

**Abolition in India: Law, Order Making, and Defining “Slavery” in the Colonial Archive (1843-1930)**

Panel Title:

*Imperial Constructs and Difference: Contestations and Durabilities*

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**Abstract**

That "slavery" was even present, let alone a significant feature of Indian society - eight to nine million according to some estimates - came as a shock to abolitionists, British parliamentarians, and East India Company officials. In response, it was claimed that there were no two institutions more different than "East" and "West" Indian slavery. Indeed the persistence of this belief in the exceptional, benign nature of Indian slavery permeated the abolition experience in India, leading to a highly selective process of highlighting some, and obscuring other forms of enslavement. This paper focuses on colonial Sindh in the period following the legal abolition of slavery on the subcontinent, signified by the Indian Slave Act of 1843. By examining a collection of legal cases, judicial decisions and commentary, and reports by political agents, this paper uncovers processes of "recognition" of slavery by colonial agents, exploring how "unfree" labour came to be defined vis-à-vis the multiple varieties of social and labor relationships that characterized Indian society. Focusing particularly on cases involving "bound" labor in Sindh, I situate these processes of sorting, and naming forced labour, impressed labour, and debt as part of the global, order making strategies of empire focused on the legal codification of categories in general, and "slavery" and "free" labor in particular. This paper, therefore, speaks to the general claim that empire not only constructed differences between colonizer and colonized, but also differentiated between colonized "Others" in ways that justified alternative strategies of legal intervention and rule.