

Migration of Indians in Malaya during the Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

India has one of the world's most diverse and complex migration history. The arrival, distribution and eventual settlement of Indians in South-East Asia are closely related to colonial history. British colonial dominance of the Indian subcontinent facilitated the movement of Indians to Burma, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Japan etc. In these countries they came as labouring classes with minority coming as businessmen and white-collar workers and many Indian revolutionaries escaped to these countries. Since the 19th century, ethnic Indians had migrated in Malaya. The movement and settlement of people from the India into Malaya began on large scale with the expansion of western colonialism and capitalism during the 19th and 20th centuries.

India's contacts with Malaya go back to the pre-Christian era. However despite the great antiquity of the Indian overseas migration to Malaya and the debt of Malaya culture to ancient India, there were seldom large numbers of Indians in Malaya in the pre-British period. The period of modern Indian migration 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. The object of the study is to explore the historical and political dimensions of the Indians who migrated to Malaya, stressing on the need to study trend of the migration. To write the paper, primary and secondary sources extensively used.

Whereas the earlier migrants were primarily financiers and traders, the modern Indian migrant, until the Indian government ban on assisted labour emigration in 1938, was chiefly uneducated labourers going to work on some plantation or government project.¹ Indian sepoy, lascars and domestic servants were present in Penang from the very first day of its founding. Later they were joined by other Indians from Kedah. Before large scale migration of Indian labour began, the straits settlement (Singapore, Penang and Malacca) had served as a dumping ground for Indian convicts sent there by the East India Company and later, by the Government of India itself until 1873.² Many government building were built by this convict labour. These presto-Indian migrations soon merged into the local population especially in Penang.

With the acquisition of Province Wellesley³ in 1800, of Malacca in 1824 and the foundation of Singapore in 1819 by East India Company, the demand for labour always exceeded the supply. As the indigenous people of Malaya showed little inclination to work for the planters⁴; the colonial powers turned to India which had a large reservoir of cheap labour force. The demand for labour force, thus, was satisfied by labour migrants from India, although such migration was seasonal. Development of large scale production and the need to tap the British colonies for raw material due to the "Industrial Revolution" in Britain precipitated the demand for labour. Majority of Indian labourers migrated to Malaya as assisted

labourers, via the indentured labour system and the Kangani system (Kangani is the Tamil word for overseer or superior). As Sir Thomas Hyslop said, "We want Indians as Indentured labourers, not as free men".⁵ Under indentured labour system, the Indian labourer was indentured to the employer for a period of four or five years and was paid fixed wages.

This system was chiefly associated with the sugar plantations. So, there was general understanding among the planters regarding the need of assured and cheap labour supply. There were two channels of supply for this kind of labour recruitment. In the first place there were two or more than two commercial firms based in Negapatnam and Madras, accepting orders from employers. Then there were the investors, who recruited on their own and shipped the men to Penang for their own profit.⁶ There they were sold under contract for certain periods. Each man got about five pounds; and all expense of maintenance, passage money etc. were discharged by the purchaser.⁷

The large-scale immigration of Indian labour into Malaya resulted from a long-range policy promulgated by the governments of Malaya during last decade of the 19th century. Certain factors, such as strict conditions imposed by the Dutch in Indonesia on indentured Javanese labour and a marked inclination of Javanese to own land and the fact that India, as a British Colony, could supply cheaper labour, had convinced the Malayan Governments that the planter's only reliable labour force for large-scale development could come from South India alone.

Recruitment continued to be like this in terms of Indian law until 1872, when an amending act passed legalizing the movement of labour to the Strait Settlement.⁸ Later on, under ordinance 1 of 1876, an emigration agent was stationed in Negapatnam appointed by Strait Settlement government. At the same time the Madras government appointed a protector of emigrants⁹ who had the responsibility of seeing that the emigration agent effectively carried out the regulations of this service. His responsibility was to check the ship's condition before departure and confirm that the labourers were embarked voluntarily as well as having everything properly

explained to them. Now there was the proper system of licensed recruitment agencies. Every labourer was to be taken before a magistrate who registered particulars and ascertained that the emigrant was willing to emigrate.¹⁰

The indentured migration to Malaya was essentially a South Indian phenomenon, the others being only a few hundred recruits from the Bengal area of the Ganges valley. It is not possible to measure exactly how many Indians entered Malaya as indentured labourers from the origin of the system to its abolition in 1910. Statistical data is available only from 1866. From this year until the abolition, 250,000 indentured Indian labourers had gone to Malaya. One of its worst features was that it imposed on the labourers a criminal liability for the most trivial breaches of the contracts in place of the civil liability which usually attached to such lapses.¹¹ From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a parallel system of labour recruitment was evolved for Malaya. This was the method of recruitment through a Kangani.¹² Coffee and Rubber planters got most of their labour through a Kangani.

Growing demand for labour led to the turning point in Indian labour recruitment as the Malayan administration approved the Immigration Fund Ordinance 1907, establishing an Indian Immigration Committee (IIC) to manage fund, known as the Indian Immigration Fund. This legislation was important for two reasons. First, the British established a state controlled structure to handle the recruitment of Indian labour. Second, the Indian Immigration Fund was set up to provide free passage for Indian labourers intending to come to Malaya. The Indian Immigration Committee¹³ managed the movement of assisted labour migrants to Malaya by monitoring the number of recruitment licenses given to the Kangani and also the recruiting allowance or subsidy to migrants.

