

Original Article

A HISTORICAL STUDY ON MIGRATION FROM BUNDELKHAND DURING COLONIAL FAMINES

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ABSTRACT

When the rains failed in Bundelkhand, cultivators did not simply wait for relief; they moved. This paper examines migration as a central, though historiographically underexamined, dimension of the region's experience of colonial famine, distinguishing the short-distance, seasonal flight of villagers toward relief works and neighbouring towns from the longer, often permanent, streams that carried Bundelkhandi and wider United Provinces labour toward the Assam tea gardens, the mill towns of Bombay and Kanpur, and, through the machinery of indentured emigration, to sugar colonies as distant as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and British Guiana. Drawing on the Famine Commission reports, the 1897 provincial relief resolution, census migration tables, and the historiography of Indian indentured labour (Tinker, Northrup) and internal plantation migration, the paper argues that famine acted as a recruiting sergeant for colonial labour markets far beyond Bundelkhand itself, and that the region's demographic losses recorded in the 1901 and later censuses reflect not only mortality but also migration that in many cases became permanent. The paper also considers the social selectivity of migration—by caste, gender and household position—and the fate of those who returned, or did not, once the rains resumed. It closes by situating Bundelkhand's famine-era migration within the broader colonial political economy of labour circulation, in which distress in one province regularly became labour supply for another.

Keywords: Bundelkhand, Famine Migration, Indentured Labour, Assam Tea Gardens, Distress Migration, United Provinces, Colonial Labour Markets, Diaspora, Census Demography

INTRODUCTION

Famine historiography has, understandably, concentrated on relief administration, mortality and revenue policy. Migration—the movement of people away from a stricken tract, whether for a season or for good—has often figured only as a secondary indicator, a line in a district gazetteer noting that the population had fallen by more than mortality alone could explain. Yet for the people of Bundelkhand living through the droughts of the late nineteenth century, migration was frequently the first and most consequential decision a famine forced upon them: whether to walk to the nearest relief work, to a neighbouring town, to a railway construction camp, or—following the recruiting agent who had appeared in the village with promises of work, wages and, eventually, a ship—to a plantation colony on the far side of an ocean whose location the migrant could rarely have named.

This paper treats migration as a subject in its own right, distinct from but connected to the famine and revenue history examined elsewhere. It asks where Bundelkhandi migrants went, who among them was most likely to leave, what forces—colonial and otherwise—drew them toward particular destinations, and what became of the villages they left behind and the diaspora

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communities some of them helped to found. Bundelkhand's own demographic record supplies a starting clue: the ten per cent population decline recorded for Jhansi district between the 1891 and 1901 censuses, and the still steeper thirteen per cent fall recorded for the neighbouring Bundelkhand Agency, cannot be explained by famine mortality alone once the scale of contemporary out-migration from the wider United Provinces is taken into account. Some of that missing population had died; a significant, if harder to quantify, portion had simply left.

