁹⁹ J. M. Ross to Charles W. Dixon, 13 August 1958, HO 344/152, TNA.

¹⁰⁰ C. W. Dixon to J. M. Ross, 25 July 1958, HO 344/152, TNA.

¹⁰¹ J. M. Ross to Charles W. Dixon, 13 August 1958, HO 344/152, TNA.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Given that an Indian passport served as an entry ticket into Britain, as proof of Indian citizenship and therefore British subject status, restricting the very possession of such passports rather than requiring special endorsements for the UK was deemed essential for preventing the movement of ‘undesirable’ Indians to Britain. This was so, even as British officials had long been aware that by asking India to keep a certain ‘lower’ class/caste category of Indians away from Britain, they had done something which ‘we do not ask Canada or Australia to do’.¹⁰³ Indian passport applications of such Indians seeking to travel to the United Kingdom were thus referred to the Commonwealth Relations Office, following ‘long-standing arrangements’:

when an Indian or Pakistani who is *illiterate, indigent or of low social status* applies to his government for a passport for the purpose of coming to the UK, the name and address of a sponsor in the UK and information about the purpose of the visit is referred to the appropriate High Commissioner in the UK, who in turn passes the details on to us and we ask the police to interview the sponsor and furnish a report on his character, financial status, business or occupation, when he came to the UK, and how the applicant is likely to be employed if he comes to this country.¹⁰⁴

These Indians exemplified what British officials deemed the ‘pedlar class’: an especially undesirable category of Indians of ‘low social status’, a clear euphemism for low caste and class status, whose passport applications were almost always rejected by the Indian state. The presence of Indian seamen and other working class Indians who took up peddling in Britain—the most easily accessible form of employment for them during the 1920s and 1930s—had long been a concern for British officials. Indeed, attempting to prevent the entry of potential pedlars, the India Office had in 1931 called on the Indian government to warn potential migrants of the ‘wholly erroneous’ belief that there were opportunities for ‘lucrative employment’ as a pedlar or as a seaman and instead indicate to them ‘the perils of settling in Britain’.¹⁰⁵

It is hardly surprising therefore that British officials viewed the entry of ‘unskilled’ ‘lower’ class/caste Indians after 1947 as an influx of new additions to the dreaded ‘pedlar class’. Indian officials were equally wary of this category of immigrants, as is evident from their response to the passport renewal application of Mr Salig Ram of Dehradun. While the provincial Criminal Investigation Department declared that Ram was eligible to get a passport, this was contested by the local district magistrate who warned that the applicant’s financial guarantees were insufficient. Most importantly, Indian officials noted that Salig Ram’s existing passport identified his occupation as ‘pedlar’. They also suspected that Ram’s guarantor—his brother who was already resident in Britain—was not a shopkeeper as claimed and was more likely to be

¹⁰³ F. H. Clebury to Wilson, 4 February 1948, DO142/252, TNA.

¹⁰⁴ Letter in file dated 5 January 1953 (signature illegible), ‘Passport facilities: vetting of applications by Indians and Pakistani pedlars’, HO 213/1625, TNA. Italics added.

¹⁰⁵ Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 217–218.

a pedlar himself. This application was forwarded to British officials, calling on them to check the status of Ram's brother Des Raj in Newcastle. Even as Salig Ram 'undertook before the magistrate not to engage in peddling', British officials called for the refusal of a passport stating that 'in the light of enquiries which were made concerning the guarantor Mr Des Raj, it appears probable that should Mr Ram come to the UK, he would engage in peddling'.¹⁰⁶ Ram's case was very much the norm for applicants of such low economic and social status: as Indian High Commission officials noted in 1953, the British government had turned down as many as 32 applications in the preceding ten months 'solely because the applicants' guarantors in this country happened to be pedlars'.¹⁰⁷ Yet, given their entangled status as British subjects, the British government had 'not taken exception to the continued stay in this country of Indians of this category who came here a long time ago'.¹⁰⁸

Many of these early immigrants had obtained licences from the British government to engage in peddling, although the legalized status of their occupation did little to remove the stigma associated with them. This was as much a grave concern for Indian officials as their British counterparts: Indian High Commission officials had been reluctant to issue fresh Indian passports for pedlars resident in the UK and instead provided them with 'Emergency certificates' that would only allow their return to India.¹⁰⁹ Complicating their status was the fact that the existing passports of many of these applicants did not have 'proper endorsements' for the UK. While this was in violation of India's passport regulations, this did not in itself prohibit their entry into Britain, given their possession of a valid passport of a Commonwealth nation. Thus even as they decided to grant new passports to these pedlars after widespread complaints and fears of 'antagonising a large number of Indians', Indian High Commission officials still relied on the criterion of their being 'financially sound' and 'endorsed' their passport only for the UK itself, 'so that they may not visit other countries as pedlars'.¹¹⁰

The number of applications referred to the British declined after 1954, leading to further doubts among British officials as to the tangible benefits of this system of restricting migration at its source. British officials were often unsure if their recommendations regarding the refusal of passports to certain applicants were followed by Indian officials, nor did they know the exact criteria on which applications were referred to them. Indeed, there was much suspicion that Indians found their 'own methods' of getting to the UK, even if the Commonwealth Relations Office and Home Office had made an adverse report about their eligibility for a passport.¹¹¹ As H. W. Savidge of the

¹⁰⁶ Letter from District Magistrate, Dehradun, to MEA, 16 March 1948, PV-I 19(64)-PV(I)/48, 'Refusal of passport facilities for the UK to Mr Salig Ram, S/O Rala Ram', NAI.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from P. D. Runganadhan, Indian High Commission to MEA, 21 November 1953, PV (I) 26 (178)-PV(1), 'Entry of certain categories of Indians into the UK without proper endorsement in their passports for the UK', NAI.

¹⁰⁸ P. D. Runganadhan to MEA, 21 November 1953, PV (I) 26(178)-PV(1), NAI.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Letter from H. Sandys to J. M. Ross, 17 April 1957, HO 344/149, TNA.

Home Office noted, they could only hope that there was an overlap between Indian and British definitions of 'undesirable' persons who ought to be denied a passport: 'it seems probable that the Indian govt. could expect us to turn back the people they did not wish to come, rather than those whom we wished to reject, but it might well be that these could turn out to be the same in the end'.¹¹²

Yet it is clear that such a mechanism was in place with the cooperation of Indian officials who perceived this to be in their interest. British officials repeatedly asserted that the Indian and Pakistani governments were taking steps to prevent 'working class',¹¹³ 'unskilled and illiterate persons from coming to this country'.¹¹⁴ These, after all, were persons viewed as 'not likely to do credit to their countries' reputation in the UK'.¹¹⁵ A Home Office memo even claimed that while they had expected such restrictions to end with the independence of India and Pakistan, it was at the request of the two governments that these arrangements to control the entry of the 'pedlar class' were continued.¹¹⁶

Indian acquiescence to these controls was based on a long-standing anxiety about the potential national embarrassment caused by the 'unsuitable' 'lower' class and caste Indian—from stereotypes of the 'coolie' to these 'pedlar class' Indians. Indeed, while a list of guidelines issued by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to regional passport officers asked them to avoid preconceived notions of the 'ineligibility of any specific class of persons for receiving passports', they were nevertheless warned against granting passports to those who were 'likely to behave in a manner in a foreign country that would lower India in the estimation of foreigners'.¹¹⁷ It is telling that the applicant's apparent inherent proclivity to humiliate the nation was considered a main criterion for passport rejection, listed alongside other factors such as an applicant's potential to endanger national security and ability to vilify India abroad.¹¹⁸

Political 'undesirables' such as members of the Communist Party of India were often denied passports, with Indian officials seeking to provide just enough leeway to plausibly deny charges of bias. I. J. Broughton, undersecretary of the MEA, pointed out in 1952 that 'prominent and active members of the Communist party should normally not be given passports, but cases of MPs and to some extent members of the assembly have to be considered rather separately. This does not mean that they should invariably be given passports but there must be special reasons for refusing them passports'.¹¹⁹ By 1960,

¹¹² Note by H. Savidge, 18 April 1957, HO 344/149, TNA.

¹¹³ A. F. Morley to Cornish, 9 August 1955, HO 344/149, TNA.

¹¹⁴ Home Office Draft progress report to Ministers, 13 January 1958, HO 344/149, TNA.

¹¹⁵ Note to I. B. Watt, 7 April 1956, HO 344/149, TNA.

