CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The present-day States of Malaysia and the Republic of Singapore, although politically segregated, have traditionally functioned together. Throughout the text, both of them are denoted by the term ‘Malaya’ or ‘British Malaya’ as it was called before independence. (Sandhu1969:1ff) The British Empire was formally established with the establishment of Penang in 1786. The affairs of the ‘Malay States’, as defined in 1874, fell under the administration of the British Colonial Office upto 1957. However, the Second World War years (1942—45) saw the only exception with Japan seizing control. More than 95 per cent of the Indian immigrants entering Malaya appear to have come into the country between 1786 and 1957, which is the period of this study. East Malaysian territories and even the Eastern States of the Malay Peninsula do not come under the scope of this study because the Indian element in their population is negligible. Today, Indians constitute around 8 per cent of the population in Malaysia totalling 1.8 million, of whom about 90 per cent are Tamils.  

Background

British colonialism resulted in the transformation of political, economic and social structures in Malaya. Two events are noteworthy in the history of Malayan development experience. The first was the creation of an export oriented economy, heavily specialised in tin and rubber, which was integrated into the world trading system. This necessitated

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<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>22,890,000</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>3,160,000</td>
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<td>2,17,000</td>
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(among other management policies) the establishment of an institutionalised bureaucracy and the provision of infrastructural facilities. The second was the transformation of labour relations and the emergence of freer wage labour resulting from the employment of Chinese and Indian immigrants on the mines, plantations and government undertakings, and leaving its mark on the ethnic composition of labour. The division within the workforce impacted on worker consciousness and unity, a situation exploited by the employers. A united labour movement was also inhibited by the use of political and economic instruments by the government. (Kaur 1998: 74)

Indians and plantation agriculture have been almost synonymous terms in Malaya since the second half of the nineteenth century. Indian associations with plantation agriculture began virtually from its inception, though they did not become prominent until after the middle of the nineteenth century, the principal plantation workers up to this time being Chinese. With increasing immigration thereafter, Indians rapidly replaced Chinese as the main plantation labour force. For example, as early as the 1860s Indians had already replaced the Chinese as the principal labourers on sugar estates, not only on European-owned properties but also on some of those belonging to the Chinese towkays of Penang. Thereafter their numbers increased and by 1931 they formed more than 70 per cent of the total estate population of 424,000. Although their predominance declined subsequently from its peak, Indians nevertheless still formed 52 per cent of the estate population in 1957. (Sandhu 1969: 253)

The principal role of the Indians in the estate economy has been that of labourers and, to a smaller extent numerically, they have been subordinate administrators and technicians as well as estate owners and managers. Indian immigration into British Malaya was essentially a movement of manual labour from about the middle of the last century, and they have continued to be the most numerous element in the Indian population since then. In 1931, about 75 per cent of the gainfully occupied Indians were labourers, while in 1947 and 1965 the percentages of labour in the gainfully occupied Indian population were approximately 70 and 60 per cent respectively. The most
important labour group has been the estate workers, who comprised more than 85 per cent of all the Indians engaged in manual work in 1931. (Sandhu 1969: 254 – 255)

However migration to Malaya did not always provide the lower caste South Indian labourers with opportunities of escape from poverty and subordination. The agricultural economy in Malaya did not give them much scope, since it remained dependent on a single agricultural produce. Moreover, the unskilled agricultural labourer also lacked the necessary skills needed to switch over to other professions. The conditions were such that there was really no escape from the coolie lines. (Basu 2004: 184)

Since the 1930s, and especially over the last decade, there has been an overall decline in the estate group as a proportion of the total Indian labour force following a decreasing proportion of Indians living on estates on account of such developments as the Emergency, increasing urbanisation and the fragmentation of estates. The problem of the fragmentation of estates, resulting in Indian and other workers losing their jobs and having to leave the estates, has been assuming dangerous dimensions of late. It has been caused by the sale and subsequent subdivision into small plots of European-owned rubber estates employing Indian and other labourers. These sales began in about 1950, mainly, it seems, as a result of fears and problems of security generated by the Emergency and impending Merdeka and the extraordinarily high prices offered for rubber estates by speculators. (Sandhu 1969: 255)

Generally, employers enjoyed a largely unchallenged ascendancy over labour. The economic viability of estates depended to a large extent on keeping wage rates low. The colonial authorities also regarded Indian immigrant labour as transient and discouraged its permanent settlement in Malaya. Nevertheless, the decline in importance of indenture and kangani recruited labourers and the emergence of free wage labour led to a growing trend towards permanent settlement of Indian labour. Between 1900 and 1911, the Indian population in Malaya doubled. Officially too, by the end of 1930s, the British administration’s attitude to the permanent settlement of Indian labour became
more relaxed. (Kaur 1998: 86) S. Furnivall\(^2\) used ‘plural society’ to describe the conditions of social life in certain tropical societies under colonial domination. Here groups of people mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals (peoples) meet but only in the marketplace in buying and selling’ (Furnivall, 1948: 304). In plural societies, integration is imposed by the colonial power and economic circumstances. It is not voluntary.’ According to L. Kuper (1971: 10-11), the social bases of a plural society are characterised by ‘economic symbiosis and mutual avoidance, cultural diversity and social cleavage’, the society itself being ‘...a medley of peoples living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit’.

‘Plural society’ conceptualizations of the kind Furnivall and Kuper describe, can rather easily be applied in the background of British rule in Malaya. The Indians were brought in under the control of the British from one British territory to another. Chinese labourers came in relation to the efforts of Chinese entrepreneurs or on their own and worked in Malaya. The different ethnic groups lived separately and were engaged mostly in different occupations. As T.H. Sileock describes the situation (1969:144) ‘The different races were more concerned with their relations with the British, who coordinated the whole system, than with relations to one another.’

In those days, understandings of differences among’ ethnic groups—understandings based in part in reality but also in part the pure product of imagination—came to be popularly accepted, in turn serving to reinforce cleavages between the different groups. More intimate understandings across ethnic lines developed little, for

\(^2\) The term ‘plural society’ was first introduced by J S Furnivall (1948). He argued that the plural society is one in which two or more races were brought together and made to live side by side was essentially a modern phenomenon, created by Western powers. In his terms, a plural society exists when a country under colonial rule shows the following broad cultural, economic and political characteristics: (a) Culturally it comprises groups which are institutionally disparate and do not share same basic values and way of life; (b) Economically, these separate social entities have interaction mainly in the marketplace, in buying and selling types of relationships; (c) Politically, these disparate but economically interacting segments are held together by a superordinate authority – that is, the colonial rulers. To paraphrase Furnivall broadly, these plural societies do not have a common social ‘will’. The segments may mix (as in the marketplace) but they do not blend. According to him, in plural societies the only interest that kept together the various races was economic interest.
members of different ethnic communities met infrequently, if at all, apart from the ‘market place’. Good as might have been ‘plural society’ conceptualizations in the descriptive analysis of Malayan society under the British, their applicability now is indeed open to discussion. Colonial Malaya is no more, and Malaysia has achieved independence. The demographic outlines of the Malaysian population have become relatively stabilized. Mass movements of Chinese, Indians and Indonesians into what is now Malaysia were curtailed long ago and by now the sex ratios among the formerly immigrant peoples have come to be relatively balanced.

Prior to the Second World War, many within the various ethnic communities in Malaya were transients. It became clear soon after that Malayan society would remain multi-ethnic. Malaysia has formulated and is implementing its plans and programmes in terms of its population composition, still housing considerable number of people without full citizenship rights but in no way denying the local, national identifications of any of its major communities. An access to education has been vastly facilitated for members of all national groups. The professed goals in planning in the country have to do with the restructuring of society to the effect of eliminating the identification of ethnicity with occupation and income and the eradication of poverty. Strides are continuously being made in the direction of making Bahasa Malaysia not only the country’s official language but also the language to be used in forging a more basic homogeneity in communication among all of the nation’s peoples. The trappings of a modern, consumer—oriented market place are abundant and available to all with the means to purchase them. In the political arena, elites of various communities have long effectively welded together their interests in ‘racial harmony’. ‘Plural society’ conceptualizations are not so easily used in understanding the Malaysian context now as before. Yet questions relevant to such formulations remain. In what respects do the people of different ethnic communities still not combine? Where are patterns of ethnic avoidance and cleavage breaking down, if they are? What xpressions ethnicity has taken on in the Malaysian context? (Arasaratnam 1970: ix)
Indians constitute the third largest ethnic group, next to the Malays and the Chinese. They exist as a distinct and identifiable community, and will continue to do so for sometime, in view of the historical circumstances that led to their settlement in these countries and the nature of their present social and political organisation. Both in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, society is plural in character, with little or no interaction between individual communities in respect of social relations. In addition to their social and cultural separateness, the Indians have political status as a community, and will therefore continue to identify as Indians. (Arasaratnam 1970: ix)

In a sense the Indian community in Malaya is a heterogeneous one. It has many linguistic sub-groups. Of these groups the Tamils by the weight of their numbers, have left a dominant mark on Indian culture on Malaya. They have always constituted 80 per cent of the total Indian population domiciled in Malaya. The Malayalees and the Telugus, who form the next largest groups, are culturally closely allied to the Tamils and have easily been able to identify with them in the pursuits of cultural objectives. (Arasaratnam 1970: xii – xiii)

The statistics of the Indian population in the 1947 census could be taken as a guide to its social composition as it represents a turning point between continuing migration and permanent settlements. While the Indian population of Malaya represented some of the pluralism of the subcontinent’s heterogeneous peoples, there were some features in the migration process that lent this population some homogeneity and cohesion. The recruitment of labour from the Tamil districts of the Madras state and the resultant migration of other groups from these districts led to Tamil speakers constituting a high 77 per cent of the total Indian population in Malaya. Two other Dravidian language groups from South India, Malayalees and Telugus made up 7.4 per cent and 4 per cent respectively, making South Indian Dravidians the overwhelming majority of Indians settled in Malaya. Malayalees and Telugus living in small groups in the midst of large numbers of Tamil speakers, learnt to speak the language themselves and a process of assimilation was set in train. (Arasaratnam 1993: 1)
Quite distinct from these peoples’ of South Indian provenance was a mixed population coming from various parts of North India. In 1947, North Indians made up 9 per cent of the total immigrant population. A large majority of them were Punjabi Sikhs with sprinklings from other groups such as Punjabi Hindus, Sindhis, Gujaratis, Marathis, Bengalis, Marwaris, and Pathans. Not only were they distinct in their languages, they also were engaged in different economic activities. Even those among them who engaged in manual jobs, such as the Sikhs, tended to work in quite separate trades from the South Indians. The North Indians had their separate community associations, their temples dedicated to deities popular in their regions, and their rituals and festivals were a part of their linguistic and cultural tradition. About 70 per cent of the migrant Indians were Hindus, which lent a further basis of cohesion, though spatial separateness, sectarian differences, and the absence of an overall unifying body of Hinduism detracted from such unity. There were, however, significant Christian minorities among them and even more significant professors of Islam who, while being drawn to other Indians by the pull of linguistic cultural elements, were kept separate by religion. Thus the settled Indian population of Malaya revealed, in less conspicuous form, some of the linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of the Indian subcontinent. (Arasaratnam 1993: 2)

Local usage in Malaya tends to designate every South Indian a Keling while all North Indians are likewise dubbed Bengalis, irrespective of their territorial or ethnic origins. North Indians including Punjabis in Malaya are referred as Bengalis. This is probably due to two causes, long ago the western coast of Malaya was under the administrative jurisdiction of the governor of Bengal. Secondly, all Northern Indians that came to Malaya leave India from the port of Calcutta which is in Bengal. (Sastry 1947: 50) The Indian population has also undergone steady urbanisation. Thus factors viz. improved sex ratio, growth of locally born people and increasing urbanisation have tended to give to the Indians in Malaya an appearance of an settled community. Along with these three factors, a higher standard of living and the general prosperity in Malaya have moulded the Indian attitude towards the question of permanent residence in Malaya. (Mahajani 1960: 113)
Although found in almost all parts of the cities, the Indians have tended to congregate in certain sections in Singapore and Malaysia. Of the cities of Malaya, the three largest, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore, are those that have the highest number of Indian inhabitants. A substantial majority of urban-dwelling Indians live in these three cities. Indians have been associated with these cities at all stages of their growth. There is a tendency to concentrate in certain parts of the city and its suburbs. In Singapore, certain streets are noted as places where Indian business predominates. The same is true in Penang, where such names as Chulia Street speak for themselves. In Kuala Lumpur, suburbs such as Sentul and Brickfields are noted Indian concentrations. In most Indian urban settlements there is a tendency to bunch together. (Arasaratnam 1970: 44)

Concentrations occur in Georgetown, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, though Indians are to be found in all parts of these cities. As in Singapore, these concentrations have largely been the result of such factors as a kind of historical momentum, the setting of the government’s labour lines close to the labourers place of work, the, traditional Indian tendency to congregate in homogeneous communities coupled with their generally marked occupational specialization, and last, but by no means least, the efforts of British administrators to plan urban development and fit the indigenous and foreign populations into—convenient moulds. (Sandhu 1969: 221) To this day the Indian enclaves continue to be predominated by South Asians. However, other racial groups and especially the Chinese have been moving into these areas in growing numbers thereby reducing their racial exclusiveness to some extent. (Sandhu 1969: 222)

In these crowded cities, the Little Indias, Little Delhis or the Indian Quarters, as the Indian central concentrations are sometimes known, have formed distinctive, monotonous blocks of closely packed, low, narrow, double-storeyed shop-houses, in which the Indians have lived and worked cheek by jowl, often with ten to twenty-five or more inhabitants to each dwelling. The monotony of the nondescript shophouse structures is broken only by temples, often elaborately ornamented and decorated, and other institutional buildings. The atmosphere and mode of life in these Indian sectors is, and
has been, very reminiscent of India and, were it not for the presence of Malayan elements such as shop-styles and transport, the scene could well have had its setting in Calcutta, Bombay or Madras. (Sandhu 1969: 222)

Objectives

The study seeks to present an objective account of migration, settlement and naturalization of Indians in Malaya from the middle of the Nineteenth century. It is essentially historical in its treatment of the subject and its approach to the sources. It is an account of the process of settlement of the Indians in Malaya, seeking to identify problems and issues in this process and the ways in which they were dealt with.

This study deals with social life among Indian Malaysians living on a rubber plantation in West Malaysia. In one sense, its general purposes are to describe and analyse the patterns of life that occur among these people and to see how the people are tied to their local and regional, social and cultural environments. In another, the study’s objectives are to provide for a particular perspective of social life in Malaysia—the perspective possible from the point of people who live within the rubber estate context. Further it deals with comparative and theoretical issues of migration. On the level of descriptive analysis, the objectives of this study are to provide for a comprehensive look at the social life that occurs among a community of Indians living on a West Malaysian rubber plantation. The attempt will be to provide answers to questions like: how are their patterns of living related to those in the Indian settings out of which these people originally came? How are these different? How are the Indians tied to their larger geographical, economic, political and religious environments? How do they conceive of their prospects within the Malaysian context? And how do they deal with the Malays and the Chinese they encounter?

We present a sociological study of Malaysian Indian community. Moreover, given the conditions under which the Indians came to Malaya, their relative isolation and
their minority status as a community are brought to light. Nevertheless, they allow for the better understanding of how social processes in Malaysian social life influence and are influenced by the social processes occurring in a particular community.

On the theoretical and comparative level, the objectives of this study are to complement the kinds of understandings that come out of the study of immigrant Indian communities. The study also expects to contribute to the understanding of how immigrant communities adjust to their new environment in a more general sense. To contribute to the understanding of the variables important in enabling the integration and assimilation of ethnic groups and those keeping such groups apart.

**Theoretical Framework**

Etymologically, the term diaspora is derived from Greek words *dia* (through) and *speiro* (to scatter). (Lipi Ghosh Pg 13) To begin with, in popular use, the word ‘diaspora’ relates to the history of the Jews, wherein it represents a concept which has meaning for different periods in the millennial existence of the Jewish people. It has been used to describe the status of Jews during the Babylonian captivity in 6th Century BC. Diaspora has also been utilized to characterize the flourishing Jewish community that lived in Alexandria shortly before the rise of Christianity. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 14)

One of the favourite words in the 20th Century Lexicon applied to the diaspora people is cultural shock. People from one country, who are propelled into a different environment without sufficient mental preparation, are apt to experience frustration and insecurities that flow from such disorientation are especially acute in immigrant groups. Many immigrants have found it impossible to integrate themselves into the new society even though some have spent decades there. With some, it is a problem of language learning that contributes to the malaise of non-integration. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 17)

Thus, where once were dispersions, there is now diaspora. The significant transformation of the last few decades is the move towards renaming as diasporas the
more recent communities of dispersion. This is a major change of the notions that were formed in five centuries of the modern era and known by the other names until the last 1960s such as exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities and so forth. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 17)

The first major change in the connotation of the term has been done by Walter Connor, the American social scientist. Connor defines diaspora simply as “that segment of a people living outside homeland”. Willam Safran states, “Today, diaspora and more specifically diasporic community seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellers, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 17 - 18)

In writings about diaspora in general, one of the six characteristics mentioned by Safran is that, the diasporics continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran 1991: 84)

Emergence of multiculturalism and extension of the notion of pluralism, no doubt, broaden and accommodate multiple people within the reshaped fold of diaspora. The diasporic projects in today’s world aim not only to enhance articulation between the past and the present, but it also creates and articulate a bondage between people in homeland and hostland. Such connections, no doubt, can end discontinuity between the people thriving that diaspora segment is a part of homeland people. It seeks to reestablish the surmise that diaspora crossing multiplicity shares a link – that of motherland - and at the same time it poses itself beyond any single subjectivity, taking into account a hybrid derivation of several cultural influences. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 18)

There has been a great convergence between the two disciplines involved in dealing with the subject of migration – history and sociology. Historians typically address
migration as a symptom of economic change while sociologists largely revolve round the changing identity of migrants. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 20)

Since the later half of the 20th Century, the term ‘diaspora’ is being applied to dispersal of any ethnic group or community outside the country of their origin. Diaspora today is used to describe practically any population that is considered deterritorialised or transnational, that is, which has originated in a land other than in which it currently resides and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed span the globe in numbers and they play significant roles in the lives and societies of the countries of their adoption as well as countries of their origin. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 21)

The transnational approach to international migration has emerged as a solid research agenda in the 1990s and offers a promising alternative framework to the migration literature of the assimilationist school, cultural pluralist school and the context of reception school. All these schools share the notion that immigrants abandon their old patterns of life and uproot themselves from the old society in order to incorporate into and/or assimilate to the new patterns of host society. This school came under attack when a few sophisticated works upholding theories of transnationalism came to the prominence. The works of Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc is by far the most sophisticated in this area. They write in their seminar book: “It has become increasingly obvious that our present conception of ‘immigrants’ or ‘migrants’ anchored in the circumstances of earlier moments, no longer is suffice. Today, immigrants develop networks, activities, patterns of living and ideologies that span their home and the host society.” (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1993: 4)

N Jayaram points out how in human migration two unique factors need to be recognised: migration does not mean the mere physical movement of people. Migrants carry with them a socio-cultural baggage which amongst other things consists of (a) a predefined social identity, (b) a set of religious beliefs and practices, (c) a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship organization, and food habits and (d)
language. More important, the migrants are not inevitably irrevocably cut off completely from the land of their breed. They themselves retain physical and or mental contact with their homeland, often characterized by the ‘myth of return’ (Jayaram 2004: 16)

Jayaram states having almost unique sociocultural histories and being subjected to different economic and political situations, the Indian communities abroad have evolved as distinct diasporic entities. They are nevertheless Indian as they manifest in varying degrees the survival, persistence or retention of several social patterns and cultural elements whose roots and substance can be traced to India. (Jayaram 2004: 17)

The relative dynamics of the cultural elements in diaspora is an instructive field of investigation. The conditions of persistence, assimilation, change and revival, the relative ability of a particular element to adapt itself to new and changing conditions, and the sequences of changes in cultural elements are some key aspects that could be covered in such an investigation. (Jayaram 2004: 27)

Jayaram puts forth how the concept of plural society is more than a descriptive label, and its rests on certain assumptions about which scholars are not in agreement. In fact, notwithstanding its uses, as a theoretical perspective in the analysis of diasporic situations it is fraught with controversies. As a descriptive label, ‘multicultural society’ appears to be more appropriate. (Jayaram 2004: 25)

Jayaram adds that Indians as a diasporic community cannot be understood Sui generis. The evolution of an Indian community abroad is closely linked to the general history of the host country. The economic, political and social changes taking place there have an impact on the Indians as a diasporic community. Accordingly the dynamics of the ‘host society’ becomes an integral part of a study of Indian diaspora, providing as it were the backdrop against which the evolution and predicament of a diasporic community can be understood. (Jayaram 2004: 26)
Crucial to the evolution of Indians as a diasporic community has been their ability to adapt in an alien setting the institutions characteristic of the social organization of their ancestral land. The most important of these has been the family, the rites (marriage) for establishing it and the network of relationships (kinship) resulting from or reinforced by it. Caste system, which has been the primordial principle of social organization in the homeland, was another such institution. At a much broader level was the *panchayat*, the council of village elders, which arbitrated disputes and regulated community life. (Jayaram 2004: 26)

As Safran has observed, it is a general characteristic of diasporics that 'they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.' (Safran 1991: 84)

Whatever the disciplinary orientations from which the study of Indian diaspora is approached, broadly two theoretical frameworks have been adopted in its analysis: the sociocultural perspective and the political economy perspective. Focusing on cultural identity and integration of the diasporic communities, the sociocultural perspective has largely operated from within the parameters of conventional structural-functionalism. It addresses the questions of sociocultural continuity and change among the diasporic communities on the one hand, and the dynamics of these communities in the context of multiculturalism on the other. (Jayaram 2004: 33)

Drawing insights from a variety of Marxist and non-Marxist socioeconomic thinking, the political economy perspective focuses on the economic and political aspects of the phenomenon of Indian diaspora. This perspective emphasizes the historical context of the diaspora, the mode of economy of the 'host' country and the place of the diasporic Indians in it, and the nature of the state in the 'host' country. While these two theoretical perspectives are different, both in their substantive interests and conceptual apparatus, they can only be complementary to each other in providing a more comprehensive understanding of Indian diaspora. (Jayaram 2004: 33)
Vijay Mishra, one of the exponents of Indian diaspora studies, argues that the Indian diaspora, by implications can be divided into specific stages. He names early Indian diaspora of indentured labour, ‘a diapora of exclusion’ that created relatively self-contained ‘Little Indians’ in the colonies and transplanted Indian icons of spirituality in the new land. Mishra distinguishes this diaspora from the post-1965 ‘diaspora of the border’, which is mobile, variously connected to the homeland and concerned with hyphenated subjectivity. Thus, in these cases, marginality is of economic sense, while it can be of racial or social sense too. (Lipi Ghosh 2004: 19)

S L Sharma also points out the recurrent themes in the existing literature on overseas Indians indicate clearly how sociocultural perspective predominates it. There are three such recurrent themes. The first is that overseas Indians tend to recreate Indian social structure wherever they go. The second is that they tend to hold fast to their native culture in their lands of adoption. The third is that their mode of adaptation is marked by a clear preference for economic integration more than cultural assimilation. (Sharma 2004: 47). He points out that the social structure of overseas Indians is marked by a multiplicity of communities based on regional, linguistic, religious, or in some places, caste lines. Region and religion seem to be more important determinants of their social organization than language and caste. (Sharma 2004: 47)

He further states that the question of cultural identity of overseas Indians involves several issues. The first issue is how Indians abroad perceive their self identity. Do they identify themselves as Indians or as Punjabis, Gujratis...etc? In other words do they identify themselves in terms of pan-Indian identity or in terms of a parochial ethnic category? According to Fisher (1980) Indians have difficulty in organizing as Indians. More often than not they tend to identify themselves in terms of narrow ethnic categories. (Sharma 2004: 49) Sharma further adding on Fisher’s perspective dwells that it seems that while dealing with the non-Indians they tend to take on pan-Indian identity. But when it comes to interacting among themselves their regional, linguistic or religious identities take precedence. A second issue is how others look upon Indians. Are they
viewed as Indians or as Asians? That depends on several things including their relative numerical strength in the host country. Wherever Indians form a substantial group they are viewed as Indians having a distinctive identity. In the countries where their numbers are small and the ethnic groups of other nationalities are also present they tend to be bracketed with other Asians. (Sharma 2004: 49)

With regard to the course of adaptation Sharma suggests it is likely to vary from community to community depending on many factors. In any case the hypothesis of a uniform course does not strike a unanimous chord among the scholars. There are atleast three identifiable modes: (a) assimilation, (b) cultural preservation, (c) ethnic politicization for power cultivation. These refer to three processes, namely, merger, adjustment and striving for dominance. (Sharma 2004: 50) He states how Indian immigrants in Jamaica, Grenada give evidence of assimilation. The second mode of adaptation seems to be more widespread. Indian immigrants in Southeast Asia, East Africa, in Britain and in the USA and Canada give ample evidence of it. It is observed how in the cultural domain Indians tend to preserve their identity while in the economic domain they are quick to integrate. As is also pointed out by Mahajani (1960), with respect to Indians in Burma and Malaysia. (Sharma 2004: 50)

Sharma also brings forth the Political Economy Perspective in which he describes the Marxian version to corroborate the study of diaspora. The basic elements of the Marxian political economy are: historical context, mode of production, class relations and nature of state. At a philosophical level, it tends to postulate a determinate relationship between objective conditions and subjective consciousness. Accordingly, it takes history, economy, class and power as its central explanatory categories. (Sharma 2004: 54)

To begin with the historical context, nothing is so central as the context of colonialism for situating the problem of overseas Indians in a proper perspective. Political economy of colonialism as well as of imperialism provides the key to an understanding of the problem of overseas Indian in proper perspective. It reveals that Indians, in most cases, did not thrust themselves on other countries. They were indeed
inducted as captive labour by the imperial powers. Finally, it also shows the primacy of the economic factor in accounting for the emigration of Indians as well as their incorporation into the select sectors of the economies of the host countries. (Sharma 2004: 55)

The plantation mode of production is of paramount importance for understanding the lot of Indians abroad. As an economic system, the plantation mode of production in the colonial context was an example par excellence of ruthless exploitation of plantation workers. In fact, in no other system was the dependency of the working class on the managerial/proprietary class so sharp and salient as in the plantation system. As a social system it consisted of displaced ethnic groups and degraded and deprived individuals with a weak sense of community. For all practical purposes it was totally regimented and highly oppressive. As a cultural system, it symbolized acceptance of a perverse value system which made a man feel important if his woman was summoned to the management bungalows. (Sharma 2004: 55). The impact of plantation mode of production on the sociocultural life of the overseas Indians was too profound to be described. It affected them in the severest of the ways. It inflicted untold sufferings on them and badly damaged their psyche. (Sharma 2004: 55)

Some subjects have greater potential for theoretical abstractions than others. The study of immigrant communities is one such subject. This is so because it provides a special testing ground for some of the seminal ideas of the prevailing sociological perspectives. Sociologically speaking immigration signifies a situation of interaction between a traditional and a modern cultural system. It also means a change in the existential conditions of immigrants with all its implications for the change in their consciousness. It represents a turning point in the lives of immigrants to confront a strange new world and to make sense of it. It also involves a possibility that immigrants may modify and reconstruct their life-world (Sharma 2004: 60)

From the phenomenological point of view, it will be profitable to see how overseas Indians use their stock of knowledge, their typifications and their intersubjective
experiences to come to terms with new life world. Equally valuable will be to probe deep into the subjective to their pains, their torments, their dilemmas and the bearing of this all on the modifications and reconstruction of their life-worlds. (Sharma 2004: 62)

After an indepth analysis of the theories of migration and settlement Jain in his study points out how the first of these frameworks is one which deals with cultural persistence. This is the retentionist view of Indian culture overseas and the studies falling under this category have recorded the ability of the Indians to retain, reconstitute and revitalize many aspects of their culture in an overseas setting. It is believed that the common bond of race, language and fellowship coupled with racial prejudices segregated the Indians first in barracks where they were lodged as indentured labourers and since late nineteenth century in villages where they settled. Rural isolation, ethnic identity and the sheer tenacity of Indian institutions have been considered as major mechanisms for preserving the Indian culture. (Jain 1993: 52)

Jain states how studies of cultural persistence fall under the general rubric of acculturation process. In this view there is a bias which over-emphasises the retention of cultural customs and traditions and only a superficial treatment of the disappearance of conventional patterns and the reasons for their demise. There is also a problem about the approach to history and social change in this framework. Society and culture both in India and in the overseas setting have moved from one point to another during the period that the initial emigration of Indians took place. This dimension is not taken care of in the perspective on cultural persistence. In other words, it is a static rather than a dynamic and diachronic perspective on the acculturation of overseas Indian communities. (Jain 1993: 53)

The second perspective is purely and simply an adaptationist one. Studies falling under this category are chiefly concerned with the question of the adaptation of the social group or an immigrant society into the social environment of the host society. R K Jain’s (1970) work on South Indian migrants in a typical Malaysian setting is a study of the process of adaptation of a people of Indian origin to conditions of life and work in a
particular Malayan environment, namely, rubber plantations. The study highlights the interaction between norms of a traditional rural people from southern India and the ideology and procedures of an industrial bureaucracy. The adaptationist perspective has been criticized on account of its failure to incorporate the comparative aspect. It is also criticized for not being able to relate in a systematic fashion the microcosm to the macrocosm. As a result these studies tend to be self-contained. (Jain 1993: 53)

The next perspective is that of the plural society, first advocated by Furnivall (1948) in the context of colonial society of South East Asia. According to him this kind of society possessed three characteristics—cultural, economic and political. Culturally, a plural society consists of incongruous and incompatible cultural sections between which communication is hampered. Economically, the relationships between the cultural sections are those of the market place. Politically, this kind of plural society is held together only by the fact of being dominated by an external colonial power. R K Jain (1986) has argued that the concept of plural society in the sense used by Furnivall is applicable only to ‘settlement societies’ and not to civilizations. In fact, M G Smith (1969) who developed the theory in its application to the Caribbean society restricted it to modern colonial situations and to the era of European industrial expansion and Laissez-faire capitalism. Further it was confined to the study of multi-racial communities. (Jain 1993: 54) Pluralism was defined in terms of both structure and culture, as connoting simultaneously “a social structure characterized by fundamental discontinuities and cleavages and a cultural complex based on systematic institutional diversity.” (Smith 1969: 27) The stability and unity in a society with structural pluralism and differential incorporation was maintained by the dominant group which was a cultural minority.

Approaches based on cultural pluralism and cultural intersystems alert us to the macro framework in particular Indian communities overseas have to be seen in a theoretical perspective. Diasporic situations enable us to trace and analyze certain key social processes like the formation of ethnic identity, the shaping of ethnic relations, the constitution institutions, the reconstruction of life worlds, etc. (Jayaram 2004: 33)
Migration

Despite the great antiquity of the Indian overseas migration to Malaya, there were seldom large numbers of Indians in Malaya in the pre-British period; and nearly most of the Indians presently in Malaya are either themselves immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants. The period of modern Indian immigration into Malaya dates from the foundation of Penang in 1786, but it became a significant feature in Malayan demography only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the establishment of British paramountcy in India and—the-consolidation of British power in Malaya. Furthermore, whereas the earlier immigrants were primarily financiers and traders in rare commodities or purveyors of a superior organization and civilization the modern Indian migrant, until the Indian government's ban on assisted labour emigration in 1988, was chiefly an unlettered labourer coming into the country to work for a pittance on some plantation or government project. Again, unlike the earlier phase, the modern migration was not so much a spontaneous flow but more a regulated and arranged movement, induced to a considerable extent by governmental action and the persuasions of prospective employers and their agents. Finally, whereas the earlier movement was small in volume, the later migration was on a large scale. The causes for this metamorphosis were mainly political and economic changes in India and Malaya. (Sandhu 1969: 32)

The trend of immigration shows several major fluctuations, with six prominent periods. The first, running approximately from the 1840s to 1900, is the period of relatively unrestricted indentured immigration, representing by and large a steady rise in immigration until about the beginning of the present century. The second period, from 1901 to 1922, saw the increasing regulation and final abolition of the indenture system but on the other hand a rise in the kangani and other individual contract methods. With the exception of a few small drops in total immigration, as for example during World War I when restrictions were imposed on Indian emigration and immigration by ‘the Indian and Malayan governments’ respectively, there was also an increasing volume of Indian immigration. The third period, from 1928 to 1929, represents the spurt of immigration under the Indian Emigration Act, 1922 and under conditions of general
prosperity in Malaya. The fourth, from 1930 to 1933, marks the highest reversal of flow, as a result of the Great Depression and economic hardships in Malaya. More than 370,000 Indians left Malaya, during 1930—3, compared with less than 188,000 coming in. The fifth, from 1934 to 1938, witnessed the revival of the migratory flow towards Malaya, though not on the same scale as the late 1920s. This was largely because of the dampening aftermath of the Depression, a symptom not only confined to Malaya but a general feature distinguishing world population movements during this period. The final period, 1939 to 1957, shows not only the disruption of the Japanese invasion, but also the restricting influence of the Indian government’s ban on assisted labour emigration and the increasingly stringent selective immigration policy of post-war Malaya. Fresh immigration in large numbers, with the exception of a few instances, as for example in 1952 and 1953 when many tried to beat the new entry regulations, virtually came to an end. The movement of Indians after this was confined chiefly to those going to India to visit relatives and homes and returning to their place of work in Malaya. The above changes in the current of Indian immigration into Malaya were the result mainly of fluctuations in the economic conditions in Malaya, particularly in the rubber industry, and to legislative enactments, initially in India and subsequently in Malaya. (Sandhu 1969: 157 – 158)

Indian migration to Malaya consisted predominantly of adult labourers, generally between the ages of fifteen and forty-five years. These labourers comprised about 70 per cent of all the Indians entering Malaya before the Japanese occupation. Some 70 per cent of these labourers were assisted immigrants, principally kangani recruits. Fluctuation in the flow was marked in the labour movement, since it was this section of the Indian immigration which was most sensitive to economic changes in Malaya and legislative sanctions in India (Sandhu 1969: 159).

More than 98 per cent of the labour immigrants were from South India, largely Adi-dravida and other low-caste Tamils from such main localities as the North Arcot, Trichinopoly and Tanjore districts of the Madras Presidency. Most of the non-labour immigrants were also from approximately the same areas, further emphasizing the
dominance of the South Indian elements in the total Indian movement. For example, between 1929 and 1938, more than 80 per cent of the total Indian arrivals in Malaya were from South India. Before 1929, the proportion of South Indians among the Indian migrants was even higher, as North Indian migration to Malaya in substantial numbers was a comparatively recent phenomenon. (Sandhu 1969: 161) The majority of the South Indians were from the Madras Presidency (Province), the remainder being from the areas now included in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh States. The relatively small number of North Indian migrants into Malaya were chiefly the Punjabis, mostly Sikhs from the Malwa, Mahja, Dhoaba areas of the land of five rivers. (Sandhu 1969: 162)

The proportion of females amongst the other types of immigrants was even smaller. This predominantly male character of the Indian movement was due to the fact that the majority of the Indian immigrants were simply birds of passage, sojourners only in Malaya, and preferred to leave their families in India. Another significant feature of the Indian movement to Malaya was that it consisted very largely of Hindu immigrants, who formed some 80 per cent of the total movement, the remainder being principally Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, in that order of numerical strength. (Sandhu 1969: 167)

Predominantly male migration- part of the explanation for this trend lies in the cultural traditions of Indians. But the ideology of the colonial regime – that a woman’s role was largely a reproductive one – also played a part in this development. This was reflected in the sexual division of labour on the plantations and a differential wage scale, with women paid lower wages than men.³ (Kaur 1998: 86)

Labour Immigrants

European employers lacking significant access to Chinese labour throughout the nineteenth century, had to depend on workers from India. The Europeans also preferred Indian labour because Chinese workers could only be hired through contractors and were relatively expensive to hire. However, the Indians lacked funds to migrate spontaneously.

³ For details of female migration and marriages look at Chapter Two Page 68-71
and there were more attractive in other British colonies which offered higher wage prospects, better living conditions and greater chance of landing as free men. Additionally, Indian immigration to Malaya was monopolized by a few private recruiting firms that restricted supply in order to obtain higher commissions. With the rubber boom it became imperative to have a considerably large labour supply and the British administration had to step in to plan and direct the mass migration of Indians to Malaya. Historically, therefore, the colonial state was crucial not only in the opening up of Malaya to the penetration of metropolitan capital but also in creation and maintenance of immigrant wage labour. It thus exercised a major influence on the development of an ethnically divided labour market in Malaya. (Kaur 1998: 78)

The Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Frederick Weld, spoke for many succeeding generations of British Malayan administrators when he said in 1887 that the Indians were a peaceable and easily-governed race, that it was far convenient for the Government to deal with them than with Chinese labour, and that their influx should be encouraged to counterbalance the preponderance of the Chinese. Colonial officials, as well as planters and other employers of immigrant labour, kept harping on this theme till well into the 1930’s. (Arasaratnam 1970: 49) The organised Chinese, working as a group under a headman, are always a source of anxiety because of their readiness to strike work easily. Herein lay the immense value of the South Indian labourer who has never known the art of combination. He elects to lie prostrate before his Periadorai (Manager) or the Sinnadorai (Assistant Manager). There may be in one sense an advantage in not having to deal with individual labourers, but in times of unrest, there are decided advantages in having a labour force in which individual contact could be made such as easily in the case with the Indians. Thirdly, the estate European staff has usually smattering knowledge of Tamil because all the large estates are organised on the basis of a Tamil labour force. This helps to some extent with the dispensing of the intermediaries. In the case of the Chinese, however, with their diversities of dialects, the Manager is bound to be at the mercy of the labour contractor. Fourthly, some sections of the Chinese are said to be easily infected with Socialistic or Communistic doctrines and their organisations are said to provide convenient 'cells' for such ideas. Especially after the strikes of 1937, there is a
hesitation to rely exclusively on the Chinese. In fact, the tendency appears to be to replace them wherever possible by the Indians. Fifthly, a comparison of the cost of tapping per pound of dry rubber leaves little room for doubt that the Indian is far cheaper than the Chinese. (Aiyer 1938: 18)

Apart from economic and administrative reasons, Indian immigration -was also desirable as a political move, especially to counterbalance the growing numbers and influence of the Chinese. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings of the Government of India September, 1922, confidential B proc. 49 – 50) The Chinese were turbulent, and faction fights amongst them were not -infrequent. They were enterprising and daily increasing in numbers and influence and at this rate of progress could one day conceivably oust the British from their privileged position. Both the British government and planters were, therefore, wary about the Chinese and considered it ‘by no means desirable to let the Chinese obtain too exclusive a possession of the Peninsula’. In short, it was imperative to take immediate measures to check Chinese influence and ensure the safety of British interests. The casting of the Indian in the role of a counterpoise to the Chinese was considered to be one such effective step. Finally, some of the early officials also felt that the introduction of Indian immigrants into the Malay States ‘might possibly, to a certain degree, render obligatory a more permanent adoption of the residential system’ in those states ‘than has as yet been decided upon, as it would not be possible to leave the immigrants under the uncontrollable rule of a Malay Sultan’. (Sandhu 1969: 58)

Of the people of the Subcontinent the South Indian peasant, particularly the untouchable or low caste Madrasi, was considered the most; satisfactory type of labourer, especially for light, simple repetitive tasks. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings of the Government of India, January 1884, B proc. 7-14.) He was malleable, worked well under supervision and was easily manageable. He was not as ambitious as most of his Northern Indian compatriots and certainly nothing like the Chinese. True, he had little self-reliance or the capacity of the Chinese, or for that matter of many of his own countrymen from the other parts of the Subcontinent, but he was the most amenable to the comparatively lowly-paid and rather regimented life of estates and government
departments. He had fewer qualms or religious susceptibilities, such as aversion to crossing the dreaded *kale pani* and food taboos, than his Northern fellows, and cost less in feeding and maintenance. (Sandhu 1969: 56)

Acclimatization to Malayan conditions was comparatively easier for him as South India was not totally different from Malaya climatically. Moreover he was already adjusted to a low standard of living, was a British subject, accustomed to British rule and well-behaved and docile. Typical though these features were of South Indian workers in general, they were especially so in the case of the Adi-dravidas, or Untouchables, who formed the main labouring groups of South India. The relegation of the outcastes to a sort of ghetto was carried, at least in the pre-war period, in South India to great lengths, the intolerance of the Brahman being particularly conspicuous. (Sandhu 1969: 57)

The relegation of these classes to the level of animals in a caste-ridden society naturally tended to deprive them of initiative and self-respect, and made them a cringingly servile group. These people had neither the skill nor the enterprise to rise above the level of manual labour. Primitive and ill-organized, they never appear to have known the art of collective bargaining. They were therefore also especially desirable as a ‘black-leg’ counterpoise to the more progressive labouring elements such as the Chinese who were liable to resort to the strike weapon quite readily. Willing to accept low fixed wages, they enabled employers to keep wages depressed. All in all, then these features of the South Indian Adi-dravidas made them almost the ideal labouring material for the furtherance of capitalist endeavours in Malaya. Furthermore, many of the European planters, especially during the days of extensive coffee planting, came to Malaya from Ceylon, where they had been used to South Indian labour. They firmly believed that Madrasis ‘must always be the mainstay of planters. They were the best suited for such specific tasks as picking crops.’ Similarly a number of senior government officials and contractors, particularly those in the public works and railways departments, also came from Ceylon where they too had handled Indian labour. They also preferred Madrasis ‘for all work’ on such projects as road and railway construction. The State Engineer,
Selangor, for instance had no doubts that Madrasis were specially adapted for road making and were the ‘best metal breakers’. (Sandhu 1969: 57)

Finally, it was well known among Malayan employers and considered ‘hardly an exaggeration’ that the South Indian labourer was ‘highly gullible, even for his kind; that ‘political economy’ had virtually no meaning to him; and, perhaps most important of all, that an agent or recruiter would, if it was made worth his while, ‘persuade’ him ‘to go anywhere’. To this end then, propaganda, aimed at projecting favourable image of Malaya in the minds of Indians in general and South Indian labour in particular, was stepped up both in India and Malaya by the Malayan government and planters. (Sandhu 1969: 64) The labour movement was predominantly an ‘arranged’ one, in that almost every-stage of its movement from its home in India to its place of employment in Malaya was arranged and taken care of by someone else. (Sandhu 1969: 66)

South Indians were preferred for economic and non-economic reasons. Tamils were cheaper source of labour compared to Chinese and Javanese workers and were easier to recruit without any problems from the source country because India was under the same imperial government. Equally, South India’s proximity to Malaya was an additional favourable consideration. Poverty in South India, arising from the agrarian crises in the Madras Presidency due to pressure on land, climatic conditions and unemployment was an important ‘push’ factor. (Kaur, 1998: 79)

Labour migrants can be broadly divided under two categories; labourers brought under Indenture system and labourers brought under Kangany system.

**Indenture**

Indenture like slavery was peculiarly adapted to the recruitment of labour through migration. It enabled business enterprises to transfer ‘labour to newly developing areas’ and yet restrained that labour from immediately taking up holdings of its own in these new areas. Indentured emigration from India came into its own in the nineteenth century.
(Sandhu 1969: 76) It was the indenture system that provided the first complement of Indian labourer settlers to the Malay Peninsula. (Arasaratnam 1970: 12) A large proportion of Indian labour coming into Malaya in this way was absorbed into the sugar plantations.

The system in Malaya differed from that in the sugar colonies but mainly in detail and less so in spirit, the labourer in Malaya, if anything, being ‘far less liberally treated’. For example, once the procedure of indentured recruitment had been systematized, labourers in the other British colonies were recruited by their respective governments and made available to employers of indentured labour. In Malaya, however, recruitment was by speculators or employers themselves or through their own or private agents in India. The Malayan government’s function was merely to watch over the fulfilment of the contract between the individual employer and the immigrant. In practice even this was seldom done. The approved period of contract in Malaya varied between one and three years compared with the five years in the sugar colonies. (Sandhu 1969: 76)

Another significant feature of this movement was that it consisted predominantly of adult males, generally between the ages of fifteen and forty-five, the proportion of women and children in the total stream being seldom above, although frequently below, 20 and 10 per cent respectively. This was partly because, unlike in the case of the other and more distant colonies where the government of India, anxious to promote normal family life and minimize the evils associated with a large disproportion of the sexes, insisted of 25 – 50 per cent of the emigrants being females, there was no such stipulation in the case of Malaya. Partly, this was due to the fact that the migration was not a family movement by any means, consisting primarily of single or married males, unaccompanied by their womenfolk or children. (Sandhu 1969: 82) The early immigrant labour, coming through the indenture system, was predominantly male in its composition. The kind of work available, the living conditions, and the attitudes of the time, were not conducive to the migration of females in any large numbers. (Arasaratnam 1970: 32)
Abuses relating to young women were tragic. A certain number were regularly recruited for prostitution in the new labour settlements. Then there was the journey by ship under inhuman conditions, resulting in high mortality. A good number of men who reached Malaya were unfit for any kind of work, let alone arduous duties connected with plantation agriculture. (Arasaratnam 1970: 13)

Because of the nature of the contract, these labourers were worked extremely hard by their employers, who desired to get everything out of them during their period of indenture. Though the indenture was for three years, the employers had several means of getting them to work longer. By the addition of innumerable items of expenditure to the labourers charge his indebtedness was perpetual, and he could not free himself from the indenture until he had settled his debts. Wages, agreed in advance when he was totally unaware of the conditions in Malaya, were ridiculously low, much lower than the wages of other Indians who had migrated as free labourers. (Arasaratnam 1970: 14)

The lot of the Indian indentured labourers varied from employer to employer, but it was generally hard, often indescribably so. We have already noted how many of the employers appear to have worked on the principle of maintaining their workers at as small a cost as possible, of working them as hard as possible and of keeping them on the job as regularly as possible, if need be by force or flogging. Nine to ten hours per day, six days a week was the normal load of work. Those who had signed legal contracts were bound to these conditions for varying periods ranging from 313 to 940 days of work. In practice these were liable to be extended for an indefinite period. (Sandhu 1969: 83)

Wages were exceedingly low, being only 9 cents per day in the 1860s and 16—18 cents in the 1900s. Furthermore, these wages were fixed for the period of the contract and paid only for the days actually worked and those approved as holidays. The paltry earnings were further denuded by deductions for loans, advances on passage costs and fines. Much of the remainder, too, was often, as the Principal Medical Officer, Straits Settlements, discovered on his visit to sugar estates of Province Welleshey in 1879, 'frisked' off him by his other creditors—the kedai mutalaai, tantal and the older bands on
the estate, who victimized him right and left. Often the newcomer had insufficient funds left to purchase such staples as rice, let alone extras. In such cases he was reduced to eat all the rubbish he could lay his hands on, 'unripe fruit, sugar-cane, garbage and offal of all descriptions'. This affected his health and thence in turn his ability to work regularly. Irregular attendance diminished his earnings and thereby his meals, even further, to purchase sufficient food. This in turn meant greater emaciation—a vicious cycle broken only through flight or death. (Sandhu 1969: 84)

Indenture in Malaya, like its counterparts in the other colonies, was altogether an obnoxious device of recruitment and exploitation of cheap labour, one of its worst features, was that it imposed on the labourers, at least in the case of those with written contracts, a criminal liability for the most trivial breaches of the contracts in place of the civil liability which usually is attached to such lapses. They could thus be liable to imprisonment with hard labour, 'not only for fraud, not only for deception, but for negligence, for carelessness and for even an impertinent word or gesture to the manager or his overseer'. (Sandhu 1969: 85)

Kangany

The date of birth of the kangani system of labour recruitment, too, is hazy, but it appears to have begun at least as early as the late 1860s if not earlier. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, September, 1870, proc. 1 – 15) However, it did not become significant until the establishment of large-scale commercial coffee cultivation in the 1880s and 1890s. With the spread of coffee estates a difference of opinion developed between European sugar and coffee planters as to the type of labour desired in Malaya. The sugar planters, as we know, employed largely professionally recruited indentured Indians, but the coffee planters preferred to employ free labour recruited by kanganis, a procedure in vogue in Ceylon, from where most of the coffee planters had come. The rubber planters, too, favoured kangani labour, considering it far superior to the one recruited professionally.
The kangani, as employee of the estate, was expected to do his best for his employer, he knew what was wanted, he had the confidence of his master. He recruited in his own village or taluk where he was known and where his apparent wealth and well-being would be all the more effectively employed in attracting emigrants, as it could be paraded as proof of the wealth awaiting them in Malaya. Moreover, kangani labour was cheaper since commissions paid to kanganis probably varied less directly with the demand for labour. Also of major importance was the fact that kangani - recruited labourers were considered free labourers and thus initially less subject to Government control and inspection. The kangani system of the coffee and post-coffee era involved a short-term contract, generally verbal rather than written, which could be dissolved at a month’s notice on the part of either party. It received its name because of the important role of the kanganis, or headmen, who in theory were foremen on estates or senior members of families, but in actuality, were often only ‘coolies of standing’. The kangani, like his garden sirdar and maistry counterparts of the Assamese tea plantations and the Burmese rice fields and mills respectively, was both recruiter and field foreman, at least in the eyes of those he recruited. He was sent by an employer or association of employers to bring back his friends, neighbours and relatives in his home village and taluk. The kangani, on behalf of his employers, undertook to provide food, clothing and transit for the recruits in connection with the overseas trip. Frequently he was empowered to discharge their local debts or to leave money with their relatives. Considerable responsibility rested on him to choose the right sort of recruits and as compared with indenture there was a somewhat better chance that whole families or neighbourhood groups would come together. (Sandhu 1969: 90)

While it was generally true that a kangany recruited mostly among kinsmen, this category itself was nearly as wide as the spatial boundaries of the local subcaste of the kangany. This meant a considerable overlap in the kinsmen – potential recruits of various kanganies – belonging to the same subcaste in one or more villages of the same area in India. It made for a wide dispersion of kinsmen on Malayan estates. At the same time, factors such as fluctuations in rubber price and consequently irregularity of employment of any particular estate necessitated considerable internal migration. Displaced persons
undertook long or short journeys to reach their kinsmen, who provided at least some security in an industry at a time when modern safeguards such as trade unions were lacking. These movements, whether they involved an individual, a family, or a wider assortment of kin, were made easier by the fact that estate labourers had no fixed assets to move with them. (Jain 1970: 245)

Even among his own kinsmen the recruiting kangany was very often persona non grata, an evil to be avoided. But the daredevil kangany also learned, over the years, to devise better techniques of recruitment, some of which came close to kidnapping. (Jain 1970: 249)

