

INDIA'S INDENTURED LABOUR MIGRATION TO MALAYA: A HISTORICAL STUDY*

Dr. Sunaina Pathania

Assistant Professor in History,
Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The present study focus on the Indian labour migration to Malay Peninsula. The study deals with the historical explanation of contact between these two regions from time immemorial. Nature of migration is also the subject matter of the present study. Contact between India and Malaya dates back to the early times. Hindu, Buddhist priests and merchants have been travelling there and established their dominance in Malay courts. Many states were established in Malay Archipelago named after Indian states and rulers and were under the influence of Hindu-Buddhist religious ideas. This dominance remained undisturbed from the first century A.D till the advent of Islam with the arrival of Ulemas along with Indian Muslim merchants in Malacca from thirteenth century onwards. Hindu traders and Muslim merchants suffered heavily with the arrival of European powers particularly English East India Company. British control over Malaya later on encouraged Indians to migrate to work in plantