

Franchise expansion and electoral mobilization: How caste and migration shaped India's colonial politics

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Introduction

The Slavery Abolition Act 1833 abolished slavery in the British Empire. The termination of slavery created labour shortages in colonial plantations. This coupled with an increasing demand for cheap sugar to meet the demand from industrial centers of Western Europe and the United States, put additional pressures to look for a viable source of labour to facilitate profitable production. The British planters wished to adopt a method similar to the ones used in South America, where Chinese labour was obtained from the Portuguese settlement of Macao. Thus, beginning with the “Great Experiment” in Mauritius, Indian labour was made to emigrate as indentured labour to work on sugar plantations in the various British colonies (Carter, 1993). Mauritius, British Guyana, Natal, Trinidad, and Fiji stand out as primary destinations for these indentured migrants. Starting from the late 1830s till 1912, over a million Indians emigrated abroad under the indentured contracts.

What were the political repercussions at the origin of this shock to mobility? Back in 1960, Professor Franklin Scott, in his address at the XIth International Congress of Historical Sciences, asked if and how social change and mobility of men are related. Since then, numerous studies have looked at economic and political implications of migration on the sending places – Karadja and Prawitz (2019), Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport (2008), and Mariani (2007). These studies are, however, either cross-country analyses or set in the western world having a homogenous population with regards to social hierarchy and ranking of individuals based on their birth. We study these questions in a developing country context with a ranked ethnic system – 20th century colonial India.

Studying political consequences of international migration also helps us in understanding party system emergence in post-independence India. In addition, our focus on ethnic identity stems from the importance of ethnicity in politics (Horowitz, 1985; Bates, 1974).

We focus our attention to indentured migration to the South African colony of Natal, which received over 150,000 indentured migrants from India between 1860 and 1912. The reason we restrict ourselves to Natal is we have detailed, individual level data on the migrants including the caste and place of origin. This provides us with information which helps us to uncover if and how indentured migration from colonial India affected politics in the sending districts.

Background

The very first limited franchise elections were held in the Indian subcontinent in November 1920 following The Government of India Act 1919. It was passed with an aim to expand participation of Indians in the government of India. This resulted in a significant devolution of powers and responsibilities to the provincial councils including control over the development and administration of education, health, law and order, and more significantly allowed the provinces control over receipts from land revenue, liquor taxes, judicial stamps and registration fees.

A man over the age of 21 who was a subject of British India or a Native State of India, who was of sound mind and who met the tax qualifications in the province was eligible to vote. Table

1 gives a breakdown of proportions of the provincial populations eligible to vote in the first elections.

Table 1: Eligible electors in each province in the 1920 elections.

Province	Population	Urban	Rural	Total Electors	Percentage
Madras	39,827,885	32,000	510,000	542,000	1.4
Bombay	19,580,312	149,000	504,000	653,000	3.3
Bengal	45,063,697	106,000	1,122,000	1,228,000	2.7
United Provinces	47,182,044	64,500	1,419,000	1,483,500	3.1
Punjab	19,565,013	77,000	160,000	237,000	1.2
Bihar and Orissa	32,446,461	58,500	517,500	576,000	1.8
Central Provinces	12,269,638	39,500	120,000	159,500	1.3
Assam	6000000	.	.	300000	5

Source: Southborough Franchise Committee Report 1919

Data

We use a wide range of data sources to study the political effects of indentured migration across districts of colonial India. We collected and digitized data on election outcomes for the first ever elections held in colonial India in November 1920.¹ These reports contain constituency level information on the nature and type of constituency, number of registered voters, number of votes cast, number of votes to the winning candidate, number of votes to the first unsuccessful candidate, and the name of the winning candidate. These help us to compute our three main outcome variables – turnout (percentage of eligible voters who voted); margin of victory (number of votes the winning candidate received over the first unsuccessful candidate as a share of total votes polled); and the probability that there was only one candidate who stood for elections and the election was uncontested.

We also digitized data from the ship registers containing individual level information on indentured migrants. These registers contain information on the name, place of origin, caste, sub-caste, gender, age of the migrant among other things. These help us to construct district level outflows of indentured migrants, as well as caste distribution of the migrants at the district level.

To construct district-level caste distribution, we first use the 1921 Census of India to compile district populations of the sub-caste groups. However, since each province had a different social hierarchy of these sub-castes, we meticulously code each and every sub-caste into five major categories (advanced, intermediate, backward, depressed, and tribe) based on their descriptions as provided in the multi-volume compilations of the sub-castes for each province.²

¹ This data was digitized from the provincial electoral returns found in the Imperial Archives in the British Library and were catalogued as “Returns showing the results of Elections in India”.

² For Assam, *The People of India* by Sir Herbert Risley (1908). For Bengal, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* by Sir Herbert Risley (1892). For Bihar and United Provinces, *The Tribes and Castes of North-Western Provinces and Oudh* by W. Crooke (1896). For Bombay, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay* by R. E. Enthoven (1922). For Central Provinces, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* by R. V. Russell (1916). For Madras, *Castes and Tribes of South India* by Edgar Thurston (1909). For Punjab, *The Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-Western Frontier Province* by H. A. Rose (1914).

Results

We estimate the following regression model:

$$y_{dp} = \alpha + \beta Emigration_{dp} \times Fragmentation_{dp} + X'_{dp} \beta_x + \epsilon_{dp} [1]$$

where y_{dp} is a political outcome in district d in province p ; $Emigration_{dp}$ is the log of total emigration as a share of district population; $Fragmentation_{dp}$ measures the caste diversity in the district's population and is computed as 1- Herfindahl of caste implying a higher number means more caste diversity; and X'_{dp} is a vector of district geographical characteristics.

Table 2: Indentured migration and electoral competition

	Turnout		Victory Margin		Uncontested Seat	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Log(Share of Emigrants)	1.15*	0.46	-2.45*	-1.05	-0.03*	-0.01
	(0.69)	(0.67)	(1.31)	(1.21)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Ethnic Fragmentation		1.59*		-7.91***		-0.08***
- Caste \times Log(Share of Emigrants)		(0.80)		(1.65)		(0.02)
Observations	217	217	209	209	228	228
Mean Dep. Var.	24.15	24.15	24.22	24.22	0.17	0.17
District Level Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.15	0.21	0.16	0.24	0.07	0.14

Notes: Standard errors are clustered at the district level (in parentheses). * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dependent variable in columns (1) and (2) is turnout of voters as a share of total eligible voters. The dependent variable in columns (3) and (4) is margin of victory between the winner and the first unsuccessful candidate as a share of total votes cast. The dependent variable in columns (5) and (6) is the probability that the seat was uncontested, and candidate ran unopposed. The inequality index is a standardized value of 1-Herfindahl index of caste in the district implying a higher value means more diverse district. District level controls include caste diversity, soil type, latitude, altitude, and whether the district is coastal or nor.

Table 2 shows the results obtained from model [1]. Our results show that districts that experienced higher emigration under the indentures to Natal exhibit significantly more competitive elections in 1920. Columns (1), (3), and (5) respectively show that districts with a higher share of indentured migration saw a higher turnout in the 1920 elections, had tighter race as shown by a significantly lower margin of victory between the winner and the first unsuccessful candidate, and were less likely to be uncontested. In addition to this, the effect of indentured migration on political competition was concentrated in districts that were more diverse in terms of caste composition of their population. Columns (2), (4), and (6) show the results for the interaction of log share of indentured migrants and Herfindahl of caste distribution in the district.

Using our caste categorization of sub-castes and caste information of the migrants, we construct a variable called “shock to caste group”. This “shock” variable measures how over- or under-represented a caste group was in the migrant population relative to its share in the district population. A value of greater than one for a caste group implies over-representation of the corresponding caste group in the migrant population while a value of under one signifies under-

representation. Since the franchise expansion was for male individuals who fulfilled certain tax obligations, it was the warrior and the trader castes (“intermediate” castes according to our categorization) who would have benefitted the most in terms of gaining the right to vote. The lower castes could not satisfy the eligibility criteria while the advanced castes already had some say in the government. Therefore, if any caste group who would have benefitted from an increased political competition would have been the intermediate caste group. And this is exactly what we find in table 3.

Table 3: Migration shock and electoral competition

	Turnout	Victory Margin	Uncontested Seat
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Migration shock to advanced	0.12 (1.29)	-3.03 (2.37)	-0.02 (0.03)
Migration shock to intermediate	7.86*** (2.10)	-7.48** (2.90)	-0.08** (0.03)
Migration shock to backward	0.95 (1.57)	-0.59 (3.53)	-0.02 (0.04)
Ethnic Fragmentation - Caste	3.90 (5.26)	-11.82 (10.29)	-0.09 (0.12)
Log(Share of Emigrants)	1.87** (0.72)	-3.30* (1.70)	-0.03 (0.02)
Observations	187	177	187
Mean Dep. Var.	24.15	24.22	0.17
District Level Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.21	0.33	0.22

Notes: Standard errors are clustered at the district level (in parentheses). * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dependent variable in column (1) is turnout of voters as a share of total eligible voters. The dependent variable in column (2) is margin of victory between the winner and the first unsuccessful candidate as a share of total votes cast. The dependent variable in column (3) is the probability that the seat was uncontested, and candidate ran unopposed. The inequality index is a standardized value of 1-Herfindahl index of caste in the district implying a higher value means more diverse district. District level controls include caste diversity, soil type, latitude, altitude, and whether the district is coastal or nor.