The kangani was the all-important link between the planter and his labour force. He recruited labourers in India, supervised their work on the estates and paid them their fares from a lump sum paid by the employer. In return for his services the head kangani received payments for recruits introduced on to the estate and also ‘head-money’, 3—6 rupee cents per day, for each resident labourer who showed up for work. In addition, he was occasionally paid a fixed salary for special services, and often also made a little more money by sharp practices. More important, he was able to exploit his position to his own advantage, particularly to gain control over the labourers so that they were constrained not to leave the gang. The silara kangani usually worked in the field, either as a labourer or sub-overseer. For this he received a ‘name’ which entitled him to a day’s pay for each labourer in his group in addition to ‘pence money’, a sum of 9—12 rupee cents daily. The labourer was obligated to pay within two years the sum advanced to bring him to the place of work. He could not be compelled to pay, since the law clearly allowed him to leave his job with thirty days’ notice and did not hold him liable for any debt to the kangani, but the fact he would find it difficult to get work at another plantation if he failed to pay, and he took the debt as a point of honour.’ (Sandhu 1969: 91)

The advantage of this method over other methods of professional recruiting was that the Kangany could be expected to exercise greater care in the choice of labourers. (Arasaratnam 1970: 16)
Another significant feature of this kangani labour movement was that unlike its counterpart in Ceylon, where it was largely a movement of families or equal numbers of males and females, the migration to Malaya consisted of predominantly adult males, at least until the late 1920s. Thereafter males still formed about 70 per cent of all the kangani immigrants. Various attempts were made by the Malayan and Indian governments to improve the disproportion among the sexes. The Malayan government, for example, reduced the assessments paid on female workers in connection with the Indian Immigration Fund. It also increased the commissions paid to kanganis for female recruits and also for married men accompanied by their families. The Indian government on its part passed the Indian Emigration Act, 1922 and the Indian Emigration Rates, 1923, which stipulated that there should be at least one female emigrant for every 15 males assisted to emigrate as labourers. (Sandhu 1969: 97 – 98)

These attempts were however partly successful. There was the feeling, amongst Indian labour leaders and others, that the Malayan employers while going through all the appropriate gestures of encouraging female emigration were in reality not very anxious to promote such migration. They considered the female labourers less efficient and productive and more costly to maintain in terms of supervision, accommodation, and maternity and nursery provisions. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, 1982, confidential file no. 206—2/32—L & 0)

In any case, unlike the tea planters of Ceylon, the Malayan rubber planters, the principal employers of kangani labour during the present century, could only employ a limited number of females on the estates. (Sandhu 1969: 98-99)

The sum total of the above factors was that the representative kangani emigrant was an adult male leaving the country for a short while and generally always with the idea of returning home. This is not to claim that there was no family emigration, but that it concerned a tiny minority of immigrants in the total stream, at least till the late 1920s. Neither is it to deny that a few left with the idea of permanent settlement, but that such
elements were even more uncommon than the family emigrants. Kangani labour immigration into Malaya was entirely a South Indian phenomenon, predominantly Tamil with a leavening of Telugus from Andhra Pradesh and Malayalis from the Malabar coast areas. The principal districts of origin were those adjoining or close to the ports of Madras and Negapatam—North Arcot, Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Salem, Chingleput and South Arcot. These between them accounted for 70 per cent of the total emigrants, with North Arcot providing more than a fifth of the total. These migrants were drawn from a variety of castes and backgrounds, but predominantly from among the lower strata of South Indian society, especially its Untouchable or Adi-dravida sector of Pariahs, Pallas, Chamars and such like. As stated above, the vast majority of these recruits were intended for the rubber plantations, and Selangor and Perak, two of the principal rubber areas of the country, between them absorbed nearly two-thirds of such entrants. The kangani system vastly improved Malaya’s labour supply, but its method of recruitment left a lot to be desired. Bribery was frequently used to buy favours and it invariably entered into the several phases of immigration. (Sandhu 1969: 99)

The Kanganiis continuously stressed that their methods of persuasion were possible and to a considerable degree aided by the general ignorance, poverty and misery of the labouring classes. (Kalutai, donkey, was the expression most commonly used by them in describing the coolie emigrants.) (Sandhu 1969: 67)

A Kangany himself, a South Indian labourer on a rubber estate was sent to India to recruit more labour. He got a commission for each recruit. The Kangany system was substantially similar to the Maistry system in Burma. Their identical feature was a system of advance payment to induce emigration which led to initial and thereby perpetual indebtedness of the labourer to his Kangany. (Mahajani 1960: 97 ff)

When the Kangany returned to Malaya with his group of labourers and delivered them to his employer, they were employed in that plantation, usually under the Kangany who had recruited them. Thus there was a continuing connection between the Kangany and the labourers in their new and strange environment. This considerably reduced the
hardships resulting from migration for the labourers. He continued to depend on the Kangany and looked on him as a source of security as well as a general adviser on all questions connected with his new employment and all problems relating to his settling down in his new country. This relationship was, furthermore, of importance for the growth of leadership patterns within this community. (Arasaratnam 1970: 16)

The Kangany also had subtle means of keeping the labourer on a lead, attached and dependent on him. The Malayan Kangany had an effective hold on his labourers, and for a long time provided them with whatever leadership they possessed. The Kangany had to be a person who could command the respect of as wide a sector of the community of his village and district as possible. It was this system of recruiting that became the mainstay of labour supply after the indenture system was abolished in 1910 and until the end of assisted labour migration from India to Malay in 1938. (Arasaratnam 1970: 17)

During the first two decades of the century the head kangany is said to have wielded the authority to kill people for indulging in premarital sexual intercourse, without fear of legal proceedings being brought against him. While there is no conclusive evidence that he could shoot people, it is conceivable, that sometimes wounds caused by excessive beating with a cane became septic, so that the victim was declared sick and sent to the hospital where he later died. (Jain 1970: 280)

More serious quarrels called for the intervention of officers higher up in the estate hierarchy. The relationship of the men to the recruiter-foreman was one of great dependence. It constituted a major source of the kangany’s authority over his gang in the community sub-system. The kangany exploited this dependence for his personal advantage, especially to further his economic ends. (Jain 1970: 281). A kangany was often the prime source of solidarity for a gang of labourers. He could lead his gang in group actions outside the work situation. Such actions could be far-reaching significance for the industrial subsystem. (Jain 1970: 282)
In early days, at any rate ideally, the manager was the sole embodiment of paternal authority for labourers; realistically too, the size and scale of the enterprise was small and the Asian bureaucracy had not appeared in such a form as to stand between the manager and the labour. The small size of the estate helped the manager to form a self-image of the pioneer planter and overlord of the estate with all inclusive powers over men and materials within his purview. Perhaps this self-image had something to do with the verbalized pattern found among Tamil labourers, expressed as ‘Manager is our father and mother’. (Jain 1970: 284-285)

To the extent permitted by the scale of the enterprise, many of the social arrangements sponsored by the management were formed in keeping with this self-image of the planter. When asked to comment upon his close relationship with the labourers, an ex-planter wrote: ‘The good manager was looked upon as the mother and father of the labourer who usually brought all his troubles to the office in the afternoons for solving by the manager...the manager knew all his labourers, the relations on the estate, their particular virtues and weaknesses, their character and, in fact, about all there was to know of them. The kangany license recruiting system which operated in those days...resulted in something of the nature of one large family with the manager at the head.’ (Jain 1970: 285)

To the manager it seemed important that the labourers should look upon him as their ‘father and mother’, and a wise manager succeeded in this. (Jain 1970: 286). The translation of the paternalistic ideal into practice was achieved by a system of delegated authority, in which the manager vested in the European bosses (including himself), the kirani, and the kanganyies differential rights of intervention in the community sub-system. The actual playing out of these roles by the officials constituted their institutionalized pattern of interaction with the labourers. (Jain 1970: 286)

Jain in his study points out the rigidity of separation between the strata- European bosses, Kirani, and labourers. In the Weberian sense of the term, each of these categories formed a caste. Each was ethnically distinct from the other and all three were organised
in an hierarchical order. There was no inter-caste mobility, just as there was complete endogamy within each caste. The caste were distinguished by important status symbols—housing, styles of dress, modes of conveyance (on foot, bicycle, or motorcycle), and elaborate rules of deference and demeanor. Apart from such communications that were necessitated by the demands of office, members of higher caste had no regular social interaction with the lower. Thus it was that in the work situation only the crystallized pattern of interaction among castes existed. The system of social stratification was founded on an occupational basis and it was rigid. (Jain 1970: 287)

Indeed the performance of management-supported paternalistic functions demanded tact and persuasiveness. There is evidence that a kangany could use his patron-client tie to secure compliance from a recruit. The matter could be as simple as that of keeping the line clean or to extinguishing all lamps in the lines after 9 P M. The kangany and the head kangany could be held responsible for any act of violence in the lines and great vigilance was demanded from them. The Kangany, as agent of the management, was expected to reach out to help a labourer even in personal affairs. He was expected to undertake long journeys for his recruits, as for instance, to search for the deserting wife of one of his men. (Jain 1970: 288)

It was directly in the kangany’s line of authority, to finance the marriage of a recruit or to see that a deceased member of his family was given a decent burial. The kangany was expected to spend a portion of his head-money to help his men out on occasions demanding considerable expenditure. (Jain 1970: 289)

Despite the granting to him of perquisites, privileges, and power (by a system of rewards), the kangany was still a man of the management among his people. There was no caste barrier between him and the labourer; on the contrary, there were pre-existing ties, such as those of kinship. Awareness of these divided loyalties kept the manager constantly on his guard. One device to guard against the kangany’s over-accumulation of power was the creation of a hierarchy of kanganies controlled by the manager. Kanganies could be moved up and down in the hierarchy at the manager’s favour only by showing
complete commitment to the goals of the management. For an especially worthy kangany the amount of head-money was doubled, but for one who displeased the manager summary dismissal was not at all an unusual punishment. A manager could cut himself off from the labouring community at his own risk; excessive reliance upon kanganies was to be avoided. (Jain 1970: 289)

As in their social interaction in the work situation, so also in their relationship with labourers ‘off-work’, the kirani stuck closely to the roles assigned them by the management. These roles were to mediate, to warn, to interpret (to the manager), and depending upon a particular kirani’s skill and personality, even to play one party of labourers against the other for the benefit of the Company. (Jain 1970: 290)

A parallel dramatization of role-playing within a division could be seen in the ritual gift-giving to the head kangany, whenever the latter left to recruit labourers from India. All the labourers in his division paid their contributions to the gang kangany, who in turn bought a present for the head kangany. It was presented at a ceremony held in the division. A similar ceremony was held to felicitate the European assistant on his home leave or retirement. (Jain 1970: 292) It seems significant that no ritual of prostration was ever held for a kirani. Perhaps this is yet another proof of the kirani’s marginal status in the estate social system before World War 2. (Jain 1970: 292)

Notwithstanding the differences in social class, there often are economic ties between kirani and labourers, usually ties of unilateral economic advantage to the kirani, because of which the labourer gain in prestige and often in securing favourable treatment in the work situation. Some other examples are the sale of milk of kirani’s cows in the labour lines, a staff member’s interest-free borrowing of money from a line entrepreneur (or even from an ordinary labourer who may have received a large prize in a lottery), the giving of sewing lessons by a staff member’s wife to girls on the estate, and the medical dresser’s night classes in English for the labourers’ children (fees are charged for both types of lessons) (Jain 1970: 341)
The Kanagani system, apart from being cost efficient, also enabled British planters to break the monopoly of the Indian recruiting firms at the same time; this system guaranteed better results, since there were comparatively less instances of fleeing. The Kangani system differed very little from the indenture system, since the debt bondage relationship remained extant in some form or another. (Basu 2004: 176) The abolition of the indenture labour system failed to improve the condition of Indian labourers.

Unlike the spontaneous migration of the Chinese, Indian migration was planned and directed by the colonial authorities. Consequently, the structure of Indian society in Malaya, especially in the plantation sector of the west coast, was determined by the structure and needs of the European sector of the colonial economy. Begun on a small scale for public works and the European estates in the nineteenth century, the influx of Indian labour became a flood with the rubber boom after 1905, continuing at a high level until 1938. (Stenson 1980: 16)

These factors were of immense social significance in determining the nature of social life and settlement in the plantations for many years.

**Non-Labour Immigration**

There was an acute shortage of trained or 'trainable' subordinates for administrative clerical and technical functions, particularly in the governmental services. This became increasingly so following the political and administrative transfer of the Straits Settlements from the India to the Colonial Office in 1867, and especially so after the establishment of British hegemony over the Malay States and the launching thereafter, of ambitious programmes of administrative, economic and social development. In the absence of any adequate local means of meeting these imperative demands both the government and private employers had no alternative but to seek their necessary requirements of English-speaking junior staff from sources outside Malaya. Possible areas of supply were Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Ceylon and India, the last two
having had the advantage of a comparatively earlier and wider diffusion of English, technical and scientific education than Malaya. (Sandhu 1969: 68)

In the case of the Indian and Ceylonese, however, the conditions were sufficiently attractive. For example, wages offered to clerks, teachers and technical assistants in late nineteenth-century Malaya were substantially higher than those prevailing in Ceylon and two, three and occasionally, four times as high as those in India. Moreover, there was the promise of a steady job in a not too distant country and, in the case of government service, the prospect of a *pukka nawkri* and, on its completion, a government pension. This was considered the ultimate in success by many a contemporary Indian. (Sandhu 1969: 69)

Consequently there came a substantial number of English-educated Indians, especially from the south. Here at least in the 1920s, they easily found employment in building roads and railways, in surveying lands and in doing the work of clerks, dressers, plantation and office assistants, teachers, technicians and so on. As much of the labour force employed by the government and planters and number of other enterprises was from South India, the Tamil, Malayali or Telugu speaking English-educated South Indians and Jaffna Tamils were especially welcome. They were invaluable in dealing with this labour and in acting as links between them and their generally British, or English-speaking, employers. Just as South Indians proved to be invaluable in the clerical and technical services, similarly Northern Indians, particularly the tall, sturdy Sikhs, were much sought after for such employment as soldiers, policemen, watchmen and caretakers. (Sandhu 1969: 69)

The problem of providing an adequate internal security, one of the essentials for the cherished economic development of the country in early British Malaya appears to have been more difficult than that usually associated with such pioneer areas. The population was largely transitory, widely dispersed and extremely mixed, consisting of such elements as Muslim Malays and Indians, ancestor-worshipping Chinese, Hindu Tamils, Christian Europeans and Eurasians and Buddhist Siamese and Sinhalese. The
large number of Chinese with their secret societies were a special problem and a major source of disorders; and crime. Quite apart from the difficulties of ordinary policing they were also regarded as a political threat, to the extent that if not controlled they might take possession of the country. (Sandhu 1969: 70)

In the circumstances where Malaya, other Southeast Asians, Chinese, Jawi Pekans, South Indians and Europeans were unavailable, impracticable or unsuitable except for certain specific duties, the government out of necessity had to turn to alternative possible sources of police and military recruits. It turned to the Northern Indian provinces, particularly the Punjab and Northwest Frontier. Amongst the inhabitants of these areas, the Sikhs were particularly sought after. They were sufficiently mobile and poor at home and were quite prepared to migrate and work for three to five years for such low wages, in the hope of living frugally and saving enough to return home to buy new land or redeem the mortgaged family plot. If promised steady increments of about $1 a year, with the prospects of a pension thrown in and suitable leave arrangements enabling them to visit their homes periodically, they could be persuaded to serve for much longer periods. Being wholly reliable, 'fairly uncorruptible’, conscientious and generally quick to learn, they were considered fairly suitable for all branches of the security services, but especially so for armed police work or for military and para-military duties, where their stature, bearing and martial traditions and reliability were invaluable. (Sandhu 1969: 72-73)

The Straits Settlements received their first batch of Sikh policemen in 1881. The fame of these men and of their colleagues as effective security guards in Perak and other parts of the country spread rapidly. As a result they were also eagerly sought after by private employers for such duties as caretakers, watchmen, guards and drummers. (National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, December, 1904, Secret memorandum by Swettenham dated 12.8.1903; National Archives of India: Emigration Proceedings, October, 1915, secret file no. 154, serial no. 1)
Besides the clerical and potential security-force immigrants there was also a continuous stream of petty Indian entrepreneurs, businessmen, moneylenders, merchants, traders and such like, who found an increasing scope in Malaya. They in turn imported, assisted or encouraged a host of assistants and underlings to come to Malaya to help them in their undertakings. The rapidly expanding economy of Malaya also witnessed an influx of such other people as tradesmen and hawkers, who arrived either under their own steam or through the assistance of some other person or agency. With a growing horde of graduates being turned out by the colleges and universities in India, the English-educated Indian, like his lesser qualified clerical brethren, also began to find it extremely difficult to get into the cherished, but comparatively limited and highly competitive, government services or other such desirable pukka nawkris. Prospects in Malaya for such classes of Indians were by no means rosy, being limited until World War II to subordinate roles in a European-dominated government and professional world. But even such opportunities were apparently, in some cases at least, sufficiently attractive compared with those in India, for a small number of professional Indians such as doctors, lawyers and teachers were also seen to be following in the wake of their labour, commercial and other countrymen. (Sandhu 1969: 74)

Then, too, part of the military garrison in Malaya, until the Indian independence, tended to be drawn from units of the British Indian Army. Quite apart from some of the militiamen remaining in Malaya after their demobilization, these garrison units trailed a substantial number of camp-followers. Some of these, too, appear to have branched off into other undertakings, either on the departure of their unit or at times even while it was still stationed in Malaya. (Sandhu 1969: 74)

The vast majority of the commercial immigrants were salesmen, peddlers, petty entrepreneurs, traders and shopkeepers, street-side vendors, medicine-men, stall-holders and such like. Merchants, financiers and contractors of substantial means—principally Chettiar and Marakkayar Muslims of the Madras coast and Parsis, Sindhis and Sikhs—were a tiny minority, estimated at less than a fifth of the total commercial movement entering Malaya. But despite the great disparity in capital assets amongst different
categories of commercial immigrants the group, as a whole, had at least two notable features in common. In the first place, like their labour-migrant countrymen they were predominantly adult males, there being little family movement until the 1930s. Secondly, free immigrants in every sense of the word, were generally of higher caste than those who had come as labourers, these commercial immigrants usually came on their own or family resources, invariably with some capital, however small, and experience in the kind of trade they sought to practice. More accustomed to travel, and more resourceful, aggressive and ambitious, the more successful amongst them, in conjunction with others like them from such classes as the professional groups, gradually assumed the role of a petite bourgeoisie among the Indian community of Malaya. (Sandhu 1969: 121)

The Chettiars were the main channel for the supply of rural credit. They lent money to the Malaya peasants and land-owners largely in return for the mortgage of property and the deposit of their title deeds. Their clientele also included the European planters, the Malay royalty, Chinese tin miners and businessmen and the Indian traders. The bulk of credit they provided was on a long term basis. (Mahadevan 1978: 149) It was quiet a common practice among the Chettiars to insist on mortgage of property and title deeds as security for money lent. An inevitable consequence of this kind of lending was that land, rubber gardens, and tin mines began to gradually pass into the hands of the Chettiars. (Mahadevan 1978: 149)

Apart from acquiring rubber estates in this manner, viz., through money lending, the Chettiars were also, particularly from the 1920’s, independently investing their capital in rubber estates. Thus, there were a number of instances during this period of Chettiars either directly acquiring rubber plantations or, alternatively, bringing large tracts of virgin land under rubber cultivation. (Mahadevan 1978: 149) The Chettiars were most active in Malaya from the late 19th Century until the Depression of 1929. (Mahadevan 1978: 150)
Edgar Thompson, in his concept of the plantation as a 'settlement institution' explains how the earliest human component on a rubber estate in Malaya consisted of immigrants — planters, supervisors, and labourers. The only indigenous factor was the tract of land they jointly worked and inhabited. It was the way in which these people incorporated their statues and purposes into the land that gave rise to characteristics social relationships among them. The estate became a stratified local grouping. Nevertheless, all this development took place in a wider economic and politico-legal framework, which was associated with imperialism and colonialism. (Jain 1970: xix)

The labourers share a common style of life, the essential rudiments of which have been planned and standardized by the management. (Jain 1970: 344) The area around the factory (palai-tottam, or the old plantation) was the hub of social activity. Coolie lines formed the nucleus of human habitation. Ties of village, caste, and kingship were in some cases supplemented, in other replaced, by those of neighbourhood. In this community the kanginis enjoyed a status higher than the rest. Their superior occupational position as recruiter-foreman was reinforced by a wide ramification of their kinship ties among labourers. The kirani and European bosses (villai-k-karar) were marginal to the community itself, although as agents of the industrial sub-system they played a definite and important part in its ongoing political processes. In the subsequent decades, as the estate grew in area and population, it was segmented into three divisions each under an overlord or head kangany. This led to an increase in the scale of the political processes so as to include interdivisional relations. Finally, towards the end of the prewar period external political factors initiated further changes in procedures for the regulation and control of group activities in the labour lines. (Jain 1970: 276)

As early as 1904-08 kanganies were instructed to recruit by preference, whole families, more apt to settle down than bachelors, but many bachelors joined in and were, in fact, more active and useful element of the labour force. Each married couple on arrival was allowed one room or line while identical accommodation was shared by two
or more bachelors. Bachelor’s lodges and domestic groups based on nuclear families were thus the two most common types of residential arrangements in the prewar period. True joint households based on patrilateral or patrilineal extension were few in numbers and short-lived, being confined almost exclusively to newly arrived immigrants. (Jain 1970: 238)

On the other hand, common cooking and income-expenditure arrangements sometimes existed among close kin occupying contiguously situated rooms. In a large majority of cases the person to join was an unmarried cognate or an affine of the household head. Such an arrangement could rarely survive the many quarrels and quibbles that were bound to arise in joint living; it was rare, though not altogether unknown, for this unit to outlast the marriage of the joining kinsman. This applied equally to arrangements in which the joining person was a close kin, such as a sibling, and others in which he was more distantly related. For whatever the period, however, this ‘joint household’ functioned as an effective domestic group. It was essentially a grouping of convenience and mutual aid. A number of men who immigrated as adult bachelors entered one or more such arrangements before acquiring wives and setting up their domestic groups. (Jain 1970: 239)

In the homeland village society, an extended household implies a common hearth, a common purse, and adjacent rooms under a common roof. While the first two of these attributes were present in such households, adjacent rooms were not always provided by the management. Members of a household could occupy contiguous rooms only when such accommodation was vacant; much else depended on the neighbour’s willingness to make room. Clearly this was not always possible, nor could a solution be found by putting up another structure as could certainly be done in a village. The obvious alternatives were either to live at a distance from one’s parents and married siblings or to share the limited accommodations. For reasons of sheer convenience, the latter alternative seems to have been more frequently adopted. It was also thoroughly acceptable to the economically minded management and in addition, suited its custodial arrangements. While some attempt was usually made by householders to segregate the
married from the unmarried, if only with the help of flimsy curtains and partitions, difficulties and misunderstandings frequently arose. (Jain 1970: 241)

One major factor that influenced social life was the provision of type-plan housing. Before this was standardized and controlled, conditions must have been very bad, especially in the sugar and coffee plantations. After the code of 1912 and when rubber had become the mainstay of plantation agriculture, the housing provisions of the law were implemented by employers, as it was in their interests to have a settled and healthy labour force on the estate. In the first phase, this housing consisted of what were known as ‘Lines’ – a long building roofed with a local palm called attap, or sometimes with tiles or corrugated iron, which was divided down its length by a partition not reaching a roof and partitioned into rooms, back to back, each occupied by a family. Usually, following the Malayan style of house-building, this whole structure was lifted above the ground on piles, and room was provided underneath for kitchen and strong facilities. Partitions between rooms were low, and there was no privacy at all for families. Besides, one room for an entire family resulted in overcrowding and unhygienic living. Disease which broke out in one family soon spread through the entire line. Labour employed by Government was housed in similar structures put up near their places of work. Proper cement drains for the lines, a water supply in the vicinity, and communal latrines were insisted on by the law. (Arasaratnam 1970: 63 – 64)

Shivaram Sastry in his report on the Congress Mission in Malaya pointed out how many of the Indian labourers are illiterate, disorganised and addicted to drink and similar vices. They forget their immediate demands and adored the white planters till recently as semi-gods. These unfortunate labourers are controlled and exploited in the most inhuman manner, by the estate managers through the agency of unscrupulous middlemen who use to take overhead commissions both from the planters as well as from the labourers. The labourers were seduced into all sorts of unworthy avocations so much that they forgot what they were and began to lead life for bare animal existence. (Sastry 1947: 82)
Sastry points out how in the process of clearing the jungles many unfortunate Indian labourers have become victims of malaria, filarial, asthma and rheumatism. Tropical ulcers and yaws are also sapping the vitality of the people. (Sastry 1947: 55). Very heavy mortality occurred amongst the Indian indentured workers employed on the plantations, and road and railway construction. The estate managements and the local authorities attributed this to poor health conditions of the workers at the time of their arrival. In fact, the principal diseases from which the workers suffered were ulcerated legs, chronic diarrhea, dysentery and debility. (Netto 1961: 35)

K Tambisamy, an Indian contractor, attributed the sickness and mortality of the Indian indentured workers to their low pay. He told the Enquiry Commission in 1890: The men are in sufficiently good health, as a rule, on first arrival, but deteriorate as time goes on. ...I am employing 700 men on contract works now at 35 cents; all Tamils. ...If the men in India knew exactly what they were coming to under the existing conditions, they would prefer to remain there on Rs. 3 a month than to come here and earn Rs. 10. (Netto 1961: 36) Those who died were Statute Immigrants who had undergone medical examination at the Emigration Depots in India. Under the Emigration Act, the Statute Immigrants were medically examined as to their fitness for agricultural labour, and unless the men passed the medical examination they could not proceed to Malaya. (Netto 1961: 36)

According to the Report of the Residency Surgeon, Dr. Traver, 'during the latter part of the year 1888 and upto June 1889, all the coolies lived in the newly felled jungle, lines being built for them close to their work on the earth-works along the railway track. In January, several cases of diarrhea occurred among them, the number of attacked increased rapidly, one set of lines being affected after another. (Netto 1961: 36)

