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After the Railways Are Built: Makrani Labor and Illegible Claims to Land and Belonging in Sindh

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Abstract

This article focuses on an incident involving a series of evictions experienced by a group of Makrani laborers who made their living by earning daily wages at the Hyderabad railway station in early twentieth century Sindh. In this piece I critically analyze two imperial projects: first, the construction of the Indian railways and second, the promotion of “free” wage labor by the colonial regime in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. By critically interrogating the promises of both “free labor” and “technological progress” this article argues that survival in the Sindhi countryside depended on a group’s ability to assert legible claims to both belonging and to land. Through an in-depth examination of the conflicting land claims, bureaucratic exchanges, and discourses around wage work that these evictions provoked, this paper reflects on the enduring entanglements of race, labor, technology, and empire in this region of British India.

Keywords

Sindh – labor – abolition – Makranis – railways – land – Indian Ocean

1 Introduction

On August 18, 1934, the Divisional Superintendent of the North-Western Railway in Karachi wrote an exasperated letter to the Commissioner of Sindh appealing for assistance. A conflict was brewing in Hyderabad, Sindh’s second-largest urban center about one hundred miles north of the bustling port city of Karachi. The Superintendent claimed that a *Makrani* “coolie”

community had “encroached” on a plot of land adjacent to the largest railway station in Hyderabad. Decades ago the government had leased this land to Nadirshah R. Mehta & Sons (a group contracted to handle goods at the station) to house its migrant laborers. However, the contract had since changed hands and the new contractor preferred to “employ local men.” This new contractor thus no longer had any use for the land – or the people on it. The Divisional Superintendent complained: “[T]hese men have been and are a source of nuisance ... it is objectionable from the sanitary point of view to have those unsightly and unsanitary huts on railway ground close to the quarters of the Railway staff.”¹ The very act of being visible, it would appear, was a sufficiently egregious offense. In the blink of an eye, this group of Makrani laborers had gone from being a crucial labor force to an aesthetic inconvenience.

The Makranis were one among many migrating groups that private contractors and government actors recruited to work on labor-intensive infrastructure projects across British India. Among these groups, Makranis were often seen as racially distinct from the broader Indian population due to their perceived African features and origins. Makranis were, and still are, also widely believed to have descended from enslaved people illicitly transported by Arabs, Baluchis, Indians, and others and liberated by British agents as part of imperial anti-slavery activities on the Indian Ocean.

Events analyzed in this article mark one episode in a broader social history that details the challenges to survival and livelihood that Makranis and other Afro-Asian groups faced in early twentieth century South Asia. I situate these events specifically within a post-abolition legal and administrative regime that promoted wage labor as the hallmark of a new “free” and efficient economic order. Railways, too, had a vital role to play in this new colonial economy. Under British rule railways were seen as vital arteries that streamed across the Indian social and economic landscape. Railways allowed the colonial government to connect India to the global economy in new ways as well as govern, communicate, and transport goods and people more efficiently. An increasingly dense web of tracks and outposts formed the critical infrastructure that allowed commodities to be shipped from hinterland to port, plantation to city, and cultivator to urban financier. This case marks an extended history of

¹ *Encroachment on Railway Land at Hyderabad by Makrani Coolies, 1934* (RCCS/25266). Unless otherwise stated, all references to this incident are from the same file. The acronym RCCS indicates the Records of the Chief Commissioner in Sindh, found in the Sindh Archives, Karachi. The acronym IOR is used for files found in the India Office Records, located in the British Library, London.

contestation over railways and the areas surrounding them as spaces where multiple aspirations and interests overlapped and clashed in colonial India.

In this article, I demonstrate how the colonial state drew Makranis, like many marginalized groups in India, into broader imperial projects that promoted wage labor and technological investment as vital for both the individual and the colonial economy. Both projects enabled the British colonial state to assert itself as a vehicle of civilization and freedom. However, these projects were rendered hollow by the racialized structure of the economy and administration, the growing reliance on international markets, the increasing commodification of land, and the spread of rural debt.² All these forces placed limits on who could reap the rewards of these promised transformations. Within a context defined by shifting private contracts, internal labor allocation structures, and rapidly evolving land markets, the colonial state vacillated between being incapable and disinterested in creating space for Makranis. These imperial projects thus did not create utopias. Instead, they generated surplus peoples, allowing the empire to project technological and moral superiority and realize its own economic ambitions while designating peoples as waste or disposable.³

In what follows, I will briefly explain what railways signified and their role in creating new subjectivities in South Asia by configuring space, time, and labor. Within this broader context, I highlight the history of railway construction in Sindh. I then situate the Makrani protagonists of this article within a regional history of migration and interconnections between Sindh, Baluchistan, East Africa, and the Gulf. Finally, I delve into the events of the so-called “Encroachment on Railway Lands by Makrani Coolies” incident

2 Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Tariq Omar Ali, *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); David Cheesman, *Landlord Power and Rural Indebtedness in Colonial Sindh, 1865–1901* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997). The literature on histories of race, empire, and capitalism in India is of course voluminous. I have cited some only a few major works here.

3 Michelle Yates, “The Human-As-Waste, the Labor Theory of Value and Disposability in Contemporary Capitalism,” *Antipode* 43.5 (2011): 1679–1695; Pavithra Vasudevan, “An Intimate Inventory of Race and Waste,” *Antipode* 53.3 (2019): 770–790; Pallavi Gupta, “Broomscales: Racial Capitalism, Waste, and Caste in Indian Railway Stations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45.2 (2021): 235–256. While this is an angle that I do not explore in this article this case could be productively put in conversation with important literature exploring the production of “waste,” both human and environmental, as inherently connected to the production of value under capitalism.

in Hyderabad. I reflect on what this case tells us about when “belonging” – translatable into claims over land – was or was not legible to the colonial state, the impossibility of discipline in the face of the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, and the clear limits of wage labor’s ability to provide access to livelihood in the Sindh countryside. This case has been reconstructed from a collection of documents from the Sindh Archives in Karachi and spreads over six years. The files record debates, political maneuverings, petitions, and telegrams between Sindhi bureaucrats, British officers, the Bohri community, members of a local labor union, Sindhi reformers, and representatives of the Makrani *Jamait*.⁴ While scholarship on Makranis often focuses on the port cities of Gwadar and Karachi, in this piece I follow the Makranis into the interior of Sindh. Sources about the Makranis are challenging to come by. This article is motivated by the modest goal of bringing to light a specific fragment of Makrani social history. I situate this incident within the larger context of labor migration regimes, public and private railway contracts, and contestations over land in colonial Sindh.

This case demonstrates that survival depended not on earning a wage but on a group’s ability to assert legible claims to a place to live. It also demonstrates that claims to both belonging and to land were intimately linked. Scholars have used the concept of “belonging” to explore claims that individuals make to citizenship, tribal membership, or to regional, community, or even neighborhood-based identities.⁵ Assertions of belonging can open up space for individuals and families to demand specific entitlements including but not limited to land. Historical actors in a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts have also posited political claims – sometimes successfully – to belonging based on investments of their labor.⁶ In India, the liberal tradition whereby property rights were tightly linked to the act of mixing time and labor into the earth to make land productive heavily influenced colonial land policy.⁷

4 Jamait can mean a political organization or party. In this case, the use of this term by members of the Makrani community signified that they represented an organized community or unit, not merely a disorganized settlement of itinerant migrant labor or coolies.