¹¹⁶ Letter in file dated 5 January 1953 (signature illegible), HO 213/1625, TNA.

¹¹⁷ Letter from MEA to all Passport Issuing Authorities in India and all Indian representatives abroad, 25 July 1952, File 20(10)-J/52, 'Instructions from the MEA regarding refusal of Passport Facilities to Indian citizens', NAI.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Letter from I. J. Broughton, 18 December 1952, File 20(10)-J/52, NAI.

even as the guidelines were somewhat reformulated to provide passports for all members of Parliament, local assemblies, and councils, without calling for financial guarantees or security checks, this nevertheless did not apply to members of the formerly secessionist Dravidian political parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or Dravida Kazhagam which were apparently ‘blacklisted’.¹²⁰

The discretionary scope built into the very structure of the passport system was amplified further by the fact that state governments were in charge of granting passports on behalf of the centre until 1954. The Government of India’s guidelines—effectively calling on passport officers to identify Indian citizens who would not embarrass the nation abroad in order to grant them passports—facilitated clear discriminatory practices in local passport offices. The remarkable memoir of Ishwar Das Pawar, the first Scheduled Caste gazetted officer in Punjab who became the undersecretary of the Passport Department in 1952, makes clear the extent to which discrimination against ‘lower’ caste applicants was the norm. As he recalls, ‘Scheduled caste people would come to me grumbling that they were denied passports for the UK while others got them freely.’¹²¹ This was evident to Pawar in his scrutiny of such applications: he recounts the case of one Scheduled Caste candidate whose application had not been dealt with at the state level as was the rule, but had instead been sent to the Government of India, with the facts of the case misrepresented in order to secure a rejection of his passport. Pawar took up the matter with officials in Delhi, who reiterated his view that the case be reconsidered and the candidate be issued a passport. In his memoir, Pawar quotes the letter sent by I. J. Broughton commending his handling of the case:

As it is our policy to be as liberal as possible in the grant of passports consistent with the security and honour of the country, it should always be the object of state governments to grant passport facilities as freely as they can and only to refuse them when the evidence is really strong that the issue of a passport ... would be detrimental to our interest ... We receive frequent complaints about the arbitrary severity with which the passport rules are administered by the passport authorities.¹²²

Broughton’s representation of the discriminatory granting of passports as a problem of the local implementation of guidelines rather than that of the *guidelines themselves* obfuscates the ways in which, as we have seen, these rules were explicitly designed to exclude those deemed embarrassing for the nation-state. Indeed, the very principle of the discretionary granting of

¹²⁰ Minutes of the second conference of the regional passport officers, New Delhi, 6–7 September 1960, File 21(101) PVI/60, ‘Second Conference of the Regional Passport Officers held at New Delhi from 6–7 September 1960: Implementation of the decisions taken’, NAI.

¹²¹ Ishwar Das Pawar, *My Struggle in Life* (New York: Page Publishing, 2015; ebook). See chapter titled ‘The Passport Affair’.

¹²² *Ibid.*

passports, coupled with strict financial guarantees and educational requirements, enabled bureaucrats to exclude many Indians from the lowest caste and class backgrounds as unworthy of holding a passport. Pawar was one of the exceptions: he attempted to relax the financial requirements for Scheduled Caste applicants and, according to Juergensmeyer, 'helped five hundred SC applicants to emigrate each year'.¹²³ Pawar recounts his stint in the Passports Department:

... quite a number of *Harijans* were able to get passports for (the) UK Many of those families are now in that country, and some of them have acquired citizenship of that land. It gives me great pleasure and unbounded satisfaction to know that they are living there happily and are much better off.¹²⁴

The complications of dealing with passport authorities in the states eventually led to the centralization of passport authorities in 1954, with the central government setting up its own regional passport offices.¹²⁵ This did not, however, reduce complaints about the arbitrary nature of granting passports, an issue that was cropping up more frequently in Parliamentary debates too. In 1961, Lok Sabha MPs called on the government to appoint a Parliamentary committee to look into the 'rules and procedures regarding the issuance of passports with a view to eliminating corruption, discrimination and delays'.¹²⁶ A conference of regional passport officers in 1960 likewise also discussed widespread complaints that passport offices were 'very slow and dilatory' and passports were granted only 'to persons who had good approach ... while other applicants had no response'.¹²⁷ Lakshmi Menon, the deputy minister of External Affairs, argued that there was a great delay in issuing passports 'to even most deserving applicants' and called for a more 'practical and humane approach'.¹²⁸ The then foreign secretary Subimal Dutt concurred and called on officers to adopt an attitude that 'a citizen should be given a Passport unless there are good reasons to the contrary and not that a passport is not to be given until the applicant gives good grounds in his/her application'.¹²⁹