The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, of which British Bundelkhand formed a part, were in this period one of the principal reservoirs of migrant and indentured labour for the British Empire's expanding plantation and industrial economy. This was not a coincidence of geography but a structural feature of empire: provinces prone to famine and burdened by heavy, inflexible revenue demand were, almost by design, provinces that produced a mobile, desperate labour supply, and colonial labour recruiters—whether working for Assam's tea gardens, Bombay's cotton mills, or the emigration depots that fed the indenture ships bound for Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and British Guiana—knew exactly where to look. Bundelkhand's famine years were, from this vantage point, also recruiting seasons.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To examine migration as a distinct dimension of Bundelkhand's experience of colonial famine, alongside but analytically separate from mortality and relief administration.
- 2) To distinguish the different forms migration took: short-distance flight to relief works and neighbouring towns, seasonal labour migration, and longer-distance or permanent emigration.
- 3) To trace the recruitment of Bundelkhandi and wider United Provinces labour for the Assam tea gardens during and after the famines of the late nineteenth century.
- 4) To examine internal migration toward industrial and urban centres, particularly the cotton mills of Bombay and the industrial town of Kanpur, as a famine-era and post-famine phenomenon.
- 5) To reconstruct the mechanics and scale of indentured emigration from the United Provinces to colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and British Guiana, and to assess the extent to which Bundelkhand contributed to this stream.
- 6) To assess the social selectivity of migration, including its caste, gender and household dimensions.
- 7) To interpret census and gazetteer demographic data (notably the 1891–1901 population decline) in light of both mortality and migration.
- 8) To examine the fate of migrants who returned to Bundelkhand once conditions improved, and of those who did not.
- 9) To situate Bundelkhand's famine-era migration within the broader colonial political economy of labour circulation across the British Empire.
- 10) To draw on the historiography of Indian indentured labour and internal plantation migration to contextualise the Bundelkhand case within wider patterns of colonial labour recruitment.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study concentrates on the period of Bundelkhand's major famines—1868–70, 1896–97 and 1899–1900—and the years immediately following each, when migration streams set in motion by distress typically peaked before gradually subsiding. Geographically its core concern is the four British districts of Bundelkhand, though because indentured emigration and plantation-labour recruitment operated at the level of the United Provinces as a whole, much of the surviving quantitative evidence necessarily speaks to the province rather than to Bundelkhand alone.

This points to the study's principal limitation: migration statistics broken down to the level of individual Bundelkhand districts are considerably scarcer than province-level emigration and plantation-recruitment figures, and where district-specific data could not be verified, this is noted rather than inferred from provincial averages. A further limitation is that the colonial sources available—recruitment reports, emigration agency records, census migration tables—were compiled by an administration and by labour-recruiting interests with their own reasons to present recruitment in a favourable light, so that the migrant's own experience of the decision to leave, the journey, and life at the destination survives mainly through later oral history, diaspora memory and the retrospective scholarship on indentured communities rather than through contemporary first-person testimony from Bundelkhand itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INDIAN INDENTURED AND PLANTATION LABOUR

The foundational study of Indian indentured emigration remains [Tinker \(1974\)](#), which established the interpretive frame within which most subsequent scholarship has worked: that indenture, introduced in the wake of the abolition of slavery to supply labour

to Britain's sugar colonies, reproduced many of slavery's coercive features even as it was legally a contractual arrangement. Northrup (1995) offers a more comparative and, in places, less unremittingly bleak account, situating Indian indenture alongside other systems of contract labour migration across the imperial world and examining the motivations migrants themselves may have had for accepting recruitment, without thereby minimising the coercion and deception that accompanied much recruitment practice.

For the internal, non-indentured dimension of colonial labour migration, the scholarship on Assam's tea gardens is particularly instructive for the Bundelkhand case, since the United Provinces supplied a substantial and rising share of Assam's plantation labour force across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Census-derived migration tables compiled in this literature show labour drawn to Assam from Bengal and Bihar, the Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas tracts, the Central Provinces, Madras and the United Provinces, with the United Provinces contingent recorded in the tens of thousands and rising across the 1901–1931 censuses, recruited, like other streams, through sardars and agents operating in conditions of chronic rural distress.

