

Alexander Persaud (Richmond)

'The sun never sets on the British Post Office: Trinidad-India remittances in the 1880s'

What migrants sent remittances back home during the first era of globalization? How much? One group, Indian indentured servants in colonies around the world, remitted hundreds of thousands of pounds back to India during the 19th century. I construct and analyze a unique data set of the census of Trinidad's remittances during the mid-1880s, which were sent via the postal system in conjunction with the immigration authorities. This data set contains transaction-level data on roughly 6,000 separate remittances valued at over £10,000. First, I find that remittances were biased in favor of upper castes, with double the proportion of upper castes among recipients in India as were present in indentured servants in Trinidad. For example, Brahmans received 13% of the remittances but were just about 7% of the indentured servant population. Lower castes, on the other hand, sent disproportionately few remittances. Second, the distribution of remittance amounts show that upper castes also sent larger remittances--on average, roughly a years' worth of wages in north India--and had greater support across the entire distribution. Remittance amounts were lower-censored by minimum remittance requirements, and lower-caste remittances show bunching at this threshold. Third, geographically, several districts stand out, but the effects appear driven by upper castes. Fourth, although the sample is self-selected, the data provide evidence that upper-caste ex-indentured-laborers may have been more likely to move out of manual labor into more lucrative jobs in commerce and industry.

These results show the importance of social capital, intercontinental ties between upper castes, and potentially elite capture of public goods, or at least elite utilization of public goods. They also reinforce research in other colonies with large indentured populations that show the sharp split between those who returned to India (upper castes) and those who stayed in the recipient colonies (lower castes). This paper may be the first scholarship using microdata on remittances in the first wave of globalization. This paper also contributes to ongoing work about land settlement and breaks in the caste system outside of India.