These seemingly promising solutions belied the paradoxical conclusions of that same conference: making the passport application process easy, according to these officials, meant expediting the applications of 'persons of good standing'. These persons, they pointed out, should be 'freely' provided endorsements

¹²³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 246.

¹²⁴ Pawar, *My Struggle in Life*.

¹²⁵ File 40(10)-EI/52, Contribution payable to the various states on account of passport work done by them on behalf of Government of India, NAI.

¹²⁶ File 23(3)/PVI (61) 'Lok Sabha resolution regarding Committee of MPs to renew the rules regarding issue of passports', NAI.

¹²⁷ Minutes of the second conference of the regional passport officers, New Delhi, 6–7 September 1960, File 21(101) PVI/60, NAI.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

for the countries they sought to travel to and 'if an educated person (graduate and above) or a person of good standing wishes to proceed abroad on a pleasure trip it should not be necessary for RPO to enquire about his travel plans or about financial arrangements made'.¹³⁰ Indeed, their further suggestions for 'simplification' of passport procedures included the following incredible proposal:

It was therefore agreed that in addition to the Chief Ministers and Chief Secretaries of States and Joint Secretaries to the Government of India, if a Secretary/Additional Secretary/Special Secretary/Deputy Secretary to the Government of India or various state governments and a 1st class Magistrate certifies that the applicant is known to him for more than two years ... and recommends that the applicant is a fit person to be considered for the grant of passport, the Regional Passport Officers should waive the police and security verification and grant a passport immediately provided the applicant is eligible to receive one otherwise.¹³¹

The fact that these suggestions for easy access to passports relaxed rules largely for 'persons of good standing' only further illuminates the entirely discriminatory process of granting a passport. It is unsurprising therefore that such policies led to a thriving market for forged passports utilized by those not privileged enough to be personally acquainted with senior government officials. By the 1950s, the large-scale use of forged passports by Indian immigrants to bypass restrictions on their emigration to Britain became a significant diplomatic issue.¹³² Many migrants sought to travel by ship to bypass growing scrutiny at Indian airports. One sizeable group holding forged passports sailed to Italy in October 1959, from where they travelled via Calais to Dover. This transnational journey complicated things for all governments involved: as the *Daily Herald* put it, there was an 'amazing see-saw' between Britain and France over who should assume the burden of the Indian 'invasion'.¹³³ The Government of India's response to this crisis was somewhat astounding: not only did India initially refuse to bear the expenses for the repatriation of these Indians, they also claimed that there was no proof that these forged passport-holders were Indian citizens. Indeed, a Home Office spokesperson described the detained Indians as of 'uncertain nationality'.¹³⁴

After all, these 'lower' class/caste Indians had long been regarded as unworthy of an official Indian passport and particularly humiliating to India

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Minutes of the second conference of the regional passport officers, New Delhi, 6–7 September 1960, File 21(101) PVI/60, NAI.

¹³² Reports alleged that almost 20,000 Indians had entered Britain using fake passports by the mid-1950s, and there was much controversy over Pakistani immigrants using forged passports too. See Talvinder Gill, 'The Indian Workers' Association Coventry 1938–1990: Political and Social Action', *South Asian History and Culture*, 4, no. 4 (2013), p. 560.

¹³³ 'Fake Passport Mystery', *Daily Herald*, 26 October 1959.