Acting Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements, wrote to the British Residents of Perak, Selangor, Sungei Ujong, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, among other reasons for high mortality rates are,
1 – Low rate of wages
2 – The length of the period of contract; and great stress is put upon the unfavourable effect upon the mind, and consequently upon the physical health of coolly-immigrants of the prospect of three years enforced servitude upon wages fixed very much below the market rate of labour – a prospect that has to be faced by every new-comer, and which results, in many cases, in despair, loss of health and death. (Netto 1961: 36 – 37)

S Patrao, Acting Civil Surgeon, Negapatam, wrote to the Head Assistant Collector, Negapatam, on 15th November, 1890: ... ‘It is indeed very deplorable to go over the long list of deaths among the Indian emigrants in the Straits Settlements during the year 1889, and I consider that the excessive death rate is generally due to the unhealthiness of most of the estates and the climatic influence, the low rate of wages and the long term of their contract, or overwork. (Netto 1961: 37)

In 1901, the Indian Immigration Agent reached the conclusion that: ‘There are many reasons to account for the high death rates which so often occur amongst the Tamils here, and while it is almost impossible to deal with some of them, there are others, the evil effects of which might at least be considerably reduced if proper precautions were taken. 1 – early morning chills, 2 – the drinking of unwholesome water, 3 – delay in proper treatment of the sick. (Netto 1961: 39)

One of the most serious problems was the high death rate of both Chinese and Indian labourers. In 1900 the Institute of Medical Research was established in Kuala Lumpur with the aim of solving the mystery of beriberi and other topical diseases. While measures were taken to combat malaria, hundreds of labourers died in the estates and the tin mines. Most of the Indian immigrants arrived in Malaya in poor health, and under the attacks of malaria, beriberi, dysentery and other diseases, thousands of Indians never realized their hope of returning to their home villages with their meager savings of silver. (Hon-Chan 1967: 133)


**CAUSE OF DEATH AMONG INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE FMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1907</th>
<th>1908</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaria and fevers</td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>2,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysentery</td>
<td>1,396</td>
<td>1,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>1,040</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beriberi</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach complaints</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4,295</td>
<td>5,419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Hon-Chan 1967: 133)

These figures, taken from the Annual Reports of the FMS, speak for themselves. The Indian labourer lives on the estate. The Chinese and Javanese labourer generally live off the estate. The Labour Code contains many provisions, general in application, but in practice confined to Indian labour, relating to housing, sanitation, medical arrangements, water supply, estate schools, children’s crèche and other such facilities. Both in theory and in practice a tradition has been built up that the Tamil labourer should look up to his master for redress whose fatherly benevolence resolves the many petty disputes, the matrimonial tangles in the labour lines and other petty ills which commonly afflict the simple unsophisticated, illiterate peasant mass of the Indian villages. (Aiyer 1938: 131)

Until the 1930s when busses and bicycles began to open up communication, estate workers generally had no contact with the outside world. The trespass laws, which were designed to insulate workers from communist and socialist ideological influences, made it difficult for workers’ friends and relatives to even visit the estates. (Jain 1989: 104)

The position of Indian labour in Malaya is not definitely one of a self-reliant, coherent, organised body, ordinarily able to look after itself with a certain amount of
protection that every labouring population stands in need of. Even with the mass of legislative enactments that have been passed to protect the rights of Indian labour – there has been little advance in its status. It’s working and living conditions have remained low. This shows that protective legislations are only useful in preventing grosser abuses and in restraining a very powerful employer from committing any acts of depredation on a weak, disorganized body of labourers. Such legislations have only a negative value. On the positive side they have failed to improve the value of the labourer and implant in him a sense of higher self-respect. (Aiyer 1938: 48)

The employer had no objection to certain improvements which were in the nature of safe and profitable investments. Of these, he was agreeable to sanitation, improvement of health conditions, control of malaria, good water supply, better housing accommodation provided he was not unduly hustled, and such other minor improvements which were conducive to better health and living for himself and his men. As a corollary to this he was prepared to bear a share in providing curative medicine and medical aid to his labour force. Maternity benefit was also not seriously objected to, though it is an increasing burden as the estate population breeds alarmingly. Education is only a sop to satisfy the conscience of the outside intervening authority. On the whole the planter is not to blame if he has treated the education of the estate children with a certain amount of cynical joke. He knows that in no country it is the concern of many hundreds of private persons to educate a large number of children. The state disowned all responsibility to educate compulsorily the children of immigrant races. The planter owed no responsibility in the matter. The estate schools are no more than convenient places to stowaway the children and keep them from mischief when the parents are working on the estates. (Aiyer 1938: 58)

As regards the economic rights of the worker the wage-earning class was not likely to show any signs of independence. This was easily secured by the nature of labour force itself. Being an unskilled agricultural labour and also lacking in adaptability, the alternative fields of employment are limited in a country whose agricultural economy is
principally based on a single agricultural produce — at any rate so far as the Indian is concerned. (Aiyer 1938: 59)

Aiyer further states how very little is known about the conditions of employment of the labour employed outside the plantations, like in the Railways, Public Works Department, Sanitary Boards, Rural Boards, the Municipalities, etc. An economic enquiry into their conditions is urgently called for. In the absence of any published information it can only be said from all accounts based on observation, that their condition is miserable. Compared to them the labourers on plantations are in many ways better off. The wages paid to this urban labour is ridiculously low. If higher wages are paid to them, then the plantation labour tends to migrate to an area where the higher rates prevail. (Aiyer 1938: 60) Here again the bulk of this class of labour is also unskilled agricultural labour which is unfit for any but lower type of menial work. It has already a lower standard of living. It is still further depressed by the continual arrival from India of the so-called voluntary emigrants. The result is that Indian labour has neither value nor price. Indian labour in short forms the lowest element in the Malayan population far removed from the Malay in his village. (Aiyer 1938: 61)

In 1937 V S Srinivasa Sastri in his report on Malaya pointed out — 'I was shocked beyond words by the conditions of the quarters provided for the bachelors. They consist of stone barrack-like building which at the time of my visit was so over-crowded that it is doubtful if even the barest requirements of public health were fulfilled. Both the heat and the smell of the place were over-powering and appeared to find no easy exit. The washing accommodation was such that all used water found its way down the main steps which form the general entrance. No privacy of any sort was provided for and no wonder the place is a scene of frequent disputes and quarrels.’ (Aiyer 1938: 61, ff)

In the Malayan plantations wages are reduced whenever there is a fluctuation in the world market for Colonial raw material and food-stuffs on the assumption the Indian labour needs little for his subsistence. (Aiyer 1938: 23) The employers have a powerful voice in all labour matters. With an inarticulate and disorganized labour force, their
dominant position gives them that air of benevolence towards Ramasamy-the underdog who is cruelly exploited by every parasite in the world except by his benevolent benefactor, who certainly knows what is good for his labourer. Starvation and destitution are the badge of his tribe and everything the employer does is in the nature of a favour conferred on him who has been cast away by his own country and driven away from his desolate home. It is absurd to think even of any rights of the Indian labour, and to imagine that Indian labour will ever negotiate on terms of equality with his employer is to invite a mild ridicule. (Aiyer 1938: 26)

Indian labour is loosely knit and dispersed. Its life is one of isolation. The middle-class and the well-to-do elements in the Malayan Indian society are still disproportionately small though their numbers are increasing. It is leaderless. It is incapable of throwing out leaders at any rate in the beginning. Further, nearly 80% of the labour population in the estates belong to the depressed and backward classes of the South Indian villages and they are difficult to organise without being first educated in their elementary rights. (Aiyer 1938: 34)

A perfunctory enquiry held by the Malacca planters showed the bad plight of Indian labourers and they wisely discontinued such disconcerting kind of investigations. According to an independent authority vast majority of them have risen no higher than their miserable starting point and have lived out their brief Malayan lives within a radius of few miles from the dingy 'coolie lines' in which they slept. (Aiyer 1938: 35)

Then the average Indian labourer was a shockingly inefficient house keeper. Even when he could afford to have better food, he tended to stint in this direction, not so much because of any superior endowment of thrift but to spend the savings thereof on drink, tobacco and the like. Moreover, the Indian labourer was notoriously careless in his eating habits and hygiene—often eating food that was frequently stale or which only remotely resembled anything fit for human consumption. In addition, quite apart from the usual prejudices against going to a hospital when sick, he seldom took any proper precautions against infection of any kind. In this setting of indiscriminate eating habits and poor
hygiene, bowel complaints and infections were almost universal among the Indian labourers. The debilitating effects of this and other infections, such as yaws, further sapped the resistance powers of the Indians, and this in an area in which malaria was hyperendemic and a major killer before the advent of modern anti-malarial controls and biotics. (Sandhu 1969: 170)

On top of this, medical facilities were far from adequate. On some estates these were totally absent till recently. Then, in the case of those that possessed them, these medical facilities often consisted of only a shack and a compounder who had picked up the rudiments of medicine along the way. Even as late as 1918 there were only eight doctors to 1,006 estates in the Federated Malay States. Estates could use the government hospitals in the urban centres but, more often than not, these were fully extended in meeting urban needs. Then, for many of the isolated estates access was not easy at any time. Finally, there was the fear amongst many estate managers, especially in the early years of the present century, that their labourers would run away or be crimped if they were allowed to leave the estate. In these circumstances they often delayed sending sick labourers to government hospitals, preferring to treat them in their own medical facilities in the hope they would get better. When this did not work out, only then did they take steps to take their sick to the hospitals. Often this was too late. In some cases where such estate managers themselves realized it was too late, rather than take their dying labourers into the hospitals and have to explain their actions, they resorted to the safer device of leaving the moribund labourers—who invariably had no idea of the actual name of the estate on which they worked, knowing it only by its colloquial Tamil sobriquet — on the side of main roads, away from their own properties, in the hope of their being picked up by some passing Samaritan. Even as late as the 1930s labourers in a moribund state were being picked up from the roadsides by government vans that chanced to be passing or were summoned by some passer-by who had stumbled on the near corpses. Then, if not succumbing to exhaustion, malnutrition and disease, the Indian labourers, living as many of them did on the fringe of the Malayan angle, had also to survive encounters with snakes, particularly cobras, crocodiles, tigers and other dangerous reptiles and beasts. In the face of these overwhelming odds it is not at all surprising that, up to the abolition of
indenture, on some estates as many as 60 rising to 90 per cent of the labourers died within a year of their arrival. Conditions improved after this, but even then the deaths remained high till the 1920s. The fate of the comparatively better off and organized non-labour Indian immigrants was, quite naturally, somewhat better in terms of survival. But deaths amongst them too, although nothing like that amongst their labour compatriots, were high till the 1920s. (Sandhu 1969: 171)

Housing in the plantations and health among the workers were always problems to which insufficient attention was given, with adverse long-term effects. In every piece of legislation intended to deal with labour migration there was some provision imposing responsibility on employers for the provision of housing, medical facilities, and sanitary arrangements. Labourers, who left their villages in an already undernourished condition, were ready victims to sickness and epidemics on the way to Malaya. Those labourers who survived found the new climatic conditions and frugal lifestyles difficult to take and contracted diseases to which they succumbed in large numbers. Mortality rates were very high, with the highest occurring among indentured labour. Labour housing on plantations was the standard type called ‘lines’ — a long building roofed with a local palm or with tiles or corrugated iron, divided length-wise by a partition not reaching the roof, with each section again partitioned into rooms. Each of these rooms housed a family. The entire structure was built on piles and underneath it was room for cooking and storage. The whole system bred inter-family disputes, unhygienic living conditions, and the quick spread of disease. Employers were constrained to take note of the uneconomic nature of the provisions for labour, if not its inhumanity, and from the 1920s, in law and in fact, conditions began to improve. (Arasaratnam 1993: 6)

A commission appointed in 1924 highlighted the deplorable state of health, sanitation, and the provisions for medical care in the plantations. The commission’s recommendations resulted in the passing of the Health Board Enactment in 1926 which sought to impose minimum standards in these areas. The planters were opposed to government legislation and refused to co-operate in upholding its provisions. The scheme had to be abandoned after a few years. It was left to individual plantations to make their
own provisions. There was a great variation in the provision of these facilities between enlightened employers and those paying very minimal attention to these matters. It took a long time for housing to move away from the ‘lines’ type structure to more congenial buildings. After 1935 these ‘lines’ were phased out in many estates and new cottage-type buildings were put up in which a unit of four rooms was occupied by two families. There was a complete separation between the two families, with each having its own entrance. This was a decided improvement to living conditions, promoting greater privacy in social life and reducing health hazards, congestion, and opportunity for public quarrels. (Arasaratnam 1993: 7)

After 1935 there was a widespread feeling that some improvement should be effected in the type of labour housing. The Labour Department and Health Authorities condemned the barrack-like structures as unfit, and planters began rebuilding their houses in a more satisfactory manner according to approved plans. The trend now was towards building cottage-type houses. Each unit of four rooms was occupied by two families. The units were raised on piles, and the division between the two families was complete with separate entrance. Each cottage had a garden around it, which the occupants could cultivate. Increasingly, the old lines were replaced by these cottages. Which were a decided improvement, promoting a healthier social life, and avoiding the congestion, public quarrels, and health hazards caused by the former type of housing. (Arasaratnam 1970: 64)