5 Sarah Ansari and William Gould, *Boundaries of Belonging: Localities, Citizenship and Rights in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Syantani Chatterjee, “The Labors of Failure: Labor, Toxicity, and Belonging in Mumbai,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 95 (2019): 49–75; Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz, *Land and the Politics of Belonging in West Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

6 Laura Brace, *The Politics of Property: Labour, Freedom and Belonging* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Shona N. Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7 See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government: Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1980); Judy Whitehead, “John Locke and

However this case demonstrates clear limits to when and for whom these ideas were applied. The Makranis did not even attempt to claim a right to the land they had been living and working on for 50 years. At no point did neighbors intervene on their behalf to insist that they belonged there, although some did insist that they were poor and deserving of mercy. In fact it was their neighbors who wanted them removed. The Makrani Jamait only ever sought to purchase alternative land at a subsidized rate. They could thus only engage in market transactions for land, not claim specific entitlements based on their labor on the railways or belonging to the region or community.

2 Colonial Utopias: Building the Railways

With no railways operating in India before 1850, in a mere 50 years massive capital investments turned India's railways into a symbol of the civilizing power of the British Raj. By the turn of the twentieth century, India had the fourth-largest railway system in the world by route length.⁸ Railways altered the rhythm of circulation of capital, goods, and people. They opened up and foreclosed routes of pilgrimage, livelihood opportunities, commercial and kinship networks, and forms of communication throughout South Asia.⁹ Prasad argues that the railway announced new formats of organizing and comprehending time through the imposition of timetables and eventually an "all-India railway time" that began to regulate and discipline all aspects of temporal life.¹⁰ As Manu Goswami has argued, railways physically facilitated the unprecedented movement of goods and people across geographic space in India and held lofty promises of technological progress. Railways stood for India's symbolic transition to modernity and into the future.¹¹ The technological might of the railway in India was a preview of the nation that India could become with the proper time, capital, and discipline.

the Governance of India's Landscape: The Category of Wasteland in Colonial Revenue and Forest Legislation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.50 (2010): 83–93.

8 Ian J. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj: 1850–1900* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 38.

9 Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, *Imperial Technology and "Native" Agency: A Social History of Railways in Colonial India, 1850–1920* (London: Routledge, 2018).

10 Ritika Prasad, "Time-Sense': Railways and Temporality in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 47.4 (2013): 1252–1282.

11 See Goswami's book *Producing India* especially chapter three (i.e., "Mobile Incarceration: Travels in Colonial State Space").

Initially, railways in India were mainly built and financed by a group of ten private British companies with backing and support from the colonial government. Under the concessions system, the government of India offered these companies favorable terms such as free land and access to cheap labor. The government retained extensive powers to regulate the railways in exchange for these concessions, including the right to set maximum and minimum freight rates and passenger fares.¹² Over the century, railway construction gradually shifted away from being a predominantly private sector enterprise and was eventually brought under the complete control of the colonial state. By the end of the nineteenth century, between the colonial state and private capitalists, some “150 million pounds sterling” had been invested in the Indian railways.¹³

Railway construction was a highly stratified process. In Ian Kerr’s study of the labor and technical engineering that went into building the Indian railways, he noted how hierarchies permeated all stages of their construction and management. Railway companies overwhelmingly employed British or European men as skilled workmen and engineers, while Indians were recruited as “unskilled” manual labor or “coolies.”¹⁴ Eighty percent of the ten million workers involved in railway construction were engaged in “unskilled” work. Women and children often made up a considerable part of this workforce.¹⁵ Indians participated by digging trenches, moving earth, shoveling rocks, and, after building the railway, loading and unloading goods (among other things). Constructing the railways in the first place and then working on them thereafter could be extremely dangerous. Many examples demonstrate how violence and risk were inherent in railway work. In 1892, the District Magistrate of Karachi informed the Commissioner in Sindh that a “gangman” was injured by a trolley cart. The letter stated that the man’s “negligence in standing on the edge of the trolley” caused the accident.¹⁶ On his way to the hospital, the man died.

Just as each province drawn into the railway network was seen to edge closer to the future, the colonial regime insisted that railways were calling novel

12 Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary, “Regulation, Ownership, and Costs: A Historical Perspective from Indian Railways,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 4.1 (2012): 28–57, 33.

13 Laxman Satya, “British Imperial Railways in Nineteenth Century South Asia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43.47 (2008): 69–77, 69.

14 Kerr, 88.

15 Madhavi Jha, “Men Diggers and Women Carriers’: Gendered Work on Famine Public Works in Colonial North India,” *International Review of Social History* 65.1 (2020): 71–98.

16 *Judicial Department Railway Accident – A Cooly Fell off a Material Trolley, 1892* (RCCS/43268). Also, see RCCS/43271 and RCCS/43264 involving an incident when a train ran over a porter’s left foot and another detailing how a carpenter was injured while working on the railway in Sindh.

working subjectivities into being. In celebration of the coming of the railways, Sir Bartle Frere, Commissioner of Sindh between 1851 and 1859, wrote, “for the first time in history the Indian Cooly finds he has in his power of labour, a valuable possession.”¹⁷ Railways would create demand for new kinds of workers, provide opportunities to earn cash, and help to further discipline new classes of “free” wage earning Indians. The task of constructing railways demanded the discipline, power, and laboring energy of this new class of laborers liberated from the attachments of agrarian life. In fact, railway contractors preferred recruiting “itinerant, specialist communities,” such as Makranis, over labor from local communities.¹⁸ Their very embeddedness in the local village economy made workers drawn from the landless peasantry “unreliable.” Kerr states that early on, drawing on “circulating” or a “floating rural proletariat” became the preferred method of labor recruitment.¹⁹ A dense web of contractors who could bring laborers from near and far thus fed the demands of railway construction.

Railways would thus create wage-earning opportunities and free Indians from their reliance on agriculture and nature for their needs. In addition, it was believed that earning wages would teach Indians new ways of engaging with the colonial economy and administration. For example, working for the railways would teach subjects to follow new rhythms of work, to earn and then to spend money on goods provided by the market, and to be self-reliant and autonomous. The certainty and liberating effects of this transition became engrained in policies instituted by the colonial government to manage various colonized groups such as peasants, tribes, artisans, migrant groups, untouchable castes, and others – such as the Makrani protagonists of this story. In the eyes of the colonial state, wage work would speed up the transition from “status to contract” and create new classes of wage-earning, responsible, and productive subjects.

Railways were a prime example of the paradoxes and tensions inherent in creating “colonial space.”²⁰ Railways became sites of social and racial anxieties about interactions between classes and genders and heightened tensions between the colonized and colonizers.²¹ For example, trains were supposed to carry the people of India into the future. Yet, few Indians could afford tickets,

17 Kerr, 4.

18 Alexander Bubb, “Class, Cotton, and ‘Woddaries’: A Scandinavian Railway Contractor in Western India, 1860–69,” *Modern Asian Studies* 51.5 (2017): 1369–1393.