The Kangani labour immigration into Malaya was also a South Indian phenomenon, predominantly Tamil with a learning of Telugu from Andhra Pradesh and Malayalis from the Malabar Coast areas. From the statistical data available from 1898; between 1898 and 1938 we get the figure of 1,186,717 kangani recruits who landed in Malaya.¹⁴ In spite of the services done to Malayan labour market by the kangani recruitment, the system soon became the centre of criticism. Bribery was frequently used to buy favours and it invariably entered into the several phases of immigration, especially where a lowly paid authority, as for example the village *munsif* was in a position to dispense privilege. Since the system was exploitative the Indian nationalist leadership also began to raise the question over the condition of Indian migrants.¹⁵ In the face of mounting criticism, the kangani system was suspended during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Formal abolition of the system, however, came in 1938 when the Indian government placed a ban on all assisted labour emigration.

The growth of the Indian population after 1901 is tied very closely to the expansion of the government services and projects as well as the oil-palm and rubber estates, particularly the later. The area under rubber grew rapidly from 20,200 hectares in 1900 to 219,000 hectares in 1911 and 1,322,000 hectares in 1938.¹⁶ The growth of Indian population was

equally spectacular as increasing number of Indians flowed into the country to man the new enterprises. The number of Indians in Malaya spiralled to 479,626 by 1900 to 908,100 by 1911, and to 888,751 by 1921. The following table indicates the year wise trend of Indian migrants¹⁷:

Year	Indians
1900	479,626
1911	908,100
1921	888,751
1931	51,576
1932	44,863
1933	45,163
1934	124,579
1935	100,935
1936	73,681
1937	158,042
1938	76,300
1939	56,191
1941	41,008

Besides labour immigration, there was also the non labour migration to fulfil the growing demand of clerks, security personnel due to the establishment of British rule in Malaya. There were few people with a competent knowledge of English in Malaya. English knowing Indians therefore became the natural choice for the government and private employers in Malaya. Due to the better wages offered to clerks, teachers and technical assistants, promise of a steady job in a not too distant country and with the assurance of government pension; attracted the large number of Tamils, Malayalam or Telugu speaking English educated South Indians to Malaya.

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. 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 as \$9-15 per month, in the hope of living frugally and saving enough to return home to buy new land.¹⁸

Besides the clerical and potential security force migrants, there was also a continuous stream of petty Indian entrepreneurs, businessmen, moneylenders, merchants and such like, who found increasing scope in Malaya. These were named as commercial immigrants. Although North Indians were among the first commercial migrants in British Malaya; South Indians also made up the majority of these migrants such as Malabar and Coromandel Coast Muslims and Chettiar Hindus. Until the early years of the twentieth century the Northern Indian commercial migrants consisted wholly of Bengalis, Parsis and Guraratis. But with the increasing Sindhi and Sikh migration in the ensuing years the Gujratis, Parsis and Bengalis were superseded by these newcomers, together with a few Marwaris, both numerically and gradually commercially.¹⁹

With the exception of occasional fluctuations and the total cessation of these migrants during the Japanese occupation the annual movement of commercial migrants into Malaya increased substantially from the early years of the twentieth century. The movement of North Indians in substantial numbers began with the advent of Sindhi and Sikhs in significant numbers from about the late 1920s, and especially in the years before and after World War II. But then, just when this movement appeared to be gaining momentum and even looked like overtaking its South Indian counterpart in numerical terms, it was cut short by the migration restrictions introduction by the Malayan government in 1953.²⁰

The estimated number of Indian migrants in the Straits Settlements increased from an estimated total of less than 2,000 in 1786 to 15,073 in 1831, which further increased to 33,389 by the time of the first population census in 1871. By 1891, the Indian population had jumped to about 76,000 and ten years later to some 119,000. Their story of the growth of the Indian population after 1901 was tied very closely to the expansion of the government services and of the oil palm and rubber estates. The number of Indians in Malaya increased sharply up to 1931 due to great depression. The increase of

more than 75 percent on the Indian population between 1911 and 1921 was much higher than that for any other community. But such a high rate of increase was not maintained in the coming decades.

Thus we note a historic continuity in the relation between these two countries – India and Malaya from the early centuries of the Christian era to the present day. The contact is almost unbroken century but alters its nature to fit changing conditions in both countries. We have noticed historic migration and settlement of the Indians in Malaya during the British period. Between 1900-1921 a large number of persons migrated to Malaya, Burma. Most of them came from Southern India. A large number went as labourers and others as petty traders and miscellaneous servicemen. South-East Asia was a major destination of mass labour migration. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century's labour migration from India to the region was a defining feature of Asian globalization. The migration and settlement of the Indians in Malaya began on large scale with expansion of British rule in India. British colonial dominance of the Indian subcontinent facilitated the movement of Indians. The arrival, distribution and eventual settlement of Indian was closely related to colonial history.

References

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