

## Asia and Mauritius: Penal Transportation in East India Co., 1787-1863

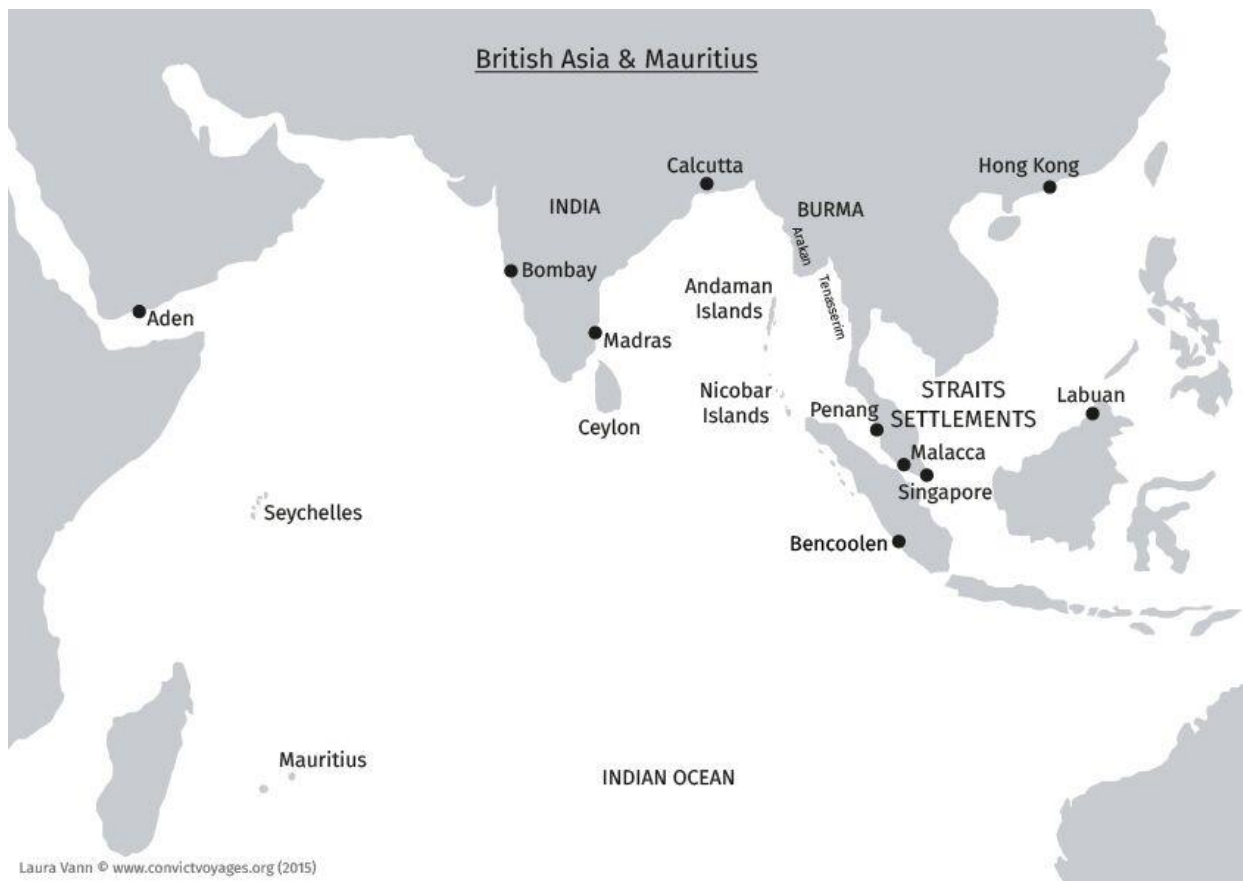
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Between 1787 and 1857, the East India Company (EIC) instituted radical changes in punishment in South Asia, across the three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, including the introduction of sentences of overseas penal transportation. In the pre-colonial era, criminal offenders had been punished through banishment from their hometowns or home districts. The EIC innovations were to tattoo convicts on the forehead (except in Bombay), to award sentences of transportation to specially established penal settlements, and to employ convicts in forced labour there.

Convicts were transported for a range of offences, such as dacoity (gang robbery), murder or attempted murder (including infanticide), robbery with violence, burglary and theft. They were usually transported for periods of seven or fourteen years, or for life. Prisoners serving sentences of imprisonment or banishment could also apply for transportation. The destinations and number of convicts so transported were as follows:

<b>Aden, 1841-50</b>	150
<b>Andaman Islands, 1793-96</b>	30
<b>Bencoolen, 1787-1825</b>	2,000
<b>Arakan and Tenasserim Provinces, Burma 1828-57</b>	6,000
<b>Mauritius, 1815-37</b>	1500
<b>Penang, Malacca and Singapore (known as Straits Settlements after 1823), 1790-1857</b>	20,000

Occasionally, after a second offence, Indian convicts were re-transported to other penal colonies, including Robben Island (Cape Colony) and New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Australia). They might also suffer local imprisonment, if they committed further indictable offences, or if leprous be transferred to a leper colony, such as Isle Curieuse in the Seychelles. From the 1830s to 1860s, convicts were shipped from the Straits Settlements and Burma to mainland Indian jails too, including the district prisons of the Bengal, Bombay and Madras presidencies. The colony of Labuan also received around 500 convicts from Hong Kong, during the period 1851-80. Convict transportation in EIC and colonial Asia and Mauritius was, then, multi-directional, sometimes circular, and connected both to other sites of confinement and to other penal colonies across the British Empire.