REGIONAL AND PROVINCIAL FAMINE-MIGRATION STUDIES

The wider historiography of Indian famine has periodically noted forced and distress migration as a feature of nineteenth-century famines, including instances in which colonial authorities in Bombay and Madras moved to restrict the movement of famine-stricken villagers into cities, even while other departments and private employers were simultaneously recruiting labour from famine-affected tracts for railway works, plantations and mills elsewhere—an apparent contradiction that reflects less a coherent policy than a set of separate colonial interests operating on the same distressed population for different ends. Recent scholarship on the moral economy of relief-works labourers during the 1896–97 and 1899–1900 famines has further illuminated how famine labourers negotiated, resisted and moved between different forms of state and private employment, providing a valuable comparative frame for interpreting Bundelkhand's own migration patterns even where Bundelkhand-specific case material remains thin.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Bundelkhand's contribution to these wider migration streams has not been the subject of sustained, region-specific historical study. The indenture and Assam-migration literature treats the United Provinces largely as an undifferentiated recruiting ground, without disaggregating Bundelkhand's particular contribution or examining how the region's specific famine chronology may have shaped the timing of its migration peaks. This paper is offered as a step toward filling that gap, while candidly acknowledging that fully disaggregated Bundelkhand-level migration statistics remain to be recovered from district-level archival sources not fully accessible for this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical-analytical method, drawing on the 1897 provincial relief resolution and District Gazetteers for evidence of famine-era population movement within and out of Bundelkhand; published census-derived migration tables for Assam's tea-garden labour force and for indentured emigration from Indian ports, chiefly Calcutta; and the secondary historiography of indentured labour (Tinker, Northrup) and internal plantation migration. Because comprehensive district-level migration statistics specific to Bundelkhand could not be fully assembled from the sources available for this study, the analysis proceeds by combining what direct evidence exists for the region—chiefly demographic and anecdotal material in the gazetteers and relief resolution—with the wider United Provinces-level pattern into which Bundelkhand's experience is understood to fit, flagging clearly where an inference rests on the provincial rather than the district record.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Migration was not a colonial invention in Bundelkhand any more than famine was; a region so exposed to drought had long known seasonal and occasional movement of population in search of work, water and food, and local memory associated the great historic famines, such as the Chalisa of 1783–84, with a scale of depopulation and flight that went well beyond ordinary mortality. What colonial rule changed was less the fact of migration than its direction, its organisation, and its eventual reach: the same nineteenth-century transport and communications revolution—railways above all—that colonial administrators credited with making famine relief possible also made it possible, for the first time, for a village in Bundelkhand or its neighbouring United Provinces districts to lose members not merely to a nearby town but to a tea garden a thousand miles away in Assam, a cotton mill in Bombay, or a ship's hold bound for a colony on another continent.

The infrastructure of this new, colonially organised migration had several distinct, sometimes overlapping, strands. The oldest was indentured emigration proper, which began with the first shipments of Indian labour to Mauritius in 1834 and expanded, through the following decades, to British Guiana, Trinidad, Fiji (from 1879) and other colonies, recruited through licensed agents and depots that drew, over time, increasingly on the United Provinces alongside Bihar. A second strand was internal, non-indentured but still organisationally coercive plantation labour migration, epitomised by the sardari recruitment networks that funnelled labour

toward the Assam tea gardens. A third was migration toward India's own emerging industrial centres—Bombay's cotton mills, and closer to Bundelkhand itself, the growing industrial and cantonment town of Kanpur—driven less by organised recruiting agents than by the pull of wage labour opportunities that appeared, to a famine-stricken cultivator, considerably more reliable than another season on parched land. All three strands intensified in the years immediately following Bundelkhand's major famines, when rural indebtedness, land loss and the sheer disruption of agricultural routine left many households with diminished reason to stay.

MIGRATION STREAMS FROM FAMINE-ERA BUNDELKHAND

SHORT-DISTANCE AND SEASONAL MIGRATION: RELIEF WORKS AND NEIGHBOURING TOWNS

The most immediate and least remarked form of famine-era migration was short-distance: villagers walking to the nearest sanctioned relief work, to a district town, or to a neighbouring, less severely affected tract in search of wage labour or charitable relief. The 1897 relief resolution's own account of railway construction then in progress in several North-Western Provinces and Oudh districts records that famine-stricken labourers were, in some places, drawn away from state relief works toward railway earthwork, and separately notes an unusually large emigration of professional labourers toward the Assam-Bengal Railway construction from famine-affected districts well before formal relief works had even opened—evidence that private and infrastructural labour markets could pull migrants out of a stricken tract faster and further than the state's own relief apparatus responded to them. Bundelkhand, lying as it did along an axis of expanding railway construction connecting the United Provinces to central India, is likely to have experienced comparable pulls, even where district-specific documentation is thinner than for the eastern United Provinces districts named explicitly in the 1897 resolution.