19 Kerr, 92.

20 See Goswami’s book *Producing India*.

21 Nitin Sinha, “The World of Workers’ Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India, 1918–1922,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45.5 (2008): 999–1033.

even if reasonably priced fares would have created a significant revenue base for the railway companies. The cars, platforms, and physical spaces surrounding railway tracks and stations could also be sites of tension. There were continuous protests over the exclusion of upper-class Indians from British-only white compartments as well as the reproduction of caste exclusions within designated “Indian” spaces. Railway stations and cars were thus foci of popular politics and dissent as much as spaces for commerce and exchange.²²

Laboring for a wage on railways was also seen as the solution to various challenges endemic to colonial rule such as famine and poverty.²³ Seen as a problem of “distribution rather than production” the colonial regime claimed that railways would help transport grain and food to those in need during times of famine. However, most Indians could see that trains merely enabled crops to be exported out of India at greater speeds.²⁴ The construction of railways introduced new land values and taxation regimes while imposing burdensome aesthetic demands on the areas around them. Finally, this new enterprise promised reprieve from the capriciousness of nature by offering new opportunities for all year-round wage labor. However, it was land and nature itself that remained ever more vital to staying alive in the new colonial economy.

3 The Railway in Sindh

Sindh’s entrance into the colonial present was often indexed by the presence of the railway’s physical structures. In his description of Sukkur in Sindh, Edward Stack wrote in 1882 that amidst the dusty timelessness of the Sindhi landscape, “the presence of a newer civilization is proclaimed by the bright red of the brick built railway station.”²⁵

Sindh was a significant outpost in the railway network from its earliest days. In March 1855, the British Parliament incorporated the Scinde Railway Company intending to put “Karachi, the only seaport in Sindh, in communication

22 Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

23 Amal Shahid, “Re ‘constructing’ Informality: Famine Labour in late 19th century Colonial North India,” *Journal of Labor and Society* 24.1 (2021): 16–43.

24 Stuart Sweeney, “Indian Railways and Famine 1875–1914: Magic Wheels and Empty Stomachs,” *Essays in Economic and Business History* 26 (2008): 147–158.

25 Edward Stack, *Six Months in Persia, Vol. I* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1882), 2.

with the Indus, the great commercial artery” of Western India.²⁶ Before building the railway line, goods and people had to take a winding journey along the Indus by steamer to get to Karachi and, thus, the Arabian Sea. Building the 105-mile-long railway track between Karachi and Kotri, a city right outside Hyderabad, shortened the travel time to Karachi considerably. Goods loaded on steamers traveling the Indus could now be placed directly onto trains between Kotri and Karachi. Several additional lines were added over the years, and the Scinde Railway Company became the Sind, Punjab, and Delhi Railway. In 1878, the line to Kotri was extended to join the Delhi-Punjab railway system at Multan. This extension replaced the Indus Steam Flotilla water route between Kotri and Khanpur.²⁷ In 1886 the North-Western Railway amalgamated the Sindh lines as well as the Punjab Northern, the Indus Valley, and the Sind Pishin Railways under one company.

Hughes observed in 1862 that passengers inundated the newly constructed railway lines in Sindh.²⁸ There was also a widespread expectation that its construction would revive Hyderabad’s economic fortunes.²⁹ In 1883, David Ross romantically described the railways as retracing routes that Indian history had already rendered meaningful. Ross states: “The history and antiquities of this extensive tract must be a subject of great and vivid interest ... the railway from Peshawar to Karachi closely resembles Alexander’s line of march from the Himalayas to the Arabian sea.”³⁰ The *Bombay Telegraph* predicted that this new route would enable Karachi to become “a grand commercial depot for Persia, Arabia, Egypt, and the countries of the Upper Nile.”³¹ However, following its annexation by the British in 1843, Sindh’s role was increasingly reduced “to that of an outlet for the agricultural production of the Punjab.”³² The railway did little to change this continuing economic marginalization.

26 Edward Archer Langley, *Narrative of a Residence at the Court of Meer Ai Moorad with Wild Sports in the Valley of the Indus* (London Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1860), 93.

27 Edward H. Aitken, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind* (Karachi: Mercantile Steam Press, 1907), 344–345.

28 H.C. Hughes, “The Scinde Railway,” *The Journal of Transport History* 5.4 (1862): 219–225.

29 Langley, 93.

30 David Ross, *The Land of the Five Rivers and Sindh: Sketches Historical and Descriptive* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1883), 10.

31 Hughes, 222.

32 Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 54.

4 Freedom across the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has long connected diverse regions of the world, from eastern Africa's Swahili-speaking coast to the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and the western coast of India.³³ Now flourishing scholarship on Indian Ocean history has helped bring a depth of understanding to the interconnections between regions that have traditionally been cordoned off into different area studies.³⁴ Such scholarship highlights the networked relations of peoples who have historically felt at home in two places at once, challenging the boundaries of the nation-state and exposing the frailty of colonial constructions of spatial relations.³⁵

The scholarship on the Indian Ocean also decenters Atlantic-dominated histories of slavery, abolition, and freedom. The historiography shows that clamping down on the slave trade across the Atlantic intensified slave-trading activity across the Indian Ocean as plantations and other labor-intensive enterprises moved eastward.³⁶ Historians have also interrogated the British imperial project of emancipation particularly of African or Black peoples.³⁷ After Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the British navy began an increasingly aggressive campaign to stop and search vessels belonging to either rival colonial powers or non-European merchants, elites, or seafarers. Many Africans found on board these vessels were “freed” on the high seas in these stop-and-search spectacles of imperial benevolence. Yet most scholars are quick to point out that these acts of “liberation” drew African peoples into an ever-growing “drifting sea proletariat.”³⁸ The British sent large contingents of the men,

33 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

34 For a recent statement on the state of the field, see Burkhard Schnepel and Julia Verne, eds., *Cargoes in Motion: Materiality and Connectivity Across the Indian Ocean* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2022).

35 Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

36 Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight, *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Edward A. Alpers, “Flight to Freedom: Escape from Slavery among Bonded Africans in the Indian Ocean World, c.1750–1962,” *Slavery and Abolition* 24.2 (2003): 51–68. The historiography on slave trading in the Indian Ocean is now substantial. Above are just a few key examples.

37 Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

38 Janet J. Ewald, “African Bondsmen, Freedmen, and the Maritime Proletariats of the Northwestern Indian Ocean World, C. 1500–1900,” in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, eds. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 200–222.

women, and children – mostly of African origin – they freed to Bombay to work as domestic servants, to work on ships for the British navy, or to work on plantations.³⁹ Abolition was thus embedded in a growing global demand for wage labor by flourishing industries (e.g., maritime work, plantations, resource extraction, and public works such as railways).

Reading vernacular sources from regions across the Indian Ocean world also complicates the teleological view of abolition as a rupture that separated old from new and enslavement from freedom. Examining sources that give us insight into systems of debt and patronage in different regions across the Indian Ocean littoral, Fahad Bishara asks what freedom meant as an alternative to slavery, considering the obligations, bonds, and credit exchanged between peoples, whether “free” or not.⁴⁰ Others show how enslaved people demanded a “deeper insertion” into society rather than the individualism of the free labor economy that abolition thrust upon them.⁴¹ This article joins these critical rejoinders to demonstrate the importance of social ties and belonging over wages, dependence on the market, and free labor.

5 Makranis: From High Seas to Hinterland

Like many group labels in India, the “Makrani” identity cannot be fixed or tied to a particular hereditary lineage. Makrani might sometimes mean quite simply ethnic Baluchi tribes who encompassed various kinship groups of varying status and hail from Baluchistan’s coastal regions between the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.⁴² However, in colonial bureaucratic parlance, Makrani was often

39 Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, “The Colonial Response to the African Slaves in British India – Two Contrasting Cases,” *African and Asian Studies* 10 (2011): 59–70. They also left them in the care of missionary schools and homes.

