The Focus

Human trafficking in Asia before 1900: a preliminary census

The often egregious exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf and East Asia is frequently cited as evidence that 27–32 million mostly Asian men, women, and children remain de facto slaves in the early twenty-first century. That these workers are characterized as ‘slaves’ despite the abolition of slavery worldwide comes as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million

importing slaves into Asia

At the heart of any such exercise must be an acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity of peoples trafficked within and beyond Asia and these trades’ complexity and multi-directionality. The presence of military slaves known as Habshis (‘Ethiopians’) in India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and the existence of Siddi communities of eastern African ancestry in modern India and Pakistan underscores that any history of human trafficking must include the African slaves imported into Asia over the centuries. Current estimates suggest that Africans toward the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. The Portuguese shipped slaves from the Red Sea and East African coasts to the Middle East and South Asia between 800-1700, and 2,000-4,000 a year during the eighteenth century. A paucity of data on the number of Africans in India at any given time makes it impossible to determine how many of these 2.0-3.1 million exports reached South Asia, the Middle East, and South America during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.7 Missing from this picture is a comprehensive sense of the volume of human trafficking in Asia. Assessing the scale of this activity is not an easy task. The paucity of archival materials on slavery and slavery in Asia compared to what exists for the Atlantic world is a major impediment to reconstructing these trades, all the more so when these sources are widely scattered, often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and require a command of multiple European and Asian languages. Our lack of knowledge also reflects many Asian historians’ reluctance to acknowledge slavery’s existence in their own countries, much less examine local records for information about slaving and slavery in the locale under consideration. A review of recently published scholarship demonstrates, however, that these evidentiary hurdles are not insurmountable, and that it now is possible to outline a preliminary census of transnational human trafficking in a part of the globe that encompasses four major regions: Central Asia (including modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (Siem), Vietnam); and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea).

Importing slaves into Asia

The often egregious exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf and East Asia is frequently cited as evidence that 27–32 million mostly Asian men, women, and children remain de facto slaves in the early twenty-first century. That these workers are characterized as ‘slaves’ despite the abolition of slavery worldwide comes as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million

Human trafficking in Asia before 1900: a preliminary census

importing slaves into Asia

At the heart of any such exercise must be an acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity of peoples trafficked within and beyond Asia and these trades’ complexity and multi-directionality. The presence of military slaves known as Habshis (‘Ethiopians’) in India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and the existence of Siddi communities of eastern African ancestry in modern India and Pakistan underscores that any history of human trafficking must include the African slaves imported into Asia over the centuries. Current estimates suggest that Africans toward the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. The Portuguese shipped slaves from the Red Sea and East African coasts to the Middle East and South Asia between 800-1700, and 2,000-4,000 a year during the eighteenth century. A paucity of data on the number of Africans in India at any given time makes it impossible to determine how many of these 2.0-3.1 million exports reached South Asia, the Middle East, and South America during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.7 Missing from this picture is a comprehensive sense of the volume of human trafficking in Asia. Assessing the scale of this activity is not an easy task. The paucity of archival materials on slavery and slavery in Asia compared to what exists for the Atlantic world is a major impediment to reconstructing these trades, all the more so when these sources are widely scattered, often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and require a command of multiple European and Asian languages. Our lack of knowledge also reflects many Asian historians’ reluctance to acknowledge slavery’s existence in their own countries, much less examine local records for information about slaving and slavery in the locale under consideration. A review of recently published scholarship demonstrates, however, that these evidentiary hurdles are not insurmountable, and that it now is possible to outline a preliminary census of transnational human trafficking in a part of the globe that encompasses four major regions: Central Asia (including modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (Siem), Vietnam); and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea).

Importing slaves into Asia

The often egregious exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf and East Asia is frequently cited as evidence that 27–32 million mostly Asian men, women, and children remain de facto slaves in the early twenty-first century. That these workers are characterized as ‘slaves’ despite the abolition of slavery worldwide comes as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million

importing slaves into Asia

At the heart of any such exercise must be an acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity of peoples trafficked within and beyond Asia and these trades’ complexity and multi-directionality. The presence of military slaves known as Habshis (‘Ethiopians’) in India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and the existence of Siddi communities of eastern African ancestry in modern India and Pakistan underscores that any history of human trafficking must include the African slaves imported into Asia over the centuries. Current estimates suggest that Africans toward the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. The Portuguese shipped slaves from the Red Sea and East African coasts to the Middle East and South Asia between 800-1700, and 2,000-4,000 a year during the eighteenth century. A paucity of data on the number of Africans in India at any given time makes it impossible to determine how many of these 2.0-3.1 million exports reached South Asia, the Middle East, and South America during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.7 Missing from this picture is a comprehensive sense of the volume of human trafficking in Asia. Assessing the scale of this activity is not an easy task. The paucity of archival materials on slavery and slavery in Asia compared to what exists for the Atlantic world is a major impediment to reconstructing these trades, all the more so when these sources are widely scattered, often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and require a command of multiple European and Asian languages. Our lack of knowledge also reflects many Asian historians’ reluctance to acknowledge slavery’s existence in their own countries, much less examine local records for information about slaving and slavery in the locale under consideration. A review of recently published scholarship demonstrates, however, that these evidentiary hurdles are not insurmountable, and that it now is possible to outline a preliminary census of transnational human trafficking in a part of the globe that encompasses four major regions: Central Asia (including modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (Siem), Vietnam); and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea).