THE ASSAM TEA GARDENS: A STRUCTURAL DESTINATION FOR UNITED PROVINCES LABOUR

Assam's tea plantations represented one of colonial India's largest single destinations for organised internal labour migration, and the United Provinces supplied a consistently significant, and over time growing, share of that labour force. Census-derived tabulations of Assam's immigrant tea-garden labour by province of origin show the United Provinces contingent recorded at over one hundred thousand by the early twentieth century and rising across successive censuses between 1901 and 1931, alongside larger contingents from Bengal, Bihar, Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas, and smaller but rising numbers from the Central Provinces and Madras. Recruitment operated through sardars—labourers or former labourers who returned to their home districts to recruit further workers, typically on a commission basis—and through licensed recruiting agents, both of whom were drawn, by simple economic logic, toward districts where distress made recruitment easiest: precisely the condition that famine years in Bundelkhand and neighbouring Bundelkhand-adjacent tracts of the United Provinces reliably produced. Once recruited, migrants faced a mortality-heavy journey and often brutal plantation conditions, with historical accounts of the earlier Assam recruitment era recording death rates among newly arrived labourers that were severe even by the standards of nineteenth-century labour migration; workers were frequently unable to return home or even to communicate freely with their families once indentured to a garden.

INDENTURED EMIGRATION OVERSEAS: BUNDELKHAND WITHIN THE GIRMITIYA STREAM

The most geographically extreme form of famine-era migration carried labourers, via the recruitment depots of Calcutta, across the ocean to sugar colonies under British, French and Dutch control. Beginning with the first shipments to Mauritius in 1834, and expanding after the 1830s to British Guiana, Trinidad, and from 1879 to Fiji, this system of indentured emigration—known among the migrants themselves, in a corruption of the English word "agreement," as *girmit*—had by the time it was finally wound up in 1917 carried over a million Indian labourers overseas: more than 450,000 to Mauritius, roughly 239,000 to British Guiana, some 144,000 to Trinidad, and around 61,000 to Fiji, alongside smaller streams to Natal, Réunion, Suriname and other territories. The regional composition of this migrant stream shifted over time: in the earliest decades of indenture, from the 1830s to the 1860s, recruits were drawn predominantly from Bihar, but from the 1870s onward recruitment shifted markedly westward to draw increasingly on the United Provinces, a shift reflected clearly in the demographic composition of later-recruited colonies such as Fiji.

This chronological shift in the geography of recruitment is significant for Bundelkhand's history, because it places the peak years of United Provinces-sourced indentured emigration squarely within the same decades as the region's worst famines. While comprehensive district-level figures specifically isolating Bundelkhand's contribution to this stream could not be verified for this study, the coincidence of timing—recruitment agents drawing ever more heavily on the United Provinces from the 1870s onward, precisely as Bundelkhand endured the famines of 1868–70, 1896–97 and 1899–1900—makes it highly probable that Bundelkhandi cultivators and labourers, alongside their neighbours elsewhere in the province, were swept into this current, whether directly recruited from Bundelkhand villages or absorbed into it after first migrating to Calcutta or another emigration depot in search of any employment at all. Indentured emigration depots and their agents, as the wider historiography makes clear, were notorious for recruiting through deception as much as through open economic appeal, promising migrants wealth and a five-year contract they frequently could not, in practice, escape on the terms described to them.