Across the settlements, convicts were organized into work gangs, usually through a system of classification that provided incentives for good conduct and punishment for bad behaviour. One distinct element of the penal settlements was that well conducted, long service convicts were employed as warders (tindals). At the other end of the penal scale was the chain gang, in which the most refractory convicts were kept. Convicts could be moved up and down this class system, depending on time served and compliance with the regime. Their ultimate goal was the acquisition of a ticket of leave, with permission to live outside the barracks and to take paid work.

When settlements were newly established, convicts mainly laboured on public works, including in the building and repair of buildings, roads and bridges. A few were appropriated for private employment, including on sugar plantations and in logging, though this was heavily criticized and became less common as time passed. After infrastructural needs were met, occupations diversified, and convicts were employed in a variety of ways, including as carpenters, blacksmiths, gardeners, weavers, and potters; at silk and coffee cultivation; or as servants, clerks and grooms. The large majority of convicts were men; women made up a tiny number of transportees: 5% at most. They were mainly kept at "domestic" work, including cleaning and sewing. Many formed relationships with their male compatriots.

Coalescing with the convict flows to the penal settlements described so far were a few transported political prisoners, who were sent to the same destinations but made subject to a different regime. For example, soldiers transported to the Straits Settlements and Burma after the Anglo-Sikh Wars of the 1840s lived separately from the ordinary Indian convicts in places like Singapore and Moulmein. Kandyan rebels were sent from Ceylon to Mauritius during the 1810s and 1820s, and again were kept apart from the headquarters of the penal settlement. Ordinary Indian convicts were even employed as their servants. The subaltern rebels described above were not treated differently to

other offenders, however, revealing that status played an important role in the organisation of the settlements.

Where free labour was available to hire, convicts were usually perceived as cheaper, as notwithstanding the cost of their shipment, lodging and rations, they were unpaid. Certainly, they were both easier to control and more expendable than local workers. Because of the demands of public works, convicts were often placed in semi-mobile work gangs, living in temporary huts, and so had remarkable freedom of movement. This was so much so that it was often the subject of contemporary comment. Observers also frequently criticised occupations that did not constitute “hard labour.”

But convict labour was a persistent feature of EIC and imperial expansion. Convicts were pioneers in colonisation; providing the necessary labour to establish new settlements. Transportation fell from favour once this work was complete, and especially when other forms of labour became available. By the 1850s in Singapore, for example, the growing merchant community began to complain that the presence of convicts in the port city would deter further development, and in particular free settlement. In contrast, it has been suggested that convicts drove free labour out of Burma, because it could not compete with unwaged penal gangs. Moreover, the kind of work that convicts did became stigmatised, and free labourers refused to accept it.

It is important not to lose sight of convict perspective in writing histories of penal transportation in British Asia. As a state managed system, there exist remarkably detailed records of their antecedents, and extensive sets of reports and correspondence on the various settlements. It is possible to tease out of these archives a sense of how some convicts responded to their fate. A good example of this is convict resistance, which could be subtle and everyday or violent and spectacular, and how it shaped work practices, cultural and social life. Convicts had a surprising degree of agency, and adopted strategies such as reporting themselves sick or downing tools to avoid work. Their mass resistance could be extraordinarily brutal and retributive. One 1817 convict uprising on a Mauritian sugar plantation led to the largest criminal trial conducted on the island since the British takeover. An 1854 convict ship mutiny in the Bay of Bengal produced so many defendants that the trial had to be conducted in the Calcutta Town Hall, as they could not fit into the court room.

Convict transportation to Burma, the Straits Settlements and Mauritius is little remembered today. After liberation and abolition most convicts settled down and married local wives, thus merging with the free communities. There are convict descendants in these places, but no self-acknowledged convict-descended community, as exists in the Andaman Islands (a penal colony between 1858-1945). A few plaques dot the landscape of places like Singapore, which remember the convicts' role in the building of the port. There, the famous “saint soldier” of the Anglo-Sikh wars remains at the heart of the city's *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). The most tangible legacy, however, was perhaps the ongoing use of Indians (especially Sikhs) as warders in the prison service, in Burma and the Straits, into the 1970s.

### **Further Reading**

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