40 Fahad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Fahad Bishara, “The Diver’s New Papers: Wealth, People, and Property in a Persian Gulf Bazaar,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 64 (2021): 513–540.

41 Jonathan Glassman, “The Bondsman’s New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast,” *The Journal of African History* 32.2 (1991): 277–312; Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa, Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).

42 Stephen Pastner and Carroll Pastner, “Agriculture, Kinship and Politics in Southern Baluchistan,” *Man* (N.S.) 7.1 (1972): 128–136; Stephen L. Pastner, “Lords of the Desert Border: Frontier Feudalism in Southern Baluchistan and Eastern Ethiopia,” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 10.1 (1979): 93–106. The Pastners have several ethnographic pieces that shed light on these structures.

the name for Baluch groups with perceived African ancestry. Phenotypically, Makranis were and still are generally affiliated with the broader category of *Shidi* – the term for Afro-Asian peoples in India.⁴³ However, it is important to point out that the Makranis' particular association with the Baluch identity sets them apart from other Shidi groups.

Scholars often link the Makrani presence in Baluchistan to political, social, and economic networks that have historically connected the Gulf, East Africa, and the Baluchi coast.⁴⁴ Complex jurisdictional boundaries and political histories make this region particularly interesting. Most of what is modern day Baluchistan remained under the rule of the Khan of Kelat throughout the colonial era and never officially became part of British India.⁴⁵ However Gwadar, a port city approximately 380 miles west of Karachi, and its surrounding areas belonged to neither the British nor the Khans of Kelat. Since 1783 this region was officially governed by the Al-Busaidi Sultans of Oman.⁴⁶ Ruled from Muscat across the Arabian Sea, Gwadar was a significant node in a regional traffic of goods, commerce, and peoples within the boundaries of the Omani maritime empire. Cities such as Oman, Zanzibar, Bahrain, and Gwadar were thus tied together through trade, migration, and cultural exchange that spanned over 200 years. The British never officially annexed Gwadar but exercised informal influence over the city as they did over the Omani Sultanate in general.

43 See Shanti Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan: From Medieval to Modern Times* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1996); Helene Basu, "Redefining Boundaries: Twenty Years at the Shrine of Gori Pir," in *Sidis and Scholars*, ed. Amy Caitlin-Jarazibhoy (Trenton, New Jersey: Rainbow Publishers, 2004), 61–85; Pashington Obeng and Fiona Jamal Almeida, "Siddhis and Africans in India: Embattled Dignity within Classificatory Systems," in *Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism against Africans and Siddhis in India*, ed. Ibrahim Diallo (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 43–55.

44 Hafeez Ahmed Jamali, "A Harbor in the Tempest: Megaprojects, Identity, and the Politics of Place in Gwadar, Pakistan," Ph.D. dissertation, the University of Texas at Austin, 2014 (<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/30322> [accessed November 6, 2022]); Behnaz Mirzai, "The Persian Gulf and Britain: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade," in *Abolitions as a Global Experience*, ed. Hideaki Suzuki, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 113–129.

45 The Khanate officially ceded to Pakistan in 1955.

46 Hafeez Jamali, "Shorelines of Memory and Ports of Desire: Geography, Identity, and the Memory of Oceanic Trade in Mekran Coast (Balochistan)," in *Reimagining Indian Ocean Worlds*, eds. Smriti Srinivas, Bettina Ng'weno, and Neelima Jeychandran (New York: Routledge, 2020), 165–179, and 166; Azhar Ahmed, "Gwadar: A Historical Kaleidoscope," *Policy Perspectives* 13.2 (2016): 149–166. There is some debate about the exact nature of Naseer Khan's original transfer of power over Gwadar into the hands of the Saiad Sultan of Oman (i.e., whether it was permanent gift or a temporary loan). Since Makran was a key region in Britain's "Forward Policy", for various strategic and political reasons the British supported the Sultan of Oman's claim over the city over the Khan of Kelat's.

The role that the slave trade played in the region is similarly complex. Through treaties and political influence, British agents wielded jurisdictional authority to stop and search vessels traversing the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea maritime routes. Agents frequently intercepted peoples that they believed to be slaves throughout the nineteenth century, as they did in other locales across the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ In addition, Gwadar became a place of refuge for men and women who wanted to escape the service of the Khan of Kelat or other elite families in the region. After the Sultanate of Oman signed the Suppression of the Slave Trade Treaty of 1873 individuals could appeal to British agents at telegraph stations, consulates, or vessels for manumission certificates and protection from their masters.⁴⁸ Because of this Treaty, Omani officials were compelled to reject requests to return individuals to the households they were running away from.

It is crucial to maintain a critical posture towards the assumption that the Afro-Asian presence in Makran in particular and South Asia in general can be attributed entirely to the slave trade.⁴⁹ In some accounts, so-called African “slaves” would insist that they were seafarers simply trying to get from one place to another by traversing the migration circuits that characterized the historically interconnected Indian Ocean space. Nevertheless, over time Makranis and Shidis became increasingly legible in the colonial archive as subjects whose freedom was bestowed on them by British Empire. This association with the slave trade marked African-origin groups as ex-slaves and thus natively alienated and racialized “others.” The incident that this paper recounts elucidates some of the long-term consequences of this association. Namely, that while circulations of peoples between Africa, the Gulf, and Makran took many different forms and that Makranis may have resided in Gwadar for many generations, they were persistently viewed as low-status outsiders in colonial India.

Migration from Gwadar to Karachi and the interior of Sindh was also multifaceted. In the late nineteenth-century large numbers of formally free Makranis – together with other groups seeking work and wages – migrated from the Makran coast to the rapidly expanding colonial cities of Karachi and Bombay. These cities promised new opportunities for work on steamships, commercial harbors, dockyards, and railway lines.⁵⁰ There is evidence that

47 Johan Matthew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism Across the Arabian Sea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

48 Jamali, “Shorelines of Memory,” 169; Mirzai, 123.

49 Mishal Khan, “Abolition as a Racial Project: Erasures and Racializations on the Borders of British India,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 38 (2021): 77–104.

50 Jamali, “Harbor in the Tempest,” 49.

the British also actively transported groups of refugee “slaves” from Makran to Karachi when too many of them accumulated in Gwadar. Along with Baluch fishermen, Makranis formed a significant segment of Karachi’s working class, mainly in Lyari on the outskirts of Karachi.⁵¹ Accounts from Karachi from after Partition refer to Makranis as “Afro-Baluch,” noting that many members of this community worked as “cart drivers, peons or coolies, fishermen or tenants” and other low status positions.⁵²

Makrani populations were not only concentrated in urban areas like Karachi. Makranis were among the groups that made up the “drifting rural proletariat” that Ian Kerr uncovered in his survey of itinerant laboring groups working on railway construction across India. In addition to Pathans, Khols, and Santhals and a tribe called the Wudders, he identified the Makranis as part of an “increasingly interlinked, spatially more extensive” labor market in India.⁵³ Groups of Makranis also migrated to the interior of Sindh, including Hyderabad. Looking at the details of a comprehensive census by H.T. Lambrick in Sindh, Makranis often appeared in lists of caste or kinship groups included within the category of *haris*, or landless sharecroppers, who had highly vulnerable relationships to the land and livelihood.⁵⁴

Makranis also worked as wage laborers in cotton ginning mills in Sindh’s interior. Lambrick noted about Makranis that “these people depend on manual labor of all kinds, and a number of them move into Eastern Sind for several months of the year, to work in cotton ginning factories, and seem to a considerable extent to be settling down there.”⁵⁵ B.P. Adarkar, in his report on labor conditions in the cotton ginning and baling industry in the mid-1940s, also observed that most of the wage labor in these factories was non-Sindhi. He wrote: “A large number of men and women from Makran have immigrated into the province and constitute the major part of the industrial landless agricultural labour.”⁵⁶

The colonial administration wrote Makranis into its historical record as suitable for hard labor, particularly as dock workers in factories or railways.

