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Natasha Pairaudeau, *Mobile Citizens: French Indians in Indochina, 1858-1954*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2016. xx + 370 pp. Illustrations, maps, portraits, bibliography, and index. \$32.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-8-7769-4159-8.

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Memories of this reviewer's childhood in the Mekong delta weave together the taste of the spicy cakes sold by the Indian street vendor, the sight of colorful silk and cotton fabric bolts piled high in the market stalls ruled over by debonair Indian merchants, the fragrance of incense burning at the local Indian temple, and the math classes taught by the *Thầy Ấn Độ* [Indian teacher] at the local lycée. Vietnamese in the south know them as *chà già* [Southern pronunciation of *Chà Vã*], omnipresent yet invisible, stereotyped in Vietnamese culture as cutthroat usurers or wielders of black magic.[1] They were known in French-speaking milieus as *Pondichériens* or *Français de l'Inde*. But who they were, whence they came, the roles they played, and the interactions they had with the outside world were among many unanswered questions that have rarely attracted the attention of scholars. Often subsumed with other migrant groups or treated as a historical excursus, they had seldom been the focus of in-depth studies, a fact which, according to Daniel Leplat, results from "the rather small size, the diversity of the cultures...the legal statutes that characterized the Indian community in colonial Indochina." [2]

Natasha Pairaudeau's *Mobile Citizens: French Indians in Indochina, 1858-1954* fills this lacuna by examining this small Indian migrant community of Indochina in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. She traces the journey accomplished by French Indians who, seeking a better future, departed from the "French Establishments in India," the southeastern *comptoirs* of Pondicherry, Karikal, Chandernagore, etc. to follow their patrons in their eastward imperialist expansion. As they settled into the Vietnamese society of Cochinchina that had been freshly colonized by the French in the 1870s, the conflicting perceptions that these migrants, Indian by origin but French of citizenship, generated in the eyes of the host society and of the French--theoretically their fellow citizens--were to evolve over time and affect every aspect of all the lives involved.

They were French Indians issued from both ends of the Indian social hierarchy, French-educated minority as well as pariahs; they were for the most part Tamil Catholics who, once established in the urban centers of Indochina, fulfilled the administrative, economic, and military needs of the French conquest in its early stages. As full-fledged French citizens with salaries and voting rights on a par with their European counterparts, they received preferential treatment by the colonial system, including even the terms of imprisonment (p. 60). This came as the result of renunciation, a choice that they had made back in India and which the transplanted generations in the following decades sustained and steadfastly protected.

The benefits afforded by French citizenship and the positions that these French Indians held within the colonial administration as well as their interactions with the colonial power situated them in the eyes of the Vietnamese as above them in the political hierarchy but "below" them in the racial one. The

resulting tensions between these communities led to measures within the Indian and the Vietnamese populations that were to affect the future of both, not only at the local level but equally at the national one. France as a colonial power but also as the formulator of human rights values had to modulate its policies—ambiguous and conflicting—vis-à-vis both communities based on the evolving political situation in Indochina, the metropole, and Asia.

Mobile Citizens comprises eight chapters, of which chapter one serves as an introduction, summarizing the work's critical arguments. Chapters two and three examine how the confluence of both the French Revolution and imperialism affected the application of the concept of citizenship to colonial subjects within the Indian community of the French *comptoirs* of India and in the colony of Cochinchina.

French imperialism in the eighteenth century carried a paradoxical character as it attempted to spread values issued from the French Revolution to the conquered land and peoples to “create French men and women of a different colour” through assimilation while imposing on them a continued subjugation (p. 36). Reactions varied depending on the type of colonies that the citizenship project affected. Plantation colonies such as St. Domingue wholeheartedly accepted it. However, when applied to cultures that historically had practiced non-Western customs and beliefs, this endeavor encountered unexpected difficulties, as the citizenship process included two inalienable rights, that of “electoral franchise” and “civil equality.” The latter, which encompassed matters related to marriage, family, and inheritance, was rejected in predominantly Muslim societies, as it was thought to interfere in Sharia practices and customary law.

In French India, the authorities had adopted a policy of non-interference in customs and religious beliefs, leading to the legal distinction made between *électeurs* and *citoyens*, the former being able to vote for representatives but lacking the full protection that was granted the latter by the French Civil Code. To become full-fledged French citizens, Indians of Pondicherry in 1870 remedied this situation by petitioning the authorities and declaring their willingness to renounce their indigenous civil practices and “to consent instead to be judged by the French Civil Code” (p. 43). Their efforts succeeded when the 1881 decree officially created a category known as the *renonçants* within the French *comptoirs* of India.

