

Empire and the Making of Personal Status

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Natasha Pairaudeau, 'The shaping and deployment of personal status in French India and Indochina'

The upholding of indigenous personal status in French India (the right of local people to retain their 'caste and customs' in matters regarding marriage, inheritance and children) can be traced through one line of descent to the same practice in British India. Yet in the wider post-revolutionary French empire, 'personal status' was also an important stake in the project of making citizens out of colonised peoples. In the late 1800s, when a small group of Indians in Pondicherry insisted on their right to be regulated by the French Civil Code, Indians in the French possessions became free to choose whether they wished to continue to subscribe to their indigenous personal status or to 'renounce' it in favour of French civil status. This legal arrangement, coupled with a migrant flow of French Indians to Indochina from the same period, provides us now with a rare opportunity to examine more closely the motives and agency of ordinary people with regards to the decisions they made and values they attached to the retention or renunciation of their indigenous personal status. The French in their Indian possessions saw the retention of indigenous personal status as one means of maintaining social order, but the practice existed in tension with the Republican project of legally and socially assimilating peoples ruled by France overseas. In Indochina the underlying economic importance of the regulation of marriage and the family emerges more strongly, both in French insistence on upholding the indigenous personal status of Asian migrants and in anomalies in the ways in which Indian migrants used, and mis-used, their personal status.