51 Adeem Suhail and Aameem Lutfi, “Our City, Your Crisis: The Baloch of Karachi and the Partition of British India,” *South Asia* 39.4 (2016): 891–907.

52 John B. Edleson, Khalida Shah, and Mohsin Farooq, “Makranis: The Negroes of West Pakistan,” *Phylon* 21.2 (1960): 124–130.

53 Kerr, 102.

54 See Personal Papers of T.H. Lambrick (IOR/MSSEUR/208/8, 9 & 10).

55 H.T. Lambrick, *Census of India, Vol XII, Sind, 1941* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1942), 35.

56 B.P. Adarkar, *Report on Labour Conditions in the Cotton Ginning and Baling Industry* (Simla: Government of India Press, circa 1946), 37.

Adarkar described the Makranis working in cotton ginning factories as “very hard working ... idleness or loitering are things unknown to them.”⁵⁷ The Bombay Royal Commission on Labor also noted these traits of being hard-working and physically strong in their survey of laboring classes across the Bombay Presidency.⁵⁸ However, did a strong work ethic mean anything other than a ceaseless reliance on wages for survival? Indeed, destitution was perhaps an all too real option for those who did not have a village community to fall back on when thrust into the emerging world of “free” wage labor.

6 Displacement

Returning to the events surrounding the complaint made by the North-Western Railway Company regarding the “encroachment” of the Makrani laborers that opened this article, the story that unfolded had many twists and turns. The record does not explicitly recount occurrences of violence, although there are flashes when the threat of force appears. Correspondences between the Commissioner of Sindh, the Secretary of the Revenue Department, Collectors, Deputy Collectors, and other bureaucratic personalities show active attempts to find a space for the Makranis to live amidst a web of competing interests and claims over land. Agents at all levels frequently repeated the fact of their impoverished condition to negotiate leniency on their behalf within the bureaucratic structures of the colonial state.

Correspondences between the collectors and various other administrative figures described the Makrani community as “encroachers.” However, this was not simply a temporary encampment of workers but a fully developed community. This group of Makranis had grown into a *jamaat* (i.e., community) that had put down roots, built a physical settlement, and forged few political and religious ties with the broader Sindhi community. Yet, the arrival of a new contractor – one link in a long and complex web of contractors, middlemen, private, and government interests – was enough to transform the community into “encroachers.”

By the 1920s, the state ran and mostly owned the North-Western Railway. A mere 1,286 miles of the line were in the hands of private companies, while the state-owned 5,198 out of 6,830 route miles, and the princely states owned

57 Adarkar, 37.

58 *Labour in India Royal (Whitley) Commission, Bombay (including Sind), Evidence, Vol. 1*, 227 (10R/V/26/670/9).

346.⁵⁹ Hyderabad, the capital of Sindh under its previous rulers the Talpurs, had diminished in economic importance over the nineteenth century. In contrast, Karachi, a bustling port city on the southern coast of Sindh, increasingly boomed and drew people from near and far.⁶⁰ Yet, Karachi and Hyderabad were closely connected as two vital centers of Sindhi political and economic activity, especially after Sindh separated from the Bombay Presidency in 1936.

Between the North-Western Railway officials, private contractors hired to handle goods, District Collectors, and provincial-level Commissioners, who, in the final analysis, was responsible for finding a suitable home for the Makrani community? The land the Makranis had “encroached” upon was itself government land that the state had leased to Messrs Nadirshah R Mehta & Sons. The conflict first arose when a new and unnamed contractor, along with railway employees, asked North-Western Railway officials to induce the former contractor to remove “his labour and restore it to its original condition under the terms of the agreement.” By this time, the original contractor was long gone and uninterested in the fate of the workforce summoned decades ago. With no one to take responsibility for the Makranis, the Divisional Superintendent of the North-Western Railway turned to the colonial government. He initially requested the Collector at Hyderabad to handle the issue. However, when no action was taken, he brought the complaint to the Commissioner of Sindh.

He may not have responded to the Divisional Superintendent, but the Collector of Hyderabad, G.F. Joshi, I.C.S., was quick to give the Commissioner a complete account of the incident. He explained that the Makrani community had already received a notice under section 202 of the Bombay Land Revenue Code, which specifically gave authority to the regional Collector to “evict any person wrongfully in possession of land.”⁶¹ However, he explained that certain complications had arisen, which made the situation difficult. In his inspection of the settlement, the Mukhtiar of Hyderabad had become sympathetic to the plight of the Makranis.⁶²

Joshi recommended that, since they were “poor coolies,” it would be fair for the government to grant the Makranis a piece of land to lease at an altered rate within the limits of a nearby village instead of simply throwing them out.

59 John Henry, *North-Western Railway, Memorandum for the Royal Commission on Labor* (Delhi: North-Western Railway Press, 1929), i.

60 Langley, 93.

61 *Bombay Act No. V of 1879, The Gujarat Land Revenue Code* (https://revenuedepartment.gujarat.gov.in/downloads/act_BLR_1879_n.pdf [accessed November 6, 2022]).

62 Secretary of State for India in Council, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India, xxv Index* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), xix. A mukhtiar is a class of legal practitioners in charge of a sub-division of a region. The duties of mukhtiar are both executive and magisterial.

Note that at no point was there any discussion of the Makranis being entitled to the original or to any other parcel of land. The head of the Makrani community agreed and prepared to pay the *malkano* – the term for the official land purchase rate. All parties were awaiting the results of the official assessment of the land's market value and expected that the Makranis would vacate the property once it was obtained. When the Assistant Collector finally surveyed the suggested plot, however, he found a petroleum tank in the vicinity. The presence of the tank made the suggested land parcel uninhabitable. The plan to relocate the Makranis to their new home was thus abandoned, throwing the Makrani Jamait's fate into limbo.

This situation remained unresolved until the head of the Makrani community, Ghulam Mustafa (i.e., "s/o Muradkhan, Chairman of the Makrani Jamait of Hyderabad Sind"), took matters into his own hands. In October of 1935, he and several other representatives of the Makrani community approached H.M. Willis, the new Collector of Hyderabad, with a request to grant them a different parcel of land they had found near the railway lines. They once again sought permission to pay an adjusted rate. Willis agreed and went to considerable lengths to lease the lands to them at this lower amount, stating in his letters to the Commissioner of Sindh that "the Makranis, owing to their poverty, are unable to pay this exorbitant rate." He further advocated that the land be sanctioned in their name for a seven-year lease. He continued supporting charging the Makranis the lower assessment rate despite considerable objections from subordinate officers who questioned whether this concession was legal.