¹³⁴ 'Forged Indian Passports: 23 Held in Ports and Airfield', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 October 1959.

as its representatives in the international realm. The Indian state interpreted their use of forged passports—for which they paid large amounts to agents, often pledging their property—as bringing into question their very claim to Indianness, reiterating the state’s long-held view of their status as problematic, indeed embarrassing, citizens. Nehru bemoaned that these individuals had created ‘an international scandal ... which has brought us much discredit’.¹³⁵ As a result of this scandal, stricter guidelines were put in place for a brief period from 1959–1960, making ‘illiterate or semi-illiterate Indians’ who did not know English ineligible for an Indian passport. Deputy Minister of External Affairs Lakshmi Menon explained that this ban applied to those intending to travel to the West since such people ‘who went to Britain to earn a living by petty trades or unskilled labour found it difficult to adjust themselves to the new conditions of life, particularly since they lacked a knowledge of English’.¹³⁶ The Indian government’s requirement of an English test and its persistent concern about the illiterate nature of these immigrants has a stark precedent in the exclusionary colonial usage of the literacy test, as we have seen. It is telling that these exclusionary tests were now imposed by a postcolonial nation for its own citizens.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth Immigrants bill, tabled in November 1961, sought to control the immigration of Commonwealth passport-holders and introduced the need for work vouchers and other guarantees in order to enter the United Kingdom. This marked the first major legislative culmination of British fears about ‘unhindered’ coloured immigration and the uninhibited access provided by passports of Commonwealth countries—especially for West Indians, Indians, and Pakistanis—under the BNA. In a discussion in Parliament about the bill, the MP for Southall noted the special contribution of the Indian government in restricting the entry of undesirables:

No Government tried more to regulate its emigration than did India. I do not know whether we helped the Indian Government particularly in that respect—I do not think that we did—but if there was one country with which we could have discussed what could be done to strengthen its method of controlling emigration and ours of controlling immigration, it was India.¹³⁷

The Indian government had also noted its concern about the lack of consultations on these restrictions in its aide memoire to the British government in October 1961. In a statement in the Lok Sabha, Lakshmi Menon reminded her

¹³⁵ Nehru to Partap Singh Kairon, 20 November 1959, *SWJN*, Vol. 54.

¹³⁶ ‘No Illiterate Indian Allowed to Travel to Britain’, *The Guardian*, 30 August 1960.

¹³⁷ Remarks by G. A. Pargiter, 16 November 1961, ‘Commonwealth Immigrants Bill’, HC Deb vol 649 cc 687–819. Available at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1961/nov/16/commonwealth-immigrants-bill>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

colleagues that while the British had permitted the entry of Indians whose passports they had not endorsed, the Indian government had itself exercised strict restrictions: 'We ourselves are against illiterate or semi-literate Indians going to the UK or to any other country in search of employment.'¹³⁸ Thus, India had no problem with these particular illiterate, 'lower' caste and class Indians being refused entry into Britain and in fact encouraged such restrictions. As long as the British lived up to their assurances that 'the restrictions which are now proposed to be imposed will not operate on the basis of colour', Nehru assured them that India would understand the sovereign right of a nation to control its borders.¹³⁹

Indeed, as long as the elite, 'highly skilled', 'upper' caste and class Indians were permitted to enter Britain, there was no question of racial discrimination. The unassimilable, 'unsuitable', 'unskilled', 'pedlar class' of Indians were, after all, a secondary class of Indians: discrimination against them was not racial, but eminently understandable and even warranted. By bringing disgrace and embarrassment to India, these undesirables were not the best representatives of the Indian nation in the West and thus British restrictions on their entry—given that the Indian government itself had long been complicit—could not be considered 'racist'. As A. F. Morley of the Commonwealth Relations Office had earlier noted in a letter: the Indians had 'expressed *undisguised pleasure*' that the Home Office 'found it possible to turn back certain would-be migrants'.¹⁴⁰

As we have seen, in a revolutionary judgment in 1967 the Indian Supreme Court ruled that any 'person living in India has a fundamental right to travel abroad'.¹⁴¹ It is worth engaging with the statement of the dissenting judges who argued that 'unfair' refusal of passports could be challenged in court, but should not form the basis of making passports available to all. They pointed out that the 'right to travel is not included in personal liberty' in the Constitution, since India could not guarantee that those who travel abroad would be admitted into other countries. According to them, a passport could not be demanded in the same way a railway ticket could, given that the 'Government places in the hands of a person a document which pledges the honour of the country ... it is entitled to scrutinise the credentials of such a person'.¹⁴² Unlike the United States where 'travel is a means of spending one's wealth', the right to hold a passport and travel abroad was apparently not meant for poor Indians who had to be content with a railway ticket. As the dissenting judges noted:

¹³⁸ Statement to be made by Deputy Minister for EA on the floor of LS on 4 Dec 1961 in response to calling attention to notices regarding the immigration control legislation introduced by the Govt of the UK, Mss Eur F158/173, 'Immigration: India—to England mainly & re Immigration control legislation introduced by UK Govt, BL.