MIGRATION TO INDUSTRIAL AND URBAN CENTRES: KANPUR AND BOMBAY

A less dramatic but demographically significant destination for Bundelkhandi and wider United Provinces migrants was India's own expanding industrial economy, above all the cotton-mill towns of Bombay and the nearer, rapidly industrialising cantonment and manufacturing centre of Kanpur. Unlike Assam recruitment or overseas indenture, this stream was generally not organised through formal recruiting agents but drawn by the comparatively steady, if harsh, wage labour that mill and workshop employment offered relative to an agriculture repeatedly disrupted by drought and revenue pressure. Railway construction itself, expanding rapidly through this period and connecting Bundelkhand more closely to these urban centres than it had ever been before, both displaced agricultural labour in the short term when it competed with relief works for hands, and, in the longer term, provided the very transport infrastructure that made migration to Kanpur or Bombay a physically and economically feasible option for households whose land could no longer reliably support them.

COMPARATIVE TABLES

Table 1

Table 1 Principal Migration Streams from Famine-Era Bundelkhand and the Wider United Provinces				
Stream	Destination	Organisation	Approximate Scale / Character	Typical Distance and Duration
Relief-work and local flight	District towns; neighbouring less-affected tracts; railway earthworks	Informal; driven by individual/household decision	Large in absolute terms but poorly quantified at district level	Short-distance; often seasonal or temporary
Assam tea-garden recruitment	Assam (Brahmaputra and Surma valleys)	Sardari and licensed-agent recruitment	United Provinces contingent over 100,000 by early 20th century, rising through 1901–1931 censuses	Long-distance; typically multi-year or permanent
Overseas indentured emigration	Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Fiji, and other colonies	Licensed emigration agents and depots (chiefly Calcutta)	Over 1 million Indians emigrated 1834–1917 empire-wide; United Provinces share rising sharply from the 1870s	Very long-distance (overseas); five-year indenture, often permanent settlement
Industrial/urban migration	Bombay cotton mills; Kanpur industrial centre	Largely unorganised; wage-pull rather than agent-driven	Significant but not comprehensively quantified for Bundelkhand specifically	Medium-distance; ranged from seasonal to permanent

Table 2

Table 2 Indentured Emigration to Major Destination Colonies (approximate totals, 1834–1917)		
Destination	Approximate Total Indian Indentured Migrants	Period
Mauritius	~453,000	1834–1916
British Guiana	~239,000	1838–1916
Trinidad	~144,000	1845–1916
Fiji	~61,000	1879–1916
Natal	~152,000	19th–early 20th century
Other colonies (Réunion, Suriname, Jamaica, Grenada, St. Lucia, etc.)	Tens of thousands each	19th–early 20th century

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Several conclusions follow from this reconstruction. First, migration in famine-era Bundelkhand operated at multiple, distinct scales simultaneously: a household might send one member to a nearby relief work while another travelled to Kanpur, and a third, drawn by an agent's promises or simple destitution, ended up on a ship bound for a colony neither he nor his family would ever have been able to locate on a map. These were not alternative responses to the same crisis so much as a graduated set of options whose accessibility depended on distance, information, capital for the journey, and the presence or absence of a recruiting agent in or near the village at the critical moment.

Second, colonial labour markets and colonial famine administration operated, at times, at cross purposes without ever being formally reconciled. The state's famine relief machinery was designed to keep the population within reach of its own works and villages; simultaneously, colonial-era labour recruiters for Assam, for Bombay's mills, and for the indenture ships were actively drawing labour away from precisely the same distressed tracts, sometimes in direct competition with state relief works for the same hands. This was less a coordinated colonial strategy than the coincidental convergence of separate colonial and private interests upon the same vulnerable population, but its cumulative effect was to make famine years into de facto recruiting seasons for labour markets that had nothing to do with famine relief as such.

Third, the timing of the shift in indentured emigration's regional sourcing—from a predominantly Bihar-based recruitment pattern before the 1870s to an increasingly United Provinces-based one from the 1870s onward—coincides suggestively with Bundelkhand's own famine chronology, making it likely, though not fully verifiable at the district level from the sources available here, that the region's famine years fed directly into this wider emigration stream, whether through direct village-level recruitment or through the secondary channel of famine refugees converging on Calcutta and falling into the reach of emigration agents there.