There was also some ambiguity about the official status of the land. In government records, Survey No. 261 of Deh Nareja, the land in question, was *nakabuli* (i.e., unoccupied) while in the local or *deh* map, the land contained a graveyard previously registered as a *mukam* or cemetery.⁶³ However, H.M. Willis insisted that the supervising *tapedar* (i.e., a subordinate revenue officer) in Hyderabad had recently visited the area and found that while this parcel of land adjoined a graveyard, there was no evidence of a graveyard on the land itself. After a round of lengthy exchanges, Willis revoked all previous claims of occupancy based on the local map. With guarantees from the Commissioner and the Collector at Hyderabad, the Makranis agreed to move to this new land. Dismantling their houses and uprooting their community, the Makranis gathered the required funds for the land lease and quietly left their home to start anew.

63 Deh is an administrative unit of land in Sindh.

7 Legible and Illegible Claims

The Makrani Jamait's resettlement was not the end of their dislocation and wandering. After destroying their huts and leaving their home behind, the Makranis, again, learned that they would have to move. Despite attempts by H.M. Willis to use his authority to supersede any prior claims, it turned out the Makranis' new plot of land bordered a graveyard that was still frequently visited by the *Bohri* community as part of their religious practice.⁶⁴ The head of this community almost immediately initiated a complaint against the unwanted presence of the Makranis by reasserting that the plot was still legally mukam or cemetery land. Conflicting government records, deh maps, and local sacred geographies reveal a multilayered space where claims of belonging overlapped and clashed. Amidst these competing claims, the Makranis' right to a place to live, despite decades of investing their laboring energy into the Hyderabad railways, was the least legible.

The leader of the Bohri community in Hyderabad, Seth Tailbali Noorbhoy, a "Merchant & Landlord, Sardar, Hyderabad," made several requests to the Collector of Hyderabad to remedy the situation with the Makranis. In a petition to the Collector, he detailed his community's grievances. He began by stating that "the whole of our Bori community are loyal to the Benign British Government and that on several occasions our Spiritual Guide ... has rendered valuable services to the government." With this opening, he established the Bohri community's ties to the colonial regime and emphasized the material and symbolic support it had historically provided to the British. With this introduction, Noorbhoy highlighted that he was part of a well-resourced network of landlords.

In the petition, Noorbhoy reasserted the Bohri community's legal claim to the land in question, noting that it was a burial ground. He admitted that it was not actively in use at the time. However, he argued that his community's need for space would be inevitable as "it is a well-known fact that every creature created by the Almighty God is apt to die." In other words, the land needed to be preserved for the community as a burial ground for future generations. The petition continued: "But to our great surprise we find that since the last few years Railway coolies have unauthorizedly occupied Survey No: 261 and have constructed *katcha* (mud) huts therein." He also noted that the Makranis

64 Tahera Qutbuddin, "The Da'udi Bohra Tayyibis: Ideology, Learning, and Social Practice," in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. Farhad Daftary (New York: I.B Taurus, 2011), 331–359. The Dawoodi Bohris are a religious denomination within the Isma'ili Shia Muslim faith. Qutbuddin provides a thorough discussion of the Bohra ideology and religious traditions.

enlisted the support of a “Congress man” who had approached the Bohri community on the Makranis’ behalf. Threatened by such a powerful connection, they felt compelled to petition the Collector of Hyderabad directly and ask him to take action on their behalf.

The petition reiterated many of the same objections expressed by railway authorities several years earlier. The Bohri community took issue with the very visibility of the Makranis and their homes. While no Bohri community members lived in the area, they generally visited the graveyard for *ziyarat*, a religious ritual involving visits to saints, holy figures, and revered individuals at Muslim burial sites. Noorbhoy explained that members of his community visited the site in question every Thursday and Friday and on days on which deaths occurred. The Makrani settlement blocked the passage from the main road to the graveyard. Because of this, their “womenfolk, who observe *pardah* find it more difficult to find a passage through the huts of these Makranis.” He complained that these “encroachments” were a “great trouble and inconvenience to our community” and that “besides the trouble mentioned above, these Makranies have kept dogs, who are troubling to the passers near Mukam. Even 7–8 days back one big dog ran after one boy who belonged to the Bora community, if third person would not have intervened, the dog would have killed the boy.”

It would have been difficult for the Collector of Hyderabad to ignore the complaints of the influential Bohri community. In addition to the fact that they had political ties with the colonial administration, the Bohri community was able to supply clear material evidence of a historical affective relationship with the land in the form of the Deh map and the graves themselves. These objects signaled that the Bohri community was deeply embedded in the sacred geography of Sindh. In other words this was an undeniable claim to belonging.

On July 10, 1939, the Makrani Jamait received a notice to immediately vacate the land or risk their houses being destroyed by the police. As the Bohri community’s claims to the land came into focus, the Makranis’ rights were rescinded. The Makranis were again transformed from legal occupants to “encroachers.” A member of the revenue department added further fire to the complaint by stating that the Makranis had neglected to construct their houses “in accordance with the ground plan approved by the collector.” They were, once again, guilty of failing to conform to a set of aesthetic requirements imposed on them by both their neighbors and the colonial state – whether they were near the railway or not.

The temporary Collector of Hyderabad, Mr. Gholap, located another plot of land that seemed free of conflicting claims. But the Makranis objected that it was too far from the railway station where the community’s male members

worked daily. Acknowledging this fact, the new collector, U.M. Mirchandani, found yet another parcel of land closer to the station. He sanctioned a new ten-year lease for the Makranis and ordered them to vacate their homes immediately. To speed up the process and to acknowledge the cost to the Makranis, several officers approached the Bohri community. They convinced Noorbhoy to “generously” donate 400 rupees to the Makranis. In contrast to the 1500 rupees that the Makrani Jamait had already paid to construct homes (and build a mosque), 400 rupees was a paltry amount. The three headmen of the Makrani Jamait eventually agreed to this arrangement but they refused to leave immediately. They requested 15 days to demolish their houses and remove their belongings. The Collector reluctantly granted this request.

Seizing this small window of opportunity, Ghulam Mustafa went above the Collector of Hyderabad’s head. He directly petitioned the Minister to the Government of Sindh in the Revenue Department in a final bid to rescue his community from this second eviction.⁶⁵ Most correspondences preserved in the archive are scant on details and refer to the Makranis as “encroachers.” But Ghulam Mustafa’s petition adds life, nuance, and color to the men, women, and children and their lives whose fates were being decided by the offhand bureaucratic exchanges between colonial officials. For example, Ghulam Mustafa specifies his community was not a group of itinerant migrant laborers but that his “Makrani Jamait at Hyderabad consists of about 150 families” living in over “150 houses.” Their community was not a temporary labor camp but a group of families who had built a robust social structure in the shadows of the railway yard. In the 1930s, when the Makranis were first asked to move, the community was already 600-strong.

Ghulam Mustafa’s petition omitted any moral claim to the original piece of land outside the railway yard based on their labor on the railways. Instead, it emphasized, as other officials had done, that the Makranis were a poor community that deserved charity because of their poverty. The entire file is silent about the community’s material contribution of labor, time, and energy to the railways. The Makranis had been “imported” into Hyderabad and therefore “belonged” to somewhere other than Sindh – indeed perhaps to somewhere outside India entirely. It was of little importance that Makrani labor kept the railway running and that they had been brought to the region for the express

65 This typed petition is in English with Ghulam Mustafa’s handwritten signature on the last page, also in English script. While it seems unlikely that he would have spoken fluent English, this could be explained by his work with a local labor union and Congress Party officials who may have assisted him and other members of the community in writing and helping communicate their grievances through the complex bureaucratic apparatus of the colonial state.

purpose of, in the words of the colonial officers of generations past, bringing Hyderabad city into the modern era. In contrast, the Bohri community's historical ties to the Sindh countryside could not be disputed.