A migration shock to only the intermediate caste group is associated with a higher electoral competition. Migration of other caste groups does not have any effect on politics of the district.

Mechanisms

Migration can affect politics via multiple channels. Migration can lead to a reduced supply of labour of the emigrating group or it can provide an outside option thereby increasing the bargaining power of those that remain (Kapur and McHale, 2005; Hovde, 1934). Migration can also lead to a greater diffusion of education, financial wealth, different experiences and changed expectations from returning migrants leading to the origin population becoming more politically active (Kapur and McHale, 2005). Migration can also provide financial resources via remittance channel providing the local population with a resource base to be able to politically challenge the incumbents.

Migration affecting electoral politics via the labour market channel seems unlikely since indentured migration formed a very small fraction of the local population, usually less than one percent. This number is not significant enough to be able to either create labour supply shortages or raise outside option.

However, both the financial and social remittance channels seem plausible. Roopnarine (2012), in his study of indentured migration to British Guyana, has shown that return migrants brought back significant financial savings as well as sent remittances to their families. In addition, it has been argued by many that as soon as the voyage began, the caste system began to break down. Migrants realized that caste was not a fixed social structure, that it was an obstacle to their freedom and growth, and whenever opportunities arose, they attempted to redefine the caste structure (Hoefte, 1998).

Using data on education expenditure by district boards for the years 1901, 1911, and 1921 we run the following specification:

$$\Delta Educ. Expenditure_{(t,t-1),d,p} = \alpha + \beta Return_{dp} \times Fragmentation_{dp} + X'_{dp} \beta_x + \epsilon_{dp} [2]$$

where the outcome variable is change in per capita expenditure on education by the district board between year t and $t - 1$ in district d in province p ; $Return_{dp}$ is the log of total returns as a share of district population; $Fragmentation_{dp}$ measures the caste diversity in the district's population and is computed as 1- Herfindahl of caste implying a higher number means more caste diversity; and X'_{dp} is a vector of district geographical characteristics. Table 4 shows the results of specification [2].

Table 4: Return migration and education expenditure

	Change in per capita education expd.		
	1911-1901	1921-1911	1921-1901
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Ethnic Fragmentation	0.01***	0.02*	0.02*
- Caste \times Log(Share of Return Migrants)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Ethnic Fragmentation	0.03*	0.11	0.12*
- Caste	(0.02)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Log(Share of Return Migrants)	0.00	-0.00	-0.01*
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Observations	158	58	58
Mean Per Capita Educ. Expd.	0.03	0.08	0.10
District Level Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.52	0.03	0.04

Notes: Standard errors are clustered at the district level (in parentheses). * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. The dependent variable is the change in per capita expenditure on education between 1911 and 1901 (column (1)), between 1921 and 1911 (column (2)), and between 1921 and 1901 (column (3)). The inequality index is a standardized value of 1-Herfindahl index of caste in the district implying a higher value means more diverse district. District level controls include soil type, latitude, altitude, and whether the district is coastal or nor.

We see that while districts that received a higher share of return migrants did not see a rise in per capita expenditure on education, but return migration seemed to have raised education expenditure in districts that are ethnically more diverse. This seems reasonable. Change in political behavior due to changed expectations will only be realized when there is availability of a social class that can challenge the incumbent, which is the case only in more diverse districts.

Conclusion

During the indentured migration from colonial India to the various other British colonies, over 150,000 Indians left for the colony of Natal. This paper uses data from the period 1860-1912 to shed light on the question whether international emigration can lead to political change in the sending country. Our results indicate that it indeed may be the case. Districts that experienced a higher share of outmigration are also the ones that witnessed a higher political competition in the first elections held in colonial India. We show that higher emigration rates are associated with higher voter turnout, tighter elections, and low probability that the election was run unopposed.

Our results seem to suggest that financial remittances as well as higher education expenditure by the district boards in districts receiving higher returnees could be the channel of change.

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