Importing slaves into Asia

The often egregious exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Persian Gulf and East Asia is frequently cited as evidence that 27–32 million mostly Asian men, women, and children remain de facto slaves in the early twenty-first century. That these workers are characterized as ‘slaves’ despite the abolition of slavery worldwide comes as no surprise. Many indentured labor historians, echoing the concerns of nineteenth-century British abolitionists, have argued that the 3.7 million

importing slaves into Asia

At the heart of any such exercise must be an acknowledgement of the extraordinary diversity of peoples trafficked within and beyond Asia and these trades’ complexity and multi-directionality. The presence of military slaves known as Habshis (‘Ethiopians’) in India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and the existence of Siddi communities of eastern African ancestry in modern India and Pakistan underscores that any history of human trafficking must include the African slaves imported into Asia over the centuries. Current estimates suggest that Africans toward the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. The Portuguese shipped slaves from the Red Sea and East African coasts to the Middle East and South Asia between 800-1700, and 2,000-4,000 a year during the eighteenth century. A paucity of data on the number of Africans in India at any given time makes it impossible to determine how many of these 2.0-3.1 million exports reached South Asia, the Middle East, and South America during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.7 Missing from this picture is a comprehensive sense of the volume of human trafficking in Asia. Assessing the scale of this activity is not an easy task. The paucity of archival materials on slavery and slavery in Asia compared to what exists for the Atlantic world is a major impediment to reconstructing these trades, all the more so when these sources are widely scattered, often fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and require a command of multiple European and Asian languages. Our lack of knowledge also reflects many Asian historians’ reluctance to acknowledge slavery’s existence in their own countries, much less examine local records for information about slaving and slavery in the locale under consideration. A review of recently published scholarship demonstrates, however, that these evidentiary hurdles are not insurmountable, and that it now is possible to outline a preliminary census of transnational human trafficking in a part of the globe that encompasses four major regions: Central Asia (including modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand (Siem), Vietnam); and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea).
The Newsletter
No. 87  Autumn 2020

The incidence of involuntary bondage among certain groups in Sarawak, and women comprised 10 percent of the population during the eighteenth, nineteenth centuries, while Mongols themselves were trafficked into the Black Sea region, the Mediterranean world, and the Ottoman Empire between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries.

In the early 17th century, Pulicat became the capital of what was known as the Dutch Coromandel, on India’s east coast, by which time the Portuguese had lost control of the spice trade.

Notes

The size of the Portuguese trade is difficult to determine, but assertions that Portuguese ships reportedly carried ‘great numbers’ of Mozambican slaves to India at the end of the sixteenth century, by most accounts these exports averaged 125-250 a year for a total of at least 4,200 Mozambicans between 1500 and 1830. Other Europeans began to participate in this trade during the early seventeenth century. The trickle of indentured labour was transformed into long-distance commerce in other important commodity chains associated with the development of international labour networks. There is reason to believe that many, if not most, of the Indian and Southeast Asian slaves were shipped from Java or Sumatra to Brazil, Réunion during the eighteenth century did so in relatively small groups who comprised just one or two families. We need to analyze these extraordinary quantities of foodstuffs, textiles, and other manufactured goods. Research on migrant labor networks in Southeast Asia, especially Orissa, likewise raises questions about whether slave trading and free migration overlapped and, if so, to what extent, in what ways, and why did they do so. In sum, coming to grips with human mobility requires a rethinking of the conceptual and other blinders that hinder our ability to understand the human experience with slaves and the ways in which it is represented and present, in all of its challenging complexity.

Richard B. Allen, Editor, Indian Ocean Studies Series, Ohio University Press

Crows (1580-1640). Although Portuguese ships reportedly carried ‘great numbers’ of Mozambican slaves to India at the end of the sixteenth century, by most accounts these exports averaged 125-250 a year for a total of at least 4,200 Mozambicans between 1500 and 1830. Other Europeans began to participate in this trade during the early seventeenth century. The trickle of indentured labour was transformed into long-distance commerce in other important commodity chains associated with the development of international labour networks. There is reason to believe that many, if not most, of the Indian and Southeast Asian slaves were shipped from Java or Sumatra to Brazil, Réunion during the eighteenth century did so in relatively small groups who comprised just one or two families. We need to analyze these extraordinary quantities of foodstuffs, textiles, and other manufactured goods. Research on migrant labor networks in Southeast Asia, especially Orissa, likewise raises questions about whether slave trading and free migration overlapped and, if so, to what extent, in what ways, and why did they do so. In sum, coming to grips with human mobility requires a rethinking of the conceptual and other blinders that hinder our ability to understand the human experience with slaves and the ways in which it is represented and present, in all of its challenging complexity.

Richard B. Allen, Editor, Indian Ocean Studies Series, Ohio University Press

Note

Notes

Notes

Notes