The Makrani Jamait's specific relationship to the land they had lived on for fifty years is also crucial. The community's primary source of income was their railway work. In the investments they list in their petition (e.g., their homes, family life, and later a mosque), it is significant there is no mention of the land itself. In other words, it does not appear that the Makranis were engaged in subsistence farming or agricultural activities but were likely entirely dependent on selling their labor. It is possible that individuals within this group of Makranis had developed ties of patronage by working the land of other landed groups in the surrounding regions.⁶⁶ As far as we can tell, however, they were neither land-owners nor tenants and had none of the – albeit limited – claims that landless laborers could have on the land they worked and the people they worked for. Instead, their livelihoods tied them to the impersonal body of the daily wage-paying entity that owned the contract to load and unload goods on the North-Western Railway. This kind of work came without reciprocal obligations or social safety nets that laboring for a landlord, or tending to one's land, could have.

Makranis did build some social and political ties with the broader community, even if these connections ended up being insufficient. Archival sources reveal fascinating moments when local political figures became involved in the land dispute and intervened on the community's behalf. At one point the Collector, U.M. Mirchandani, noted that he had “already seen several deputations, headed by Prof. Ghanshyam M.L.A. and Dr. Chimandas (Congress)” who had approached him to try to remedy the Makrani Jamait's situation. It appears that the note refers to Dr. Chimandas Ishwar Jagtiani, who was a prominent social reformer and member of the Congress Party and known for being a prolific writer of Gandhian publications.⁶⁷ Jagtiani was even the President of the Hyderabad Congress Committee at one point.⁶⁸ The president of a local labor union also attempted to negotiate leniency for the Makranis, but there are few details about this relationship. Finally, the Commissioner's records contain several telegrams sent by a local *Pir* (i.e., a Sufi religious figure) asking

66 As mentioned above, Makranis were listed by H.T. Lambrick as one of the kinship groups found amongst the landless laborer classes elsewhere in Sindh so this was not uncommon. However, there is simply no evidence here that this was the path taken by this particular group of Makranis.

67 Zaffar Junejo, “Time Travel through Sindh and Social Reform in the 1930s (v),” *Friday Times*, July 9, 2021.

68 L.H. Ajwani, “Sindh: Year of Awards,” *Indian Literature* 11.4 (1968): 88–90.

him to halt the eviction of the coolies. Such communications illustrate that the Makrani Jamait developed significant political and religious connections during their fifty years of living in Hyderabad. However, these figures' interventions all highlighted that it was the impoverished position of the community that made them deserving of mercy and sympathy. No one ever argued that the Makranis had any kind of *de facto* entitlement to a place in the community or to any of the land surrounding the railways.

8 The Impossibility of Discipline

A trope repeated in British India about Makrani laborers was that they were troublesome or unreliable, even if they were “able” and “strong-bodied.” This double association with a strong work ethic but a propensity for violence was often noted:

Cutchis, Sommalis, Makranis and Shidis are a cool, daring and excellent seafaring lot and have excellent certificates from the masters of the steamers and can compare very favorably with the seamen of any other nation in the world. These people run about in search of employment in Bombay and Calcutta from Karachi but are generally rejected, the indigenous residents getting the preference ... this has resulted in their miserable condition ... their condition will ultimately result in a disturbance at any time.⁶⁹

Here Whitley associates the Makranis' tendency towards “disturbance” with their status as outsiders as opposed to “indigenous residents.” Outside of Sindh, in addition to working as laborers on railways, Makranis often appeared in archival records as members of criminal tribes or outlaws. For example, in 1887, colonial state authorities pursued Seedi Ramadan Mubarak, a notorious outlaw in Junagadh identified as a Shidi. As agents tried to track him down, they actively monitored and restricted the movements of all Shidis and other mixed Afro-Indian groups, including Makranis.⁷⁰ The surveillance of some Makrani groups as “outlaws” also led the state to monitor their movements as laborers. In 1873, the Political Agent of Kathiawar asked the Railway Department to order contractors to hand over papers related to the passports of “foreigners,”

69 John Henry Whitley, *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India Volume II* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1931), 232.

70 IOR/R/2/667/15 and IOR/R/2/670/23.

like the “Caboolies, Sindies, Mekranees whom they employ.” He went so far as to state “that it would be well if they did not offer employment to Mekranees and Sindies.”⁷¹ Sometimes Makranis were the subjects of deportation orders and sent to Gwadar or Karachi.⁷²

There are numerous examples of Makrani resistance within Sindh. In 1885, the Executive Engineer for the Sind Pishin State Railway complained: “Some mekranis who were engaged for railway works by Mir Dost Khan contractors” had absconded. These men had received cash advances to work on the railway for a specified period. After taking the advance, they proceeded to “bolt back to Karachi without doing a day’s work.”⁷³ During strikes in 1934 (first in the Karachi City Goods yards, then in Hyderabad), it was reported that “40 Mekrani coolies, employees of Khudabux & Co. Railway Cooly Contractors suddenly struck work” demanding their employers increase their pay for loading and unloading goods.⁷⁴

Ghulam Mustafa’s response to his community’s initial eviction and the subsequent events that unfolded were markedly different from the colonial tropes about Makranis as troublesome. To return to Ghulam Mustafa’s petition to the Commissioner, he explained that his community had gone to great lengths to pay the altered assessment demanded of them in 1935. They had already paid 175 rupees on the lease. As the Collector at Hyderabad had requested, they obediently vacated the railway land and shifted to their new location. They had put up no resistance, actively sought out an alternative piece of land to purchase, quietly moved to this new plot of land, and attempted to build a new life. When they received the notice to move again, they “were shocked to hear this” after spending what little money they had on building new homes.

Ghulam Mustafa implored the Minister to allow his community to remain given that they had already leased the land for seven years. He also asked the Secretary to put a stay on the Collector of Hyderabad’s notice and to protect them from his threat to demolish their homes. The petition appears, at least initially, to have made a positive impression since the Secretary of the Revenue Department ordered the Collector not to evict the petitioners until the case was resolved.

After a complex exchange between various colonial officials, the Secretary ultimately decided not to intervene in the Collector’s decision. Despite

71 *Bombay Political Proceedings, 1873* (IOR/P/480).

72 *Bombay Political Proceedings, 1885* (IOR/P/2650/2801).

73 *Executive Engineer, Sind Pishin State Railway to Assistant Commissioner, Karachi, September 21, 1885* (Judicial Miscellaneous [RCCS/5880]).

74 *K.R. Estates, Esquire, Superintendent of Police, Sind Railways to the District Magistrate, Hyderabad, 28th Labour Strike (non-railway) Hyderabad* (RCCS/43857).

everyone agreeing that the Makranis were a poor community and deserving of “some consideration,” the Sindh bureaucracy delivered a clear victory for the Bohri community. The Makranis had been obedient and amenable until then. But their refusal to leave after promising they would and launching an unsuccessful petition with the Revenue Department placed them on the wrong side of bureaucratic sympathies. The reply from the Revenue Commissioner was terse and admonishing:

The headmen of the makranis agreed to the above arrangement and promised to vacate ... the petitioners have failed to carry out their promise and have in the meantime approached H.M., R.D., and got an interim stay order.