As they settled in the Mekong delta, these Indians—in majority Tamil Catholic *renonçants*—formed a separate community of French Asians who went to work not only in all French-connected colonial activities, as enforcers of law and order as well as administrators, but also in fields where Indians traditionally had participated such as finance and trade or those connected to livestock such as drivers of bullock carts or suppliers of milk (pp. 99-103).

The author's reflection on the Indian migrant flows from India to Indochina is not restricted to the French Indian renouncers of the *comptoirs* but extends to include *non-renonçants* as well as migrants from the adjacent British-controlled territories, Tamil communities of the south, Nattukottai Chettiar money lenders, and Sindhi merchants who formed a vast kinship and business network linking its members into one of Southeast Asia's most powerful communities. This migration benefited the upper Indian castes as well as so-called untouchables who could break the caste barrier through their conversion to Catholicism, their acquisition of French citizenship, and, along with the Tamil Nadu-originated *Vellala* agrarian castes, obtain administrative positions, albeit subaltern ones, an opportunity not afforded them in the Indian Civil Service (ICS).

In chapters four and five, Pairaudeau addresses the question of the French Indians' voting rights and their ever-fluctuating *renonçants* status in Cochinchina as she contrasts them to the natives' poorer political representation or lack thereof (p. 119). Contradicting the affirmation of republican values in the aftermath of the Third Republic, the administration in Cochinchina hardened its rule and distanced itself from the natives through increasingly restrictive and repressive measures. Citizenship was now considered as a right granted only to “deserving French subjects” after they had passed the more

rigorous process of naturalization (p. 58). Caught in the backlash of the “true citizen” debate, French Indian renouncers through legal representations succeeded in having their citizenship rights officially confirmed by the French Supreme Court (pp. 138, 167).

Pairaudeau equally brings forth the inescapable question of race as understood, defined, and practiced within European-dominated colonial Asia, where every discourse was modulated along the lines of relatively defined racial purity, and where its actors identified themselves diversely as of “pure European stock,” of Eurasian parentage, or as *Créole* or *Français de l’Inde*, or as native. Colonial authorities did not hesitate to resort to racial and acclimatization theories to justify special treatment accorded Europeans (p. 193). Even though shielded by their legal status as French citizens, the Indians in Cochinchina could not escape the turmoil created by the racial boundaries established between the colonial masters and subject peoples. The consideration of French Indians’ racial position within a colonial environment became a nagging problem that affected pragmatic aspects such as the question of whether French Indians—as Asian agents—could enjoy the generous pension funds afforded to European employees (pp. 157-66). In most cases, legal definitions notwithstanding, racial considerations determined the outcomes.

Chapters six and seven develop the racial motif, as the author identifies the so-called “native” constructions of a parallel racial hierarchy based on skin color, a mirror image of the European one in which the colonized fervently “embraced racial thinking” as reflected in the interactions between French Indians and their colonized counterparts at the educated and grassroots level. Cochinchinese intellectuals such as the southern lawyer, French-citizen Gilbert Chiếu, articulated anti-Chinese and Indian sentiments in numerous articles in the weekly *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* [Modern Literature of the Six Provinces]; members of the Constitutionalist Party, including Bùi Quang Chiếu, were openly hostile to the Indian French’s privileges, which they targeted in the newspaper *La Tribune Indigène* (pp. 195-205). At the grassroots level, racial tensions turned violent in the 1920s and 1930s over daily-life aspects related to the Indian-as-tax collector, -as-milkman, or -as-husband. The latter manifestation produced aggressive reactions among Vietnamese families faced with kinship with peoples considered “black” (p. 227). Nevertheless, Pairaudeau stresses that, “[a]lthough racially-based prejudice existed, it was not a constant source of tension in relations between Vietnamese and Indians in Cochinchina,” and that racial tensions tended to spike during economic crises (p. 195).

As nationalism arose in the aftermath of the First World War, French Indians, wounded by Vietnamese nationalists’ racially-tinted hostility, defended themselves by “raising the Indian public profile” through the founding of numerous associations and Franco-Tamil newspapers, some, like the *Saigon-Dimanche*, more politically strident than others. The survival reflex that had led French Indians to defend their status under colonial rule prompted them to search for a viable past of connections not only to the colonial power but also to ancient “Greater India”—aided in this by extensive scholarly works on archaeology and the history of Indochina. For all that, the French-Indian community was hardly immune to strife between itself and *non-renoncants*, British-influenced, Muslim Indian expatriates, and between the larger Indian and non-Indian communities.