¹³⁹ 'Mr Nehru Prefers Visa System', *The Times*, 5 December 1961.

¹⁴⁰ A. F. Morley to W. H. Cornish, 9 August 1955, HO 344/149, TNA. Italics added.

¹⁴¹ Satwant Singh Sawhney vs D. Ramarathnam, assistant Passport Officer, Government of India, 1967 AIR 1836. Available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1747577/>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

¹⁴² Dissenting arguments of Judges M. Hidayatullah and R. S. Bachawat. Satwant Singh Sawhney vs D. Ramarathnam, assistant Passport Officer, Government of India, 1967 AIR 1836. Available at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1747577/>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

What we are concerned with is a slender body of persons whose travel abroad is considered harmful to the larger interests of our nation and who themselves *are in any event undesirable emissaries of our nation* and who might, if allowed to go abroad, cause many complications.¹⁴³

This reading of the passport as a document of honour to be given only to those whose respectability could be vouched for is very much in line with both the colonial Indian state's treatment of the passport as a privilege for loyal, elite Indians, and the postcolonial Indian state's categorization of 'unsuitable' Indians ineligible for a passport to travel to the West. These unsuitable Indians were in many ways legatees of the 'coolie' and were equally regarded as 'undesirable emissaries' of the Indian nation—indeed, British officials too referred to the new wave of migrants into Britain interchangeably as 'pedlar class' and 'coolie class' Indians. Euphemisms and vocabularies of caste and class are therefore omnipresent in this discourse about those deemed 'suitable' to be an Indian passport-holder, reiterating Mahmoud Keshavarz's succinct observation that 'passports are material evidence of exercising discrimination'.¹⁴⁴

Postscript

In January 2018, the Government of India announced plans to issue a new category of orange-coloured passports for 'unskilled' Indians who had limited educational qualifications and required emigration clearance when travelling to a group of 18 countries, predominantly in West Asia. This would differentiate them from 'other' Indians who would continue to be issued with the traditional navy blue passport. The idea was shelved almost immediately, following a backlash that such a plan would only create 'second class citizens'.¹⁴⁵ In Jiby J. Kattakayam's words:

I can already see the looks of disdain for the orange passport holders in a highly class/caste conscious society like ours ... A pristine Blue to breeze through the West and a dirty orange to crawl through West Asian immigration counters?¹⁴⁶

Such a scheme to colour-code Indian migrants merely reflects the Indian state's long-standing view of the international as a space for narrating Indianness—a task for which 'upper' caste and class Indians traversing the

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* Italics added.

¹⁴⁴ Mahmoud Keshavarz, *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility and Dissent* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ Kalathmika Natarajan, 'Caste, Class and the History of the Indian Passport', *South Asia @ LSE*, 28 March 2018. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/03/28/caste-class-and-the-history-of-the-indian-passport/>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

¹⁴⁶ Jiby J. Kattakayam, 'We Do Not Need the Orange Colour Passports', *Times of India*, 15 January 2018. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/jibber-jabber/we-do-not-need-the-orange-colour-passports-period/>, [accessed 1 June 2022].

hallowed geographies of the West were deemed best suited. In the introduction to his profoundly moving *Passport Photos*, Amitava Kumar describes his book as a ‘forged passport ... (an) act of fabrication against the language of government agencies’. In so doing, Kumar prompts us to read the passport in terms of the stories, emotions, and experiences it renders invisible.¹⁴⁷ Lost within the pages of the postcolonial Indian passport are the histories and afterlives of empire and indenture that shaped the Indian state’s very idea of ‘the international’. Simmering beneath the surface of the proposed orange passport are stories of ‘unsuitable’ ‘lower’ caste and class applicants who were denied passports for decades, and the experiences of ‘unskilled’ migrants who had to resort to forged passports in order to bypass the state’s rejection of their mobility. Indeed, the terminologies of ‘unskilled’, ‘pedlar class’, ‘unsuitable’ Indians carry with them the histories of the ‘coolie’ and make evident the intersections of caste and class in Indian diplomatic discourse.

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¹⁴⁷ Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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