

**Indian Migrant Labourers in South-east Asian  
and Assam Plantations under the  
British Imperial System**

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**V.V. Giri National Labour Institute**



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\* Association of Indian Labour Historians

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## Preface

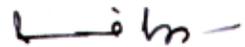
The Integrated Labour History Research Programme, a collaborative professional endeavour of V.V. Giri National Labour Institute and Association of Indian Labour Historians was initiated in July 1998 with the objective of initiating, integrating and reviving historical research on labour history. The programme has now emerged as one of the most important professional activities related to labour history globally. The programme has three mutually reinforcing components: Digital Archives of Indian Labour; Writing Labour History; Interdisciplinary research. Leading scholars and practitioners have contributed their research papers as a part of the Writing Labour History component. This essay, *Indian Migrant Labourers in South-east Asian and Assam Plantations under the British Imperial System* by Prof. Rana Behal is one of the most recent and important contributions in this regard.

Modern industrial capitalism and the consequent colonisation by the British of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world triggered the massive mobilisation of Indian agrarian communities across these diverse geographical localities. The growing demand for raw materials and other tropical agricultural products in the West opened up large-scale and sparse geographical spaces by the European capital for the production of such commodities for export. Modern plantations growing crops such as coffee, tea and rubber were set up in South-east Asian colonies of Malaya and Ceylon, and Assam on the Indian sub-continent, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This scholarly paper by Prof. Rana Behal studies the pattern of recruitment and transportation of a very diverse range of Indian agrarian communities from different geographical locations to work as labourers in these settings. The paper focuses on two important areas of this labour mobilisation and transportation: (a) the agencies of recruitment, i.e. European recruiting agents, indigenous kangannies, sirdars and arkatis and (b) the nature and the process of transforming immigrant Indian agrarian communities working on the plantations.

I would like to express our sincere appreciation to Prof. Rana Behal for this important contribution. In fact, Prof. Rana Behal is one of the

founding members of the ILHRP and he has been a great source of support for each of its activities.

I sincerely hope that researchers and practitioners concerned with labour studies will find this article inspiring.



(Manish Kumar Gupta)  
Director General  
V.V. Giri National Labour Institute

# Indian Migrant Labourers in South-east Asian and Assam Plantations under the British Imperial System

Rana P. Behal<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The subject of migration across geographical spaces and localities, both past and present, has attracted a wide range of interdisciplinary scholarship in academia. A diverse range of conceptual tools and terminologies has been applied to the study of cross-border and inland migratory practices. As per the focus of this edited volume on the multi-local mobility and networks across Asia of diverse communities, this paper aims at a comparative study of South Asian labour migration flows across the Bay of Bengal into South East Asia and the subcontinent during colonial rule. In what way did these labour flows impact Indian migrant communities in the long term? And what kind of relationship evolved between them and the indigenous communities at the place of arrival across time and space?

Modern industrial capitalism and the consequent colonisation by the British of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world triggered a massive mobilisation of Indian agrarian communities across these diverse geographical localities. The growing demand for raw materials and other tropical agricultural products in the West opened up large-scale plantations for the production of such commodities for export, and the labour force was mobilised from different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Between 1834 and 1937, an estimated 30 million migrants from India went to the overseas colonies of the British Empire, such as Burma, Ceylon, British Malaya, Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean and East Africa. Nearly 98 per cent of the total movement out of India during the colonial period was made by labourers (Mckeown 2004; Mohapatra 2007; Amrith 2011). For the past few decades the concept of transnationalism has been in vogue in migration studies (Vertovec 2004), and while the concept has been a useful tool for analysing contemporary diaspora societies, its applicability to colonial migratory flows is problematic. This notion eschews the role of capital in the mobilisation of millions of people across time and space in general. Labour flows under the imperial systems were driven by the growing demand for labour by Britain for its overseas plantation enterprises during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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Modern plantations as agro-industries were set up as major enterprises by British capital in several locations. Sugar, coffee, tea and rubber emerged as the most significant products of colonial plantations set up in Assam, Bengal and South India, Ceylon and Malaya in South East Asia, for a growing global market. Nineteenth-century Asian plantations were similar to their Atlantic counterparts in that both utilised indentured labour (except Ceylon) transported to the plantations over long distances and employed under contractually-specific conditions (Northrup 1995). The two most important aspects of indentured servitude were, first, the provision that a breach of contract resulted in criminal prosecution, and second, the widespread penal sanctions granted to planters. It was the lack of freedom inherent in indenture, namely the inability of the worker to withdraw his/her labour to bargain over the terms of a contract or for higher wages, that led to it being viewed as a “new system of slavery” (Tinker 1974; Rodney 1981). There are contesting views, with an emphasis on the economic rationality of a system, which, revisionist historians argue, benefited employers and labourers alike. It was a rational and deliberate choice on the part of emigrants, prompted by hopes of bettering their future, to find an “escape hatch” from social and economic oppression (Galenson 1984; Emmer 1986). These arguments, emphasising the benefits of indenture, are very similar to those advanced by contemporary defenders of the indentured system, notably planters and colonial officials.

This paper attempts to tell the story of marginalised Indian agrarian communities, who were economically depressed as a consequence of colonial land revenue policies and became the hunting ground for recruitment and transportation as emigrant labour for plantations in Assam, Ceylon and Malaya. I will study the comparative aspects of different recruitment systems adopted for mobilising labour in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The study will focus on two important aspects of labour mobilisation and transportation: (a) the networks of recruiters across spatial boundaries and localities, which operated under the control and supervision of the colonial state and the British, and (b) the nature and the process of transforming immigrants from Indian agrarian communities while working as labourers in enclaved, isolated and sparse geographical localities. In order to understand these processes we will have to place them within the larger context of the fluctuating fortunes of these colonial plantation enterprises in the world market, which affected the nature of demand and the supply of labour.

### **Colonial Capitalism**

With the onset of colonial rule, British capital investments in tropical Asian plantation enterprises started around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and

continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sugar in the 1830s and coffee in the 1870s in Malaya were followed by the 'rubber rush' at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sandhu 1969; Sundram 1993; Kaur 2006), coffee in the 1820s until its replacement by tea in the 1880s was a major industry in Ceylon (Heidemann 1992) and tea in the 1840s brought work to Assam (Griffiths 1967). One interesting feature common to these colonial plantations was the financial and management control executed by the managing agency houses. The emergence of these managing agency houses stimulated the amalgamation of smaller plantations into large-scale enterprises under their monopolistic control. The transition from proprietary to corporate ownership corresponded to the emergence of more monopolistic forms of capital. These managing agency houses, located in colonial and metropolitan cities such as Calcutta, Penang, Colombo, London and Glasgow, controlled and managed the production, transportation and marketing of plantation products in international markets. In some cases they also functioned as recruiting agents and transporters of emigrant labour (Sundram 1993; Forrest 1967; Bagchi 1972; Rungta 1970).

For the expansion and growth of these plantation enterprises in the three British colonies under study in this chapter, the colonial state provided generous assistance in the form of vast tracts of forestland at extremely cheap prices and on liberal terms, financial loans at very low interest rates and infrastructural facilities such as communications, ports, railways and roads. However, the most crucial aspect of the colonial state's assistance was the mobilisation of a large labour force from the agrarian hinterlands of the Indian subcontinent. Recruitment for Assam and Malaya was carried out under the indenture system. With the emergence of rubber plantations, Malaya shifted to the *kanagni* system of labour recruitment during the 1890s, while in Ceylon it had already been operating since the opening of the first coffee plantations. The two systems co-existed in Malaya until indenture was abolished in 1910. The common feature in both systems was the 'assisted' – an euphemism for employer-sponsored – nature of the emigration of Indian labour to these plantations. The true description of this mobilisation was contemporaneously coined the 'coolie-trade'. In the context of British planters' failure to persuade natives to work as coolies in their new enterprises, the idea of importing immigrant labour acquired greater significance (Sandhu 1969: 52; GOB:1861). The 'native' Malay, Ceylonese and Assamese were stigmatised as 'indolent' and 'lazy' by the planters and the colonial bureaucracy for their unwillingness to accept employment as coolies in the plantations (Griffiths 1967: 101; Assam Company Papers: 1941-44; Roberts 1966: 2). Thus began the large-scale mobilisation of the labour force, which continued for several decades through the networks of Indian intermediaries such as *sirdars*, *arakatis*

in the case of Assam plantations and *maistries* and *kanganies* for Malaya and Ceylon, respectively. They worked for and were under the control of European planters and their recruiting agents.

### Plantation Enterprise in Assam

In Assam, the commercial production of tea began in 1840. It expanded frenetically during the speculative boom, 'tea maina', during the 1860s. From the 1870s onward, plantation acreage increased dramatically and achieved the highest growth rate during the last 30 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a trend which would continue thereafter (Table 1). Tea production achieved tremendous growth throughout the period under study. Production figures grew from 24.3 million kilograms in 1885 to 64.1 million kilograms in 1900 and reached 117 million kilograms in 1940 (Tea Culture Reports: 1885, 1900; Indian Tea Statistics: 1940).

**Table 1: Area under Tea Cultivation in Assam 1872 to 1940**

Year	Hectares (thousands)
1872	11.3
1880	51.4
1882	60.2
1885	66.0
1890	77.2
1895	92.4
1900	112.8
1911	118.5
1920	140.5
1930	144.8
1940	146.8

Source: Tea Operations in Assam: 1873-1874; Tea Culture Reports: 1892-1926; Tea Statistics: 1930 and 1940.

### Recruitment and Indenture Regime in Assam

Table 2 shows that more than three million immigrant labourers were brought to Assam through sponsored recruitment over three-quarters of a century to work as coolies on the tea plantations. Unlike Ceylon and Malaya, the cost of passage was paid by the employers. One important feature of emigration to Assam, compared to Ceylon and Malaya, was the employment of a higher percentage of women and children (GOI 1891). A vast majority of the immigrants were recruited from among the tribal, aboriginal and low-caste agrarian communities of Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Ranchi, Palamau, Singbhum, Hazaribagh and Manbhum

districts of Eastern India, United Provinces and Central Provinces. The immigrants were routed from the catchment areas to Assam via Calcutta by railways, flats, steamers and walking with stopovers at depots owned by the recruiting agencies or contractors. The long and tedious journeys of the Assam steamers commuting on the river Brahmaputra usually took longer than the passages of the 'coolie ships' to Mauritius and reported significantly higher rates of mortality. Assam steamers were reporting death rates as high as 20 to 50% (GOB 1868; GOB 1874). Even though the indenture contract was formally fixed from three to five years, in practice a vast majority of the immigrants were re-employed, often through economic and physical coercion and due to the absence of repatriation provisions. Low wages and a system of advances and indebtedness tied them to the plantations far beyond their contract period. The short-term indenture contract for a vast majority became generational servitude.