The Makranis were guilty of failing to “carry out their promise.” They did not resist through acts of violence or protest but by writing a petition. Furthermore, the carefully constructed petition portrayed a keen understanding of the rules and official bureaucratic language of the state. It also indicated a clear willingness to negotiate with government structures, procedures, and regulations, even though these systems were not designed to protect their interests. Nevertheless, the letter stated: “nothing further can be done for the petitioners who may be informed that the Govt decline to interfere in the orders already passed in the matter.” They would have to move again, and immediately.

We do not know the exact details of how this second eviction unfolded. But several telegrams in the Commissioner’s records depict disarray and desperation. A community member, Umedali Brohi, sent what sounds like a panicked telegram to the Governor and the Revenue Department that stated: “Makranis residing there, insufficient time given, evacuate, pray order collector by wire stop orders till we arrange.” Another telegram from Pir Makhdum Pir Ghulam Nabi Shah (i.e., the local Sufi leader mentioned earlier) stated: “Poor Hyderabad Makranis huts including *one mosque* will be destroyed this day by police aid pray mercifully and stay order telegraphically ... winter cold poverty most harmful for family people.”⁷⁵

The causes for political actions such as strikes, formal labor organizing, and absconding from contracts are intelligible through documents such as Ghulam Mustafa’s petition. Acquiescence could be effective, but only if it was abject and complete. The community’s launching of a petition irked the Secretary enough for him to conclude that they had reneged on their promises and were less than conforming subjects. This case provides us more than a simple demonstration

75 In the original document the term “one mosque” is underlined.

of the problematic nature of the colonial “rebelliousness” trope. Rather it shows us that discipline and submission to the formal structures of the colonial state was all but impossible. Nevertheless, the Jamait succumbed to the arbitrary and constantly shifting bureaucratic demands with nothing short of heroic grace.

9 Unceasing Labor and the Limits of a Wage

Ghulam Mustafa and his community had three different homes in five years. Even though they labored on the railways for more than a generation, they had no legible or legitimate claim to the land on which they lived. Their status as “poor Makranis” merely gave them the right to purchase another piece of land at an altered rate. As they moved to their third home they were told that their right to rent this particular piece of land also had stipulations. Since the new plot was near the railways they were required to “put up a model village.” Each house needed to be constructed along “model lines” which included, among other things, the addition of a “uniform strip of 30 feet width” between their homes and the railway lines. Furthermore, they were only permitted to purchase the land “subject to the condition that the plots will be held on restricted tenure.” This measure ensured that they would not attempt to profiteer off the land.

The new plot of land was also not of the same value as their previous home near the Bohri graveyard. U.M. Mirchandani, the Collector at Hyderabad, admitted that the land was of “very poor soil, and also contains many pits which would require quite a good amount to fill up.” This fact meant that upkeep costs would be consistently high. There was much discussion about how much the government of Sindh should charge the Makranis for the land. The Mukhtiar and the Deputy Collector recommended that the new plot be granted to the Makranis at a concessional rate of 50 rupees per acre and a reduced altered assessment of 25 rupees per annum. Mirchandani agreed, but the Revenue Department’s Secretary overruled him: he concurred with charging the community an altered Malkano (i.e., an official one-time land purchase rate) but not a reduced yearly assessment.

The Secretary’s reasoning for rejecting his subordinates’ suggestions was precise. He insisted that the financial obligation was “by no means heavy as the Makranis get fairly good wages for the work they do. They work as coolies and their work is unceasing.” It is worth spending some time reflecting on the significance of this statement. The Secretary relied on the fact that the Makranis earned wages to justify a higher assessment rate. After reading scores

of documents repeating the refrain that the Makranis were poor and barely able to survive, this assertion is striking. The myth that wage work was sufficient to create prosperity and a livelihood was operating in this instance to great effect. This discourse worked its way into this obscure eviction case to limit the obligations of the colonial state to this particular group of Makrani subjects. It was a direct claim about the superiority of free wage labor and the marvels of technology over the capriciousness of subsistence agricultural activities. “Unceasing” presumably meant that wage labor was not seasonal but constant throughout the year. Unlike the uncertainty of the weather and of nature, it was symbolic of the new temporal order or “time-sense” that the railways had ushered in.

However, the double connotation of “unceasing” also gives us a window into the economic reality that work needed to be relentless, daily, and unending without rest. The Makrani wage laborers had the “freedom” to sell their labor on the market and were given the opportunity to do so by the railway. However, they had to work constantly for this privileged access to wages and therefore cash. Not for a moment were they entitled to it. In the eyes of the colonial state, by guaranteeing the Makranis wages, it was legitimate to conclude that they should be responsible for themselves. Of course, the complete inadequacy of wage work to procure a livelihood for the Makranis was clear. In his petition, Ghulam Mustafa described their economic insecurity:

As most of the people of our community are labourers in the Railway Transit Yard at Hyderabad Station where they hardly earn six to eight annas a day per head. This amount is not even sufficient for maintaining one’s family. We are therefore living from hand to mouth also with difficulty ... we have nothing left to ourselves to go and settle on some other land.

It is little wonder that Makranis were painted as troublesome or unreliable labor in colonial sources. Abstentions from work, higher wage demands, and refusals to be evicted were all rational responses to a social and economic environment in which they relied heavily on the market to purchase what they needed and on wages to pay for it. In the eyes of the colonial state, however, they were more autonomous and “free” than peasants or groups trapped in feudal or pre-modern social relationships.⁷⁶ Given these myths around the power of the wage, begging for and appealing to the benevolence and

⁷⁶ Interestingly, several scholars note that Makranis helped establish the earliest labor unions in Sindh (Kamran Asdar Ali, “The Strength of the Street Meets the Strength of the

charity of bureaucrats and officials as “poor coolies” could, for the Makranis, only go so far.

10 Conclusion

It is possible to situate the displacements experienced by the Makranis analyzed in this article within a broader history of informal settlements in colonial and postcolonial Sindh. Scholarship often pays attention to how these settlements were built, managed, and destroyed in urban settings such as Karachi.⁷⁷ Histories of the Lyari area of Karachi show how migrating groups like Makranis made new claims of belonging in this multiethnic urban space and that these claims were powerful forces in creating the city and its working class.⁷⁸ While many tie the disenfranchisement of the working class in Lyari to property regimes emergent in the postcolonial state, this case shows how belonging and land ownership were already fraught in Sindh during the colonial era.

The events described in this article demonstrate the precarious world of the “free” wage labor regimes erected in Sindh and the Bombay Presidency following imperial and capitalist expansion into the Sindhi countryside. Whether or not all Makranis trace their history to being liberated from slavery by a heroic British Empire, this case shows us that “unceasing” free wage labor that was celebrated in the wake of abolition could never be enough – for anyone. At the same time, another imperial promise (i.e., the expending of energy on the construction of infrastructural projects such as railways and other public works) that would grant workers to new ways of travelling, working, relating, and being in British India turned out to be severely limited.

At its core, the Makranis’ struggle was one about place, a physically delimited geographical space within which they could exist as a community. The myth of the liberating and sustaining value of wage labor belied the fact that ties to the land and nature remained crucial to the survival of all populations. The obstacles faced by the Makrani Jamait in this case poignantly illustrate the stakes of *not* having access to land, links to the local community, or the ability to translate labor into belonging.

State: The 1972 Labor Struggle in Karachi,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 [2005]: 83–107.

77 Nausheen S. Anwar, “Receding Rurality, Booming Periphery Value Struggles in Karachi’s Agrarian-Urban Frontier,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 53.12 (2018): 46–54.

78 Suhail and Lutfi, 891–907.