The provision of hospital facilities and medical and maternity benefits show a similar trend towards improvement. For the first two decades of the century, the provisions of the code were only pious intentions. Except for very few of the larger and better managed estates, which had properly equipped dispensaries with trained dressers, most got by with clerks who would administer patent medicines in an emergency. Otherwise the patient had to go to the nearest Government hospital. (Arasaratnam 1970: 64)
With the prosperity of the rubber industry in the 1920’s, estates began to employ medical practitioners individually or in groups, and to build their own hospitals. But even then there were a number of places where facilities were poor. The Sastri Report observed in 1937 that though the preventive side of estate health was good, the curative side was bad. Smaller estates still employed either insufficiently qualified dressers, or clerks and conductors who did the work of dressers. But by 1941 the general standards of sanitation and health on sates had improved greatly, and hospital and medical facilities somewhat less so. (Arasaratnam 1970: 65)

From the very earliest period of immigration, the authorities had to contend with the social evil of alcoholism among the labourers, though it was considerably later that it pricked the conscience of Government, estate management, and Indian leadership. The coconut palm is common in the Malay Peninsula and tapping toddy out of which was an easy process. Some of the Indian immigrant labourers belonged to the toddy caste, and there were also Chinese tappers. Soon enormous quantities of toddy were being tapped and offered on sale to labourers in plantations and towns. A large majority of the labourers must have picked up the drinking habit in Malaya. In their villages in India, liquor was not so readily available, and their were the hidden controls of village and caste. Seeing the addiction of the labourers to toddy, estate managers permitted the opening of toddy shops, sometimes one in each division, or themselves established shops so that labourers could drink within the estate and closer to their homes. (Arasaratnam 1970: 69 – 70)

The habit became so widespread that the image of the Indian labourer in the eyes of the other communities of Malaya was that of an inveterate drunkard. Estate managers, in attracting labour to their estates, would advertise the easy access to toddy as an incentive. The quantities drunk were reflected in the revenues that the Government derived from the toddy tax. (Arasaratnam 1970: 70)

A number of bodies and interests were involved in the move to fight this addiction of the labourer. The first people to take cognisance of the problem were the planters,
who, being in close proximity to the labourer, saw clearly the harm it was doing him. Soon after the planters had organised themselves into the Planter’s Association of Malaya, in 1908, and thus acquired a platform to discuss common problems relating to the industry, the Association took up the question of the indiscriminate sale of liquor to labourers. In 1912 the PAM asked the Government to prohibit the sale of foreign spirits to Indian labourers. The Government issued instructions to this effect in the same year. This made toddy the only liquor available to the Indians, and its consumption increased. The planters now became aware of the fact that toddy also could be injurious to the health of the labourer. This was especially so if the toddy was adulterated, and control was exercised to prevent this. Evidence began to accumulate on the injurious effects of toddy. A number of cases of poisoning, diarrhea, dysentery, and even death were reported after consumption of toddy. (Arasaratnam 1970: 70 – 71)

In 1916 the PAM pressed the Government to impose controls on the sale of toddy to Indian labourers. The Government was embarrassed by the PAM’s pressures for action that would curtail a good source of revenue. It thought that the PAM was going too far in its anti-toddy campaign, and appointed a commission to enquire into certain matters in relation to the alleged misuse and abuse of toddy. The report of this Commission declared that pure and unadulterated toddy was not injurious to health. The PAM felt that the report was a whitewash, and an attempt by the Government to sweep the problem under the carpet. (Arasaratnam 1970: 71)

However, some rules were introduced in the running of toddy shops to prevent adulteration. The estate management was given the authority to run shops in the estates, which had so far been done by contractors. Toddy was not to be sold to women and children. Out of the profits from the sale of toddy, two fifths were to be paid as tax to the Government, and the remainder was to be put in a special fund and used for general welfare of the labourers. In practice, this money was used for a wide variety of purposes. It was used to defray expenses connected with festivities in the temple, and special ceremonies such as fire-walking and kavadi-bearing. It was also used to provide school uniforms for children and to buy books and presents for pupils on the annual school day.
Some managers spent money from the fund to give labourers a treat on Deepavali day, and even to provide them with bonuses. Sometimes managers would abuse their trusts, and use it to pay for expense that were legitimately a charge on estate revenue. In these cases the Indian Agent would interfere by bringing them to the notice of the Labour Department. The Agent also criticized the tendency to 'waste' this fund on festivities and ceremonies, and pleaded for its use on socially productive projects and amenities to labour. (Arasaratnam 1970: 71 – 71)

The down-trodden economic state of the Indian labourer had driven him to the desperate extent of taking to toddy to forget his worries. He has come to blame fate for every injustice heaped on him. (Sastry 1947: 47). Many of the indentured got caught up in the vicious circle; a low daily income, insufficient food, deterioration in health and a reduction in their ability to work regularly; in turn a diminution in the already insufficient earnings resulted and they were obliged to eat still less, which caused a further deterioration in their health until death supervened. The position of many of the other labourers was not much different in that they were also paid only for the days for which they actually worked, medical leave and sick-pay being recent innovations only. (Sandhu 1969: 169)

Indian labourer is disorganized and hence cannot put his claims before his master effectively. He is illiterate and ignorant. He is controlled by maistries who form the middle men between the employers and the employees. They take overhead commission from both and live by 'Jabardasti'. They divert the attention of the labourers in all possible wrong directions, such as wine, women and warbling dice. The estate staff and dresser pilfer their share from the labourers wages. The Chinese shopkeeper snatches his share in a silent and unnoticed way. The hours of work for an Indian labourer are from 8 A. M to 2 P. M. Evening hours could be used for raring cows, growing vegetables and tilling the vegetables and tilling the land which he can have free of rent and without restrictions too. Where he works, he is happy and contented. (Sastry 1947: 46) Next to the Chinese mother, the Indian mother has the maximum number of children. Every
working labourer has his lazy dependents too to hang on him. Some of them are suffering for years together from ulcers for want of medicines. (Sastry 1947: 47)

The plantation structure reflected certain basic relationships among different groups, which influenced and determined the pattern of relationships in other areas of social and economic life as well. The three tier stratification system – with the European management at the apex, an intermediary Asian clerical or kerani class and the coolie or labour class – was all pervading and was reflected in all facets of social life on the estate. This stratification was evident even in the location and type of housing provided on the estates. The European management lived in especially constructed single dwellings (bungalows) away from the workers. These dwellings were often at a higher altitude. The manager was peria dorai (big lord or master), institutionalizing the superiority of the white master in the production relations of the estate. The Asian clerical or other auxiliary staff was accommodated in housing commensurate with their status as intermediary staff. The labourers were housed in employer – provided lines, allotted one unit in the line per family. They were headed by the kanganis. Their children were educated in the vernacular in what was passed off as estate schools and they were socialised almost entirely in the plantation structure. The shopkeeper and the toddy shopkeeper operated at the pleasure of the management. The temple in the estate was erected also at the pleasure of the manager, although it was usually funded by the labourers. Labourers living in estate housing were not charged rent (which was undoubtedly included in the wage calculation). Consequently if they were dismissed for striking, they faced eviction. They were thus in effect bonded to the estate and remained tied to the low-wage structure inherent in the plantation set up. Though technically free they were unlikely to compensate alternative options. (Kaur 1998: 95 – 96)

By the outbreak of World War II Indian society in Malaya was very different from the frightened and isolated communities that had been established half a century earlier. There were sturdy middle and upper classes, very well educated in English, competing effectively with other races for positions that were gradually being opened up to local settlers. In the commercial sector, a number were well entrenched in specific
trades operating at very diverse levels and scales. They were well organized in Chambers of Commerce and had influence in the power structure. Workers in plantations, government services, transport, mining, and industry had acquired certain stability in their places of employment. They had acquired a degree of consciousness, had thrown up their own leaders, and had progressed far towards acting to defend their interests. The community as a whole was moving towards an integrity and sense of unity strengthened by a consciousness of events in the Indian subcontinent where the nationalist struggle against the British was moving towards a successful conclusion. It was at this time that the Japanese Occupation came with a breathtaking, suddenness that had a traumatic effect on the Indians as it did on all other races of Malaya. As a vast majority of the community was dependent on service in the British colonial administration and on British private enterprise, the collapse of both of these with the Japanese victory left these Indians without a means of subsistence. There was an exodus to India just before the Japanese marched into the country, especially among the upper and middle classes. (Arasaratnam 1993: 20)

When the British armed forces withdrew, all European personnel in Government service and in the private sector were evacuated. This left the plantations without management and dislocated their entire operation. The Japanese attempted to restart operations, but only in some estates, which ran at a fraction of their full capacity. With the Western market denied her, Malayan rubber declined in output and efficiency. The labourers deprived of an assured wage packet at the end of the month, were left to fend for themselves. The many amenities provided for them in the estates declined and were allowed to lapse. Estate hospitals and sanitary and drainage facilities deteriorated. There was acute shortage of essential foodstuffs. Malaya’s traditional sources of supply were interrupted. Rice, the staple Indian diet, was almost impossible to come by. Estate shops which had provided rice and other essential commodities of the labourer at reasonable rates were closed down. The food shortage affected all classes of the population. Those in towns were the hardest hit. Estate labourers attempted to live on diverse substitutes such as tapioca and millet. Those who bred cattle were fortunate in having milk products as the only part of their diet with nutritive value. The struggle to secure food occupied most of
their time. People sold their gold jewellery to purchase food. Malnutrition and undernourishment took a heavy toll. The special conscription of labourers to work in heavy, distant projects, such as Siam Railways, compounded their difficulties. Here labourers lived and worked in the most inhuman and unhealthy conditions. Of the many who were thus taken away, few returned. The Indians were about 14 per cent of the Malayan population in 1940; this proportion had dropped to 10 per cent by 1947. (Arasaratnam 1970: 110 – 111)

The war years in Malaya (1942-1945) were years of confusion. The 1946 Report gives us some indication of conditions that developed during the period of Japanese occupation. Accordingly, tapping was now considered below pre war standards; almost all the buildings necessary for the housing of the staff and labour and the production of rubber, had to be reconditioned; misused or dismantled and taken-away machinery had to be replaced; squatters had come to occupy some 100 acres unplanted in rubber, and, whereas a year before '...The labourers were very weak and suffering from all the ill effects of malnutrition' now '...they have put on the lost weight and are looking healthy' (1946 Report). Problems of labour shortage and unrest, a general shortage of materials and the neglect, wanton destruction and looting that occurred during the war years saw Malay in a somewhat dilapidated state following the war. (Wiebe and Marriappen 1978: 28)

The sad plight of Indian estate workers during the Japanese occupation of Malaya has been a subject of much comment. At least one official report stated that the Indian labourers suffered more than any other Malayan occupational group during the 1942-45 period. Del Tufo linked the decline in Indian population during the intercensus years (1931-47) directly to the occupation. Very little is known about wages and, what is even more important, the purchasing power of money. (Jain 1970: 300)

The importation and distribution of food was rigorously controlled by the military authority. Almost all items of food were rationed and supplied by the Japanese through the Asian staff on a weekly quota. A labourer got only two tins of rice a week, a quantity
that was felt to be barely sufficient for two square meals. For the rest of the time, workers subsisted on a diet of homegrown tapioca. The Japanese allowed trees to be felled in one part of the estate, and the cleared land was cultivated by labourers. Tapioca and vegetables were the chief crops, and a proportion of the yield was commandeered for use by the Japanese army. (Jain 1970: 300 – 301)

Tapping and working in the gardens meant longer hours of work for men and women. Hard work and paucity of food resulted in deaths from malnutrition. In some cases people had no proper clothes. Many labourers stayed away from work for this reason. The Kanganies entered labour lines with sticks in hand and beat up men and women for not going to work. Some women ran out wearing gunnysacks. Certain other privations suffered by the labouring community were due, in large measure, to its cloistered and dependent existence in the days of the European bosses. (Jain 1970: 301)

The experience of Indian estate labourers who were taken by the Japanese to Siam was traumatic. This huge movement began in early 1943. Indian labourers were told they would have an easy job and make good money in Siam. Conditions they expected to meet there were contrasted favourably with the existing uncertainties of food supply and wages in Malaya. Reluctance to leave was dealt with sternly, and physical force seems to have been employed in recruiting men. This in itself was nothing new – at least for a large number of older recruits. However, in their train journey from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok and during the arduous eleven-day trek from Bangkok to their place of work, these labourers saw their former masters-European bosses-reduced by the Japanese to white coolies. Labourers who returned claimed that white prisoners were treated with more brutality than Asians. But the life of Asians was very hard indeed. (Jain 1970: 305) Gradually inflation set in, and prices began to rise-not so much due to shortage as to inefficient distribution and graft. (Jain 1970: 306)
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