**Table 2: Import of Emigrant Labour (Men, Women and Children) into Assam Tea Plantations 1873-1947**

Year	Numbers (thousands)
1873-80	287.0
1881-90	327.6
1891-1900	596.9
1901-10	367.2
1911-20	790.8
1921-30	361.5
1931-40	247.9
1941-47	293.9
Total	3,272.8

Source: Assam Labour Reports: 1873-1932; Emigrant Labour Reports: 1934-1947.

Long-distance recruiting was practically coterminous with the inception of tea plantations in Assam. The Assam Company, the first corporate tea company set up in 1839 in London, initially relied on European contractors to supply them with labour. These contractors worked through paid native agents who did the actual recruiting (Griffiths 1967). During the speculative 'tea mania' boom in Assam, the demand for labour grew dramatically. The planters farmed out the task of labour supply to private recruiting agencies in Calcutta which utilised the services of professional native recruiters, *arkattis*, who operated in various districts of Eastern India and forwarded the recruited coolies by rail to Calcutta, from where they were sent to Assam by river. However, the successful mobilisation of labour through these agencies came at the cost of very high mortality among emigrants during

the voyage and on reaching Assam, a tragic consequence of the 'coolie trade' during the 'tea mania' years. A Special Commission, appointed in July 1862 to investigate the whole affair, presented an appalling picture of misery, mortality and desertions among migrant labourers during transit (GOB 1868). This led to official intervention. The origin of colonial state intervention through legislations (Act III of 1863 and Act V of 1865), and the establishment of a penal contract system, has to be placed in the context of the rapid expansion during the early 1860s, when the appalling conditions of fraudulent recruitment agents and insanitary transportation led to high mortality rates and large-scale cases of absconding from the plantations – of the 85,000 labourers introduced into Assam between 1863 and 1866, no less than 35,000 were reported to have died or deserted (GOB 1868).

The legislation introduced an indenture system of penal contract, which sanctioned the prosecution and imprisonment of labourers for breach of contract and which granted planters the power to arrest labourers without a warrant for 'absconding'. The operations of the Workman' Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859 were extended to Assam in 1864 (GOI, 1906:136). Under these congenial legislative devices the indenture regime created the omnipotent authority of the planters over their immigrant labourers (RALEC 1906: 75). The indenture system was meant to ensure a cheap and plentiful labour supply that could be worked under a strict work regime supervised by the planters. The labour intensification strategies adopted for increasing production required immobilising immigrant labour within the confines of plantations. They were made to reside in the plantations under constant surveillance, both at work and in the workers' residences, known as coolie lines. To sustain the increasing demand of production and to prevent desertions, planters devised strategies to keep labourers under control, disciplined and intimidated. Physical coercion, flogging in particular, was a regular device to tame the labour force on the plantations. The right to privately arrest an absconder, provided under the penal system to planters, became an important tool in containing labour mobility significantly. Act I of 1882 and Act VI of 1901 reinforced the indenture contract system in modified forms. These legislative enactments laid and sustained the foundations of the indenture system in Assam tea plantations under which the recruitment of immigrant labour was carried on for more than a century. However, it failed to prevent desertions, and despite its 'protective' provisions, high rates of sickness and mortality prevailed among the immigrant labourers, who continued to fall prey to unscrupulous contractors indulging in abuse, deception and fraudulent practices (GOB 1868; GOB 1874; Behal and Mohapatra 1992; Behal 2007). Death and deception continued to haunt large numbers of immigrants who were brought to Assam to produce tea for the global market.

### *Recruiters: Arkattis and Sirdars*

The planters constantly complained of high recruitment costs and blamed the state regulatory provisions of the law. Since labour was the vital component of production costs, they campaigned to cut its price, in order to sustain profitability. They lobbied the government to modify legislation, and Act 1 of 1882 was passed for a 'free' recruitment system. The major features of the Act, namely deregulated emigration and freedom for local contracts, were designed clearly to serve the need of planters to regulate an expanding labour force. It is crucial to locate Act I of 1882 in the context of the strategy adopted by planters in the face of two important developments in the world market: first, the need to acquire the dominant position in exporting tea to the UK market, where the main rival was China, and second, the steady yet fluctuating decline of tea prices: between 1880 and 1900, tea prices fell by half. The planters' twofold response was to expand production at an unprecedented scale while simultaneously attempting to cut the costs of production, mostly labour costs (Behal and Mohapatra 1992).

Although the 1882 Act, which introduced the system of free or deregulated emigration, was designed to encourage private recruitment through garden *sirdars*, an immediate result, however, was the increase of unlicensed recruitment contractors, who outstripped their registered counterparts by a ratio of four to one (GOB 1883). The deregulated recruitment system had at its base the *arkatti*, or the village recruiter, and at its apex the great coolie recruiting firms of Calcutta controlled by managing agency houses (Begg and Dunlop; Balmer and Lawrie), which also had a great many tea gardens under their control (Griffiths 1967). The village *arkatti* was described in uncharitable terms as a "notoriously bad character" or as being "as a rule the scum of the country" (GOI 1889: Para 14). The recruitment process went through intermediary transactions via *arkatti* hierarchies from village to town on the way to Assam, often disparagingly referred to by local officials as the "sale system" (GOI 1883: Para 2). The boom in unlicensed recruitment led to the proliferation of these professional recruiters on an unprecedented scale. The high density of *arkattis* could only be explained by the increasing profits of the recruitment business, and the high rates paid to *arkattis* also affected the price of garden *sirdari* coolies (GOI 1889). The net result was a steady increase in the cost of recruitment to the planters. This rising cost had been cited as the primary reason for the planters' demand for deregulated emigration, yet the results were contrary to their expectations, as the cost of importing coolies went up from Rs 35 in 1878 to Rs 100-150 per head by 1895 (GOB 1896: Para 76).