Fourth, migration was not evenly distributed across Bundelkhandi rural society. Longer-distance and overseas migration in particular required either the desperation of complete destitution—precisely the state that made deceptive recruiting easiest—or, conversely, a degree of individual mobility and risk tolerance more available to unmarried men and to households with fewer immediate ties holding them to the village than to women, the elderly, and heads of larger joint households. The wider indenture historiography's attention to gender imbalance among migrants, and to the disruption of family structure that indenture often entailed, is directly relevant here even where Bundelkhand-specific gender breakdowns could not be recovered for this study.

Fifth, the demographic consequences of this migration were durable rather than transient for many households and, cumulatively, for the region. Migrants to Assam's tea gardens frequently could not, in practice, return; indentured emigrants overseas rarely did, whether by the terms of an extended or renewed contract, by the accumulation of a new life and, in time, a new community at the destination, or simply by the cost and difficulty of the return passage. Bundelkhand's population figures for 1901 and beyond must accordingly be read as reflecting not only excess famine mortality but also a real and substantially permanent loss of population to migration—a dimension of the demographic record that the existing historiography of Bundelkhand's famines, with its focus on relief administration and mortality, has not fully integrated.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR REGIONAL AND DIASPORA HISTORY

This migration history carries a significance that extends well beyond Bundelkhand's own borders. Communities descended from nineteenth-century indentured migrants in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana and elsewhere today number in the millions, and while the specifically Bundelkhandi contribution to this diaspora cannot be precisely quantified from the sources available here, the region's repeated famines during exactly the decades when United Provinces recruitment for these colonies intensified make it a plausible, if underdocumented, ancestral source for at least some of these communities. Recovering this connection—through further archival work on emigration agency records and through engagement with diaspora genealogical and oral-history projects—would enrich both Bundelkhand's own regional history and the diaspora communities' understanding of their ancestral origins.

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Several directions for further research would substantially strengthen this account. Systematic examination of the Calcutta emigration agency registers and depot records, where they survive, could establish more precisely what proportion of United Provinces indentured migrants in the relevant decades in fact originated in Bundelkhand's districts rather than elsewhere in the province. District-level census migration tables for Banda, Hamirpur, Jalaun and Jhansi, if they can be located and compiled for the 1881–1911 period, would allow a much firmer disaggregation of Bundelkhand's contribution to the Assam, Bombay and overseas streams discussed here. Oral history and genealogical collaboration with diaspora communities in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana might recover family traditions of Bundelkhandi or wider United Provinces origin that documentary sources alone cannot supply. Finally, comparative work situating Bundelkhand's migration experience alongside that of other well-studied famine-migration source regions, such as eastern United Provinces districts and Bihar, would help establish how far Bundelkhand's pattern was typical of the wider province and how far its own particular famine chronology gave it a distinctive migration rhythm.

CONCLUSION

Migration was, for many Bundelkhandi households facing the droughts of the late nineteenth century, as decisive a response to famine as any relief work the colonial state organised, and in important respects a more consequential one, since it reshaped not only individual survival but the region's demography and, for some families, its geography permanently. The same colonial infrastructure and administrative order that produced Bundelkhand's exposure to famine also produced the railways, the recruiting networks, and the emigration depots that carried its people toward Assam's tea gardens, Bombay's mills, Kanpur's workshops, and sugar colonies on the far side of the world. Reading these two histories together—famine as cause and colonial labour markets as consequence—reveals a dimension of Bundelkhand's colonial experience that a focus on relief administration and revenue policy alone cannot capture: the story of a region whose recurring distress became, for the wider empire's plantation and industrial economy, a recurring and reliable supply of labour.

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