Chapter eight shows that the links to and interactions with India intensified from the 1930s as the historical homeland was struggling to liberate itself from British dominion. The Indian French citizens were forced to “negotiate nationalisms,” shifting allegiances between forces of occupation (Vichy France and militarist Japan), clashing ideologies (Communism vs. nationalism), and contending “brands of nationalism” (that of the Indian National Congress vs. that of Japan-influenced Subash Chandra Bose) (pp. 286-89). They were caught between the Vietnamese, who vilified them as “imperial collaborators,” and the Gaullists and Vichy French, who questioned their loyalty (pp. 274-83). As India won independence, the Indian community of Indochina became one of its objects of diplomatic concern through negotiations with French authorities and the Communist and non-Communist governments of Vietnam. The 1956 Treaty of Cession between France and India delineated the fate of the French Indian

communities of Indochina, forcing them to choose their nationalities and ultimately pushing them on the road to exile as another conflict loomed (p. 315).

But where could they go? Back to Pondicherry, in an India they no longer knew? To France, where they would become “some of the earliest occupants of Paris’s post-war suburbs,” or to post-colonial French outposts in Africa (p. 318)? Or, recently, back to Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, for nostalgic visits? According to Pairaudeau’s upbeat assessment, these Indian French citizens are not orphaned of home, of empire, or of citizenship, but are “very mobile citizens” who can claim linkages with all three (p. 27).

The question of citizenship and/or naturalization, subsumed under the themes of identity--national and ethnic--has become the center of debates not only in academia but also in public life across the world as it comes to grips with crises sparked by conflicts in the Middle East and the resulting refugee exodus. France’s colonial past of empires in Asia and in Africa followed by long, costly wars of national independence have resulted in its acceptance of millions of non-Western refugees from a mosaic of religious and ethnic backgrounds into its own society--predominantly Catholic and white, proud of its republican, secular values. Inevitably clashes arose, and the strength of the National Front in the presidential elections of 2017 is the latest sign that solutions must be found to questions of immigration, cultural identity, assimilation, and citizenship. Although Natasha Pairaudeau’s study does not directly address the present refugee crisis, her work allows us to approach it from the point of view of the migrants’ experiences with adaptation to and adoption of citizenship in another time and another continent.

Unlike most studies on migrant flows, on overseas Indian communities, on Indochina and Vietnam, which are typically circumscribed territorially and nationally, Pairaudeau’s work adopts a transnational approach that links the Indian subcontinent to Indochina and specifically to Cochinchina, while remaining cognizant of the metropole’s inherent causality. The author equally rejects the binary frameworks--whether à la John Furnivall’s “plural society” or ruling Europeans vs. ruled natives--of postcolonial studies. Instead, she chooses to take an inclusive, integrated approach by demonstrating that the Indian communities in Indochina were neither passive nor “marginalized, self-contained” entities but were active agents of change inspiring reactions, reforms, and evolution within the colonial society, the different Asian and European communities, and above all with relation to their Vietnamese “others” as the latter struggled to liberate themselves from French rule.

It is difficult to find significant flaws with such a richly detailed and abundantly documented work based on tri-lingual archival research and numerous interviews on several continents. Still, questions linger. The author’s geographic and historical scope is mainly on the French Indians of Saigon, with but scattered references to those of Hanoi. Despite claims of breaking geographic boundaries, her study does so only on a meta-level while failing to address the situation in other urban settlements in Indochina such as Phnom Penh or Vientiane. Were the French Indian community’s experiences there similar to those in Saigon, given a common French-Indianness? Or did the circumstances of Saigon and Cochinchina uniquely shape the experiences of those French-Indians?

NOTES

[1] Pairaudeau explains that *Chà Và* was “employed in the nineteenth century to identify Javanese traders in southern Vietnam,” but “was expanded...to include Malays,... and Indian migrants” (pp. 197-98).

[2] Daniel Leplat, “The Chinese, the Indians and the French Exchange Control during the French Indochinese War or How to Endure, Fight and Mock the Colonial Power (1945-1954),” in Hans Hägerdal, ed., *Responding to the West: Essays on Colonial Domination and Asian Agency* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2009), p. 121.

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