While *arkattis* performed the functions of coolie recruiters on behalf of private recruiting agents, the *sirdars* were the employees of the plantations

and were sent to recruit labour from their native villages. They worked and lived among the labourers and sometimes functioned as field supervisors on the lowest rung of the power hierarchy in Assam tea plantations. They received commission for recruiting work plus their normal remuneration. They were important for recruitment purposes, and as supervisors on the field they enjoyed a slightly higher status in the plantation's social hierarchy. However, unlike the *kanganies* in the Ceylon and Malaya plantations, they did not enjoy any special or extraordinary privileges over their co-workers. There were, of course, incidents of their participation in the physical coercion of their fellow labourers at the behest of the garden managers and assistant managers (GOA 1904).

It is not my argument that the entire recruitment industry was subject to fraud and deception, as push and pull factors played important roles in immigration for Assam plantations (Mohapatra 1985). However, the existence of a fair amount of official evidence regarding reports of abuse, deception and fraudulent practices does not conform to the revisionist arguments of a 'safety hatch' and 'voluntary' emigration. This evidence was reported by colonial officials who openly supported, with some exceptions, the British planters with whom they shared cultural and racial affinities and regular social gatherings. The official enquiry commissions and recruiting district officials reported cases of fraud, kidnapping, deception and coercion in the recruitment system. The Bengal Labour Commission of 1895 and the Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported the continuation of abuses and malpractice in recruitment for Assam: "There is the same tale of deception, of false inducements, of entrapping people..." (RALEC 1906: 22).

### **Labour Intensification, High Mortality and Reproduction Problems in Assam Plantations**

Low wages, malnutrition and high rates of sickness and mortality depleted the strength of the labour force in Assam. Out of over one million labourers immigrating to the area over the last two decades of the nineteenth century, only 400,000 were accounted for in 1900. It may be pertinent to ask rather to what extent the penal contract system itself was a factor in causing the shortage of labour. Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton had reported that between 1880 and 1901 the wages of Assam tea garden labourers remained below the statutory minimum amount (PCLC 1901). Along with a low living wage, and also as a consequence thereof, the plantation system in Assam was characterised by a persistent problem of workforce reproduction. Throughout the period during which the indenture and penal contract system was in operation, mortality constantly outstripped the birth rate, with the result that the net reproduction rate was negative.

There is much official evidence to show that the mortality pattern was connected intimately with the rigours of the penal contract system. The high mortality figures were compounded by a low rate of reproduction in Assam tea plantations, caused ostensibly by the penal contract system (GOI 1891: Para 189). The low birth rate was attributed by medical opinion to the widespread practice of abortion amongst women labourers (GOI 1891). The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee reported that there were a great deal of abortions, attributed to living conditions on the plantations (RALEC 1906), as well as high child mortality rates. The labour force in the Assam tea gardens was consequently constantly dwindling, necessitating much greater recruitment of fresh labour each year.

### Plantation Enterprises in Ceylon

Coffee plantations were the major modern enterprise in Ceylon during the 1830s. During 1835 and 1837, four to five thousand acres of forestland had been cleared and planted with coffee around Kandy (Jayaraman 1967; Roy 2003). The earlier entrepreneurs were employees or ex-employees of the East Indian Company. Similar to Assam during the 1860s, the offer of extremely lucrative land grants and easy terms by the colonial state stimulated a speculative boom which led to the fast expansion of coffee plantations – the area utilised to grow coffee expanded to 31,843 hectares within a span of five years. The boom collapsed in 1847 with the fall of coffee prices, but recovery followed during the next few decades. However, coffee finally collapsed due to a fungus infection on the 1880s. Coffee growing was replaced by tea cultivation in the same locations (Heidemann 1992), and its production in Ceylon had a spectacular run of expansion from the 1880s onwards (Table 3).

**Table 3: Area under Tea Cultivation in Ceylon Plantations 1875-1940**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Hectares (thousands)</b>
1875	0.4
1880	3.1
1885	34.1
1890	73.6
1900	128.4
1910	129.0
1920	135.0
1930	162.8
1940	184.6

Source: Forrest 1967: 288

### Recruitment and the *Kangani* System in Ceylon

Tables 4, 5 and 6 give us an idea of the number of immigrants recruited and taken to work in Ceylonese plantations for the hundred years between 1830 and 1930. Unlike coffee, tea was not a seasonal crop, so the very nature of the production process adopted both in Assam and Ceylon created the need for a resident labour force on the plantation throughout the year. Tea plantations also employed a considerable number of female and child labourers (Jayaraman 1967).

**Table 4: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour (Men, Women and Children) into Ceylon, 1839-1870 (in thousands)**

Year	Arrival	Departure	Excess
1839-59	917.2	472.9	444.3
1860-70	727.1	555.7	171.4
Total	1638.3	1,028.6	609.7

Source: R. Jayaraman (1967: 322-24).

**Table 5: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour into Ceylon 1898-1902 (in thousands)**

Year	Arrival	Departures	Excess/Deficit
1898	136.9	105.7	+31.2
1899	68.4	81.6	-13.2
1900	208	112.9	+95
1901	120.6	118.3	+2.3
1902	87.8	93.9	-23.8
Total	621.7	512.4	109.3

Source: Arbhuthnott (1904: 16).

**Table 6: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour into Ceylon 1921-1938 (in thousands)**

Year	Arrivals	Departures	Excess
1921-25	473.3	51.7	401.6
1926-30	593.8	167.7	426.1
1931-38	341.8	310.7	40.1
Total	1,408.9	530.1	878.8

Source: Jayaraman, R. (1967: 330-31 and 340).

