

Call for Papers

South Asians Globally: Im/mobile Workers and Dependencies

***An International Workshop, Bonn Centre for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS),
University of Bonn, 10–11th February 2027***

Migration studies have long been hampered by entrenched binaries: free versus unfree, choice versus coercion, regulated versus unregulated. Recent works in global labour and migration history have moved decisively past these oppositions, reconceptualising these binaries as co-constitutive and relational rather than as normative poles. What was historically coded as “free” or “unfree” migration was never a natural condition but the product of state regulation, legal and extra-legal ordering, racialised classification, and Eurocentric epistemologies that cast certain forms of mobility as freedoms and others as their absence. Labour im/mobilities and mobilisation and immobilisation are constitutively entangled: the conditions that set people in motion co-produce the conditions that arrest them. Mobility is always more than transit between source and destination as it is entwined with the layered relations and structures of power that precede, shape, and outlast the movement itself.

This workshop takes up these questions with a sustained focus on South Asian im/mobilities from the early modern period to the present. Its central analytical framework is that of Strong Asymmetrical Dependencies (SADs), a concept that urges scholars to move beyond the slavery–freedom binary to encompass the full spectrum of compulsion, constraint, and choices. The workshop adopts a broad definition of “worker,” and a range of labour relations (including but not limited to debt bondage, indenture and non-indenture labour, convict labour, *corvée*, tributary and military labour, domestic servitude). Through these relations and its intersections with everyday forms of coercion and agency, the workshop aims to interrogate how SADs structure and constrain mobile South Asian workers and communities, and how such dependencies are reproduced, navigated, and transformed across the arc of migration itself.

A key analytical orientation is the recognition that coercion and choice may both operate and co-exist at three distinct moments of any migrant labour regime: *entry* into it, *extraction* of labour within it, and *exit* from it. Neither coercion nor consent is the exclusive property of any one moment at any given axis- temporal, spatial or structural. A migrant may enter a labour arrangement through ostensible consent, mediated by kinship and caste networks, customary obligation and advance payments, yet find extraction governed by debt, contractual obligation, and intermediary control that forecloses exit. The plantation worker tied to a contract, the agrarian labourer bonded to a master, the convict assigned to *corvée*, the domestic worker confined within a household, the migrant bound to a broker, the displaced community caught between borders- each figure embodies overlapping registers

of mobility and immobility, freedom and unfreedom. This forms an important aspect that the workshop sets out to theorise. Coercion is, therefore, not a fixed attribute of a given migration stream but a variable, situationally distributed condition. This analytic also opens space for attending to the full range of workers' responses: from survival strategies and everyday resistances to petitions, litigation, unionism and collective action as expressions of situated, often fleeting, agency within relations of asymmetric dependency.

The workshop pays particular attention to the infrastructures of im/mobility that mediate these moments: caste, kinship, village, and diaspora networks; labour brokers and intermediaries; advance-debt and contract (verbal and written) systems; and the overlapping legal and extra-legal orders, environmental determinants, and bureaucratic governance that, across the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, simultaneously governed migration and were renegotiated by it. How these infrastructures both facilitated movement and reproduced SADs, and how the same networks and instruments were utilised to pursue survival, accumulation, social mobility, subsistence, or escape, is a central question of the workshop. The workshop lays emphasis on examining how SADs mutate and persist within a mobility regime, and how workers negotiate them, even as they are shaped by them.

The workshop also invites papers that analyse migrants and migration governance as a core part of early modern agrarian policy and state formations, as well as anti-colonial rhetorics, mass mobilization, and ethnonationalist claim-making in colonial and post-colonial societies. Papers analysing these themes to understand the transformations in migrants' experiences and mobility regimes are encouraged. The persisting racial segmentation of labour markets, majoritarianism, and anti-migrant xenophobia and propaganda continue to shape conditions of incorporation and exclusion, citizenship struggles, and legal battles of migrants globally. Tracing the interlinkages and interconnection in governance of migration, labour control, and belonging through immigration policies and regulations, the workshop aims to bring the historical and the contemporary into conversation.

The workshop also foregrounds questions of evidence and method. Contributors are encouraged to adopt a global, connected, comparative, and entangled approach to examining migrant experiences and transformations in migration streams. The lives of migrant workers were rarely self-authored, and their traces in official archives are fragmented and shaped by the categories of empire, capital, and the nation-state. Petitions, court records, testimonies, account books, oral histories, letters, songs, diaries, film, and popular literature are not supplementary sources but crucial for reconstructing the experiences of those whose lives were structured by SADs. Interdisciplinary contributions from history, sociology, anthropology, law, and literary studies examining a diverse range of sources and archives are welcome. Submissions are particularly encouraged from early-career scholars, postdoctoral researchers, and those in the final stages of their doctoral dissertations, as well as researchers based in South Asia and the broader Global South.

Potential themes that the papers may address, but are not limited to:

- Indenture and non-indenture labour, convict labour, corvée, infrastructural labour, slave labour, servants, military labour, dock labour, child and gendered labour.
- Debt bondage, advances, penal regimes, and contracts and their circumvention
- Legal, extra-legal, quasi-legal, illegal and the juridical infrastructure of migration governance
- Intermediaries, recruiters, labour brokers, and non-state actors
- Itinerant figures: nomads, “criminal tribes,” religious mendicants, sailors, soldiers, traffickers.
- Resistance and survival strategies and collective actions of migrant workers
- Internal, inter-regional, transoceanic, and trans-imperial and trans-national migration networks; transit zones and soft-bordering;
- Climate-induced, conflict-driven, and displacement-related migration and its consequences, such as the separation of families, displacement, dispossession, statelessness, legal battles, and citizenship struggles.
- Native–migrant relations, politics, and propaganda.
- Proto-industrialisation, deindustrialisation, and neoliberal labour market restructuring, and rural–urban transformation
- Caste, village, kinship, and diasporic networks as infrastructures of dependency and mobility
- Life histories and testimonies
- Tools and methods of migration governance: passports, permits, visas, quotas, documentation, border controls and security, etc.)
- Migrants’ voices and representation in film, caricatures, legal cases, literature, periodicals, and popular culture.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of up to 500 words with a brief biography (100 words) to mobilitysouthasia@gmail.com by 20th September 2026. Any queries can also be directed to the same email. Selected participants will be notified by early November 2026 and invited to submit a draft paper of 4,000–5,000 words by 10th January 2027. The workshop will take place on 10th -11th February 2027 at the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS), University of Bonn. We will offer support for travel and accommodation expenses of the selected participants without institutional funding. The details will be shared upon acceptance.

Organizers - Ayesha Hussain, Postdoctoral Fellow, BCDSS; Nabhojeet Sen, Doctoral Researcher, BCDSS; Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal, Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow, BCDSS/Assistant Professor, University of Delhi.