The immigrant labourers recruited for Ceylonese plantations were predominantly from Tamil agrarian communities, mostly from depressed castes hailing from the districts of Trichinopoly, Salem, Tanjore, Madura, Ramnad, Padukkottai, South Arcot, North Arcot, Chingleput, Tinnevely, Coimbtore and others (Jayaraman 1967). They were brought to Ceylon via three different routes: Paumben Mannar and the North Road, Tuticorin and Colombo and from the Madras ports of Ammapatam and Tondi to Colombo (Arbhuthnott 1904). During the coffee cultivation period the recruited immigrants suffered an enormous amount of hardship both during their travel to and on arrival at the plantations. Sea travel was unregulated and mostly served by overcrowded and unstable sailing vessels. After the sea voyage the immigrants walked the 220 km distance through the tropical jungles lining the North Road, which were sources of malaria and home to wild animals. The lack of sufficient drinking water and shelter on this route, plus climbing to high altitudes, caused a great deal of hardship and took many lives. After arriving at the plantations the labourers lived in appalling and insanitary conditions in overcrowded spaces and an unfamiliar colder climate. Their misery was further compounded by physical coercion by the planters to perform tasks that took a further toll on life. Beatings and being caned by the planters were regular punishments for noncompliance or bad work. Planter-labour relations were mediated by labour laws enacted by the Ceylon colonial government. One such law enacted was Ceylon's Service Contracts Ordinance No. 5 of 1841, based on the Master and Servant Law in England, which provided penal sanctions for breach of contract. The breach of contract provision was enforced rigorously, thereby strengthening the hold of the planters over their indebted labour force (Kondapi 1951; Roberts 1966; Heidemann 1992; Peeble 2001; Duncan 2002; Roy 2003).

### **Organisation and Control of Labour on Ceylon's Plantations: The *Kangani* System<sup>2</sup>**

The vast majority of the South Indian labourers on Ceylon's plantations were recruited and transported by *kanganies* or headmen. Sent by planters to recruit labour from their home districts, the *kanganies* were also incorporated into plantation management as supervisors. From the 1850s,

<sup>2</sup> In most of the literature on immigrant labour in Ceylon plantations, the *kangani* is seen as a patriarch. This perception was created by contemporary planters and colonial bureaucracy, which found uncritical acceptance in academic works. Patrick Peeble is very critical of this assertion and forcefully argues against the description of the *kangani* as a patriarch. According to him, "these accounts of 'patriarchal *kangani*' are repeated in annual reports of the Ceylon Labour Commission and in other official literature. In due course this became part of the scholarly construction view of the *kangani*" (Peeble 2001: 34).

planters gave “coastal advances” to *kanganies* for recruitment expenses. During the transition from coffee to tea cultivation the *kangani* system developed a structure of power hierarchies where a head *kangani* was on top and several sub-*kanganies* worked under his command, in both recruitment and supervisory roles on the plantations. The hierarchy did not stop with the *kanganies*. They were, in turn, supervised by a British assistant or by a native assistant, a Jaffna Tamil, Sinhalese, Malaya or Eurasian. At the top of this hierarchy was the figure of the British planter, the *periya dorai* (the big master). Through the network of hierarchies the planters and head *kanganies* ruled the labour force and immobilised them within the confines of the plantations. Unlike in Assam, labourers in Ceylonese plantations were not placed under long-term contracts and they were ‘free’ to resign at a month’s notice according to the notion of ‘free’ immigration under the *kangani* system, both in the case of Ceylon and Malaya. However, if they wished to leave the service of the plantations, they would have to pay for the costs of their recruitment and transportation. The amount spent by the *kanganies* out of the ‘coastal advances’ was charged as ‘debt’ and recovered from their wages. Given very low wages on the plantations it was hard to repay the debt, which effectively tied them to their *kanganies* and the planters. The life of the immigrants on Ceylon’s plantations began under debt bondage. *Kanganies* became an instrument of domination and control over labourers in the hands of the planters, who controlled the financial affairs of labourers by virtue of having their wage payments routed through them, thus reinforcing the cycle of indebtedness since labourers received only a fraction of their wage in order to balance their debt accounts. The *kangani* was rewarded ‘pence money’ for every labourer from his gang who went into the fields to work, and in turn he ensured that they did not stay away from work. On a few occasions the labourers had a chance to resist this control by ‘bolting’ or running away, which was a risky business. Such a decision was not taken lightly, for they ran the risk of being attacked and robbed by Sinhalese villagers who were anti-Tamil, or being hunted and jailed by planters and the police. A survey carried out in 1862 revealed that seven per cent of all Tamil immigrants had been arrested for desertion (Duncan 2002). The best chance for a worker to ‘bolt’ was to find work on another plantation with the help of a different kind of *kangani*, called a ‘crimp’. The term ‘crimping’ was similar to ‘enticing’ in Assam, wherein labourers were ‘persuaded’ to quit without completing their contracts and to take up employment at another plantation. During periods of labour shortages, ‘crimping’ became a profitable business for some *kanganies*. The operations of the ‘crimping’ *kanganies*, illegal and successful, became a cause of concern for the planters who came up with another device, the *tundu* system, to counter this problem (Kondapi 1951; Wesumperuma 1986; Heidemann 1992; Peeble 2001).

*Tundu* was devised as a mechanism for transferring excess labour from one plantation to another in times of labour shortages. The idea behind the *tundu* system was to make labour supply flexible and to check 'crimping'. The planter with excess labour gave a promising note discharging labourers on receipt of outstanding advances, called *tundu*, to his *kangani* who would take his gang to work for another planter. However, the *tundu* system further strengthened the *kangani's* position vis-à-vis the planter as well as the labourers. He could withdraw his gang within a month, since they were not under any long-term contract and bargained for higher advances from the other planter (Heidemann 1992; Kondapi 1951; Peebles 2001). Under debt conditions, labourers had no choice but to move to another plantation with the *kangani*, albeit without gaining the benefit of a higher advance. Arbuthnott, a British official from Assam on a visit to Ceylon in 1904, reported that "there is no doubt that [the] majority of the Tamil coolies are more or less in debt." He estimated that there was an outstanding advance amounting to six million rupees against 400,000 coolies, "while indebtedness of the coolies to kanganies and *kaddy*-keepers may be double this amount" (Arbuthnott 1904: 22).

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon faced tough competition for labour in South India from the rapidly expanding rubber plantations in Malaya. Planters' dependence on the *kanganies* gave the latter power and influence. The planters did not exercise any direct control over them until well into the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They now decided to control the growing clout of the *kanganies*. The planters set up the Ceylon Labour Federation in 1898 and, with assistance from the colonial state, introduced the 'tin ticket system' in 1901 to establish direct control over recruitment and to facilitate the cheaper supply of labour. The tin tickets consisted of metal coins issued to *kanganies* instead of cash advances for recruitment and travel expenses. To further constrain the *kanganies'* clout, and to improve labour supply, planters founded the Ceylon Labour Commission (CLC) in 1904 with the help of the governments of Ceylon and Madras. CLC, a private company, though shy of admitting being in the recruitment business, now controlled the recruitment and transportation expenses of the *kanganies* through tin tickets. The planters also initiated efforts to wrest financial control over the labourers from the *kanganies*. The practice of routing wages through the *kanganies* was stopped and the planters paid labourers directly under the newly passed Ordinance 9 in 1909. The Planters' Labour Federation, set up in 1911, took over the debt accounts of labourers and *kanganies*. These devices curtailed the powers of the *kanganies* but could not fully reduce private debts held with the *kanganies*. In 1922, a system of licenced *kanganies* was created by the newly established office of the Controller of Indian Immigration Labour. The heyday of the *kangani* system finally

ceased when 'assisted' emigration was banned by the Government of India in 1938 (Kondapi 1951; Heidemann 1992; Peeble 2001). The life and world of immigrant Tamil labourers, however, remained in line with what Arbthnott had remarked on ironically in 1904: "'The coolie', it has been said, is born, lives and dies in debt" (Arbthnott 1904: 26).

### **Plantation Enterprises in Malaya**

The British opened up plantations in Malaya from the 1830s onwards, starting with sugar and followed by coffee in the 1880s, and it finally reached its crescendo with the 'rubber rush' from the early twentieth century onwards. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the sugar and coffee plantations had been replaced by rubber. The rubber boom, spurred on by the US automobile industry, brought about massive plantation expansion. Rubber acreage increased from 20,234 hectares in 1900 to 219,744 hectares in 1910. Between 1910 and 1911 alone, 259,000 hectares were planted. The rubber rush brought investments of millions of pounds into Malaya to open up thousands of acres of land, both by bigger companies and individual planters (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969; Heidemann 1922; Kaur 2006). These investments were instantly profitable. In 1910, a number of British rubber companies paid up to 300 per cent dividends, while 60 rubber companies offered dividends of 68 per cent in 1912. However, the international rubber market was very volatile and subject to violent fluctuations. For example, rubber prices increased from 0.61 cents to M\$ 1.50 per 0.5 kilogram between 1905 and 1906, and then plummeted from 8s.9d. per 0.5 kilogram in 1910 to 2s. 6d. in 1915 and to 1s.10 ½d. by 1920. Despite these fluctuations, rubber exports were lucrative enough to further expand production, because labour costs were cheap (Sandhu 1969; Sundram 1993). These fluctuations in the international markets impacted labour recruitment flow during these years.

### **Recruitment and Transportation of Labour to Malaya**

The trajectory of the immigration of Indian workers to Malaya differed from other colonies in Britain's empire. Malaya began with indenture recruitment and later also adopted *kangani* systems. The two systems co-existed until 1910, when indenture was prohibited. As in Assam and Ceylon, the failure to attract the local population to work pushed British planters to use imperial connections for mobilising labour from South India. The port cities of Penang and Singapore already had a South Indian presence as a result of migration on behalf of Indian shipping merchants. Therefore, existing networks initially served the transportation of new recruits to work in the new plantation enterprises in Malaya (Amrith 2010). The majority of these labourers were Tamils and Telugus, who

were brought under indenture contracts to work for three years in the sugar plantations. Immigration to Malaya became a part of the larger circuit of migration from South India to Ceylon and Burma. With the arrival of coffee and then rubber, Malayan planters switched to *kangani* recruitment from the 1880s (Kondapi 1951). Table 7 shows that a total of over 1.4 million immigrant labourers were brought to Malaya between 1844 and 1938.

**Table 7: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour  
(Including Dependents) into Malaya 1844-1938**

Year	Indentured (thousands)	Kangani (thousands)	Total (thousands)
1844-1850	12.6	N	12.6
1851-1860	25.8	N	25.8
1861-1870	45.8	6.0	51.8
1871-1880	35.8	10.0	45.1
1881-1890	49.5	10.0	59.5
1891-1900	40.8	11.7	52.4
1901-1910	39.6	141.2	180.7
1911-1920	N	606.1	606.1
1921-1930	N	391.7	391.7
1931-1938	N	10.0	10.0
Total	249.9	1,186.7	1,436.5

Source: Sandhu (1969: 310-313).

The colonial state assisted in the recruitment process from the very inception of Malayan plantations. It helped to control recruitment mechanisms and to exercise control over immigrant labour through the use of regulatory instruments (Kaur 2006). A depot for recruiting labour was established at Nagapatnam by the Government of Strait Settlements. However, emigration to Strait Settlements remained unregulated by any law for a long time. In 1870, an Indian colonial official, Hathaway, publically criticised and denounced recruiting abuses in his district Tanjore as involving “a regularly organised system of kidnapping” (Geoghengan 1859: 59). He drew attention to the illegality of emigration under the existing law and complained that female immigrants were destined to a life of “prostitution” (Geoghengan 1874: 59).<sup>3</sup> As expected, the Strait Government protested very strongly against Hathaway’s denunciation and lobbied hard with the Colonial Office in the UK. As a result, emigration was conditionally allowed in 1872 (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Emigration of Indians to the Straits Settlements was actually illegal at that time because it was prohibited by Act XIII of 1864.

## Indenture System in Malaya

Sugar planters were the chief employers of Indian indenture labour. The original indenture contract was for five years, but it was later reduced to three in 1876. Sugar dominated Malayan plantations (Wellesley province) until the emergence of coffee in the 1880s. The planters procured their labour from South India through British companies based in Madras, which, in turn, used the network of local *maistry* recruiters for this purpose. As in the case of recruitment for Assam and Ceylon, district officials reported cases of deception, fraud and kidnapping by the speculators and recruiters. The Malayan coolie trade, though illegal, flourished and was profitable for *maistries* and ship owners. With the granting of formal permission in 1872, immigration to Malaya came to be controlled under the regulatory devices of licenced recruiting. An emigration agent, appointed by the Strait Settlement Government, was stationed at Negapatam, and the Madras Government appointed a protector of emigrants in order to regulate the process (Kaur 2006). The recruiting districts were Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Madras and occasionally Salem and Coimbatore. Negapatam and Madras were the main ports of departure for indentured recruits. On arrival in Malaya they embarked at Penang and from there they were distributed to their employers mainly in the Wellesley and Parak provinces. Indenture emigration to Malaya consisted predominantly of male labourers aged between 15 and 45 years old. Women and children constituted 20 and 10 per cent of the cohort, respectively. A very large proportion of them returned to their homes. In the long run, however, many became permanent resident workers on the plantations (Sandhu 1969).

Indian immigrant labourers under the Malayan indenture regime shared similar experiences of work and living with their counterparts in Assam. They were entrapped in debt bondage and immobilised, like their counterparts in the Assam and Ceylon plantations (Sandhu 1969), and they were often subjected to physical coercion by planters (flogging was a common way of disciplining, taming and controlling labour). They worked long hours under harsh working and living conditions, received low wages and ate insufficient amounts of food, thus causing malnutrition, sickness and high rates of mortality (Kaur 2006). Many of the plantations lacked proper medical facilities, and in many cases they were totally absent. Consequently, 60 to 90 per cent of the labourers died within a year after their arrival on many plantations. Among the survivors, many deserted to escape the rhythm of miserable life under indenture despite the risk of severe penalties if caught. And like Assam and Ceylon, the Malayan colonial state enforced criminal liability for breach of contract. The tales of their sufferings evoked strong opposition to indentured emigration from the Indian nationalist intelligentsia. The Anti-Slavery Society in the UK

also mounted a campaign against the indenture labour system throughout the British Empire. As a result, indenture recruitment for Malaya was banned in 1910 (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969).

### ***Kangani* system in Malaya**

The combination of high mortality and desertion among immigrant labourers in Malaya, along with the expansion of rubber plantations, generated demand for more labour. A commission appointed in 1890 to enquire into the labour situation found labour shortages to be a serious problem and blamed the monopoly of professional recruiters for high costs. Lobbying with the Government of India helped to remove all restrictions on emigration to Malaya in 1897. To ensure a cheap and plentiful labour supply, the coffee and rubber planters considered *kangani*, or 'free' recruitment, a better option. The *kangani* recruitment system for Malaya was regulated, controlled and closely supervised by the planters and the colonial state. Together they established the Indian Immigration Committee and the Indian Immigration Fund in 1907 to finance, supervise and control *kangani* recruiting (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969; Heidemann 1992; Kaur 2006).

Most of the *kangani* recruits were from Tamil-speaking districts close to or adjoining the Madras and Negapatam ports. Most of them were drawn from low social strata of 'untouchables' or Adi-dravida castes (Sandhu 1969: 97). After reaching Avadi or Negapatam ports by rail, the recruits boarded ships for Malaya together with the *kangani*. They entered Malaya at Penang, which was the only entry port until 1903. Port Sweettenham and Singapore became additional entry ports later on. The *kangani* recruits in Malaya, as in Ceylon, were on short-term contracts, generally verbal, which could be dissolved at a month's notice on the part of either party. Passage costs were recovered from the labourers within two years from their wages. Though they could not be compelled to pay under the law, the inability to pay back this debt due to low wages trapped them in the cycle of indebtedness. As in Ceylon, the *kangani* in Malaya acquired a very significant position in the plantation hierarchy during the fast expanding rubber boom. He acquired an aura of indispensability to the planters as a procurer of labour. On the plantations he was entrusted with supervisory work. The planters rewarded the *kangani* with authority over his gang, higher wages and no physically demanding tasks to perform. He was paid for recruits and also 'head money' for each resident labourer who showed up for work, which prevented desertions. And like in Ceylon, the *kangani* system also developed hierarchies on the Malayan plantations, namely head *kanganies* and their subordinate *cinna* (minor) *kanganies*. Through this hierarchical structure, labour was controlled and tied down

to particular employers for longer durations (Sandhu 1969; Jain 1970; Heidmann 1992).

While the *kangani* augmented the labour supply very well for the Malayan planters, complaints regarding deception and fraudulent recruitment methods began to surface and were reported by the press. Nevertheless, even though the increasing influence of the *kangani* raised concerns, the planters were happy with the system as it assured a cheap and plentiful labour force. The practice of 'crimping' and shifting of labour within the plantations, as in Ceylon, reflected the growing power of the *kanganies* with an increasing demand for labour. The Marjoriebanks-Marakkayar Commission reported cases of labour 'crimping' in 1917 among the planter fraternity. Though *kanganies* were licenced and operated under the control and supervision of the Indian Immigration Committee, the latter only took notice of the abuses during the 1920s. By this time the volatile nature of international rubber prices was also affecting recruitment, and in bad years many workers were repatriated to India. Besides, the Government of India was exerting pressure through its newly appointed agent in Malaya. The planters, however, were vehemently opposed to the idea of abolishing the *kangani* system, which survived for the time being because of the stiff opposition put up by the Malayan planters. However, by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, the *kangani* system was in decline. A drastic reduction in wages paid by the planters in the face of declining rubber prices during the 1930s brought about the intervention of the Government of India. In 1936, Srinivasa Sastri toured Malaya to investigate labour conditions on behalf of the Government of India and recommended stopping recruitment. Continuous deterioration in trade led to further cuts in wages, thus prompting the Government of India in 1938 to prohibit all assisted emigration from India (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969; Heidemann 1992; Sundram 1993).

## **Conclusion**

One of the most significant features of all three colonial enterprises was the immobilisation of a mobilised labour force within the confines of plantations, which was achieved through penal contracts under indenture systems in Assam and Malaya and debt bondage as well as penal sanctions under the *kangani* system in Malaya and Ceylon (Peeble 2001; Amrith 2010). Workers were controlled, disciplined and tamed through physical coercion and extra-legal methods. British planters in Assam exercised their dominant authority over their workers through the use of creole 'coolie-baat' (coolie talk), which became the language of command for everyday communication. Ceylonese and Malayan planters used intermediary *kanganies* for this purpose, as they did not know Tamil, the language

of the labourers (Arubhutnott 1904). This point was also raised in the Marjoribanks and Marakkayar Report of 1917 (Heidmann 1992: 71).

Through the process of recruitment, transportation and employment, colonial plantation regimes transformed Indian agrarian communities of tribal, aboriginal and poor peasants into labouring 'coolies'. This conversion process throughout the regions of Chotanagpur, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and South India began from the time workers were recruited and pushed on their journey towards Assam, Ceylon and Malaya. They were herded together on long and torturous journeys to these distant lands, and they either walked vast distances or travelled by rail, river and sea steamers, unprotected from the elements but always under constant surveillance. During the course of this transformation their identities and individuality were subsumed into anonymous 'gangs' and 'muster rolls', destined to be confined to 'coolie lines' on the plantations for the rest of their lives. They were converted, as James Duncan described, into "abstract bodies... that are made docile, useful, disciplined, rationalised, and controlled sexually" (Duncan 2002: 318). The colonial state provided legitimacy to the indenture servitude of immigrant labourers by enacting legislative measures. In the case of the *kangani* system, state intervention came in the form of regulatory devices which provided the planters with control over recruitment and transportation. The concept of the UK's Master and Servant Law was invoked both in Assam and Ceylon for breach of contract, in order to discourage labourers from 'absconding', 'bolting' and from moving to other plantations for employment. These provisions reinforced the debt bondage relationship of immigrant labourers with the planters and also thwarted the emergence of a labour market in Ceylonese plantations. Contrary to the 'escape hatch' and 'rational choice' arguments, long-distance-sponsored emigration was designed not so much to provide economic opportunities for the labourer as to secure for the planters a labour force whose wages were determined completely outside the labour market. In the case of non-indentured immigration to Malaya and Ceylon, 'free' immigration was notional because, as I have shown, the labourers were entrapped into debt bondage to their employers through the intermediary network of the *kanganies*. The mediating agency of *kanganies*, while outside the purview of governments, did not emerge independently of the network of employers.

In a long-term process of working and living on British-owned plantations, a large number of Tamil immigrants in Malaya and Ceylon were transformed into 'coolies', as they became permanent settlers in these two locations over the course of a century of immigration. However, the potential permanency of their residential status in post-colonial times was increasingly contested and became a political issue in both localities in the

new nation states (Amrith 2011). Their 'ethnic distinctiveness' is considered a serious constraint to their 'assimilation' into the indigenous majority communities. In Sri Lanka they are seen as 'recent immigrants', and they have become 'undomicile immigrants' – hundreds of thousands of whom face exclusion from citizenship (Peeble 2001; Amrith 2011). In Assam the tea plantation labouring communities continue to be seen as 'immigrants' and 'outsiders' after nearly one and half centuries of migration. Their demand for the right to affirmative benefits under the Other Backward Caste (OBC) policy is contested and opposed by the 'indigenous' OBC communities despite the fact that their counterparts in their 'original' homes are beneficiaries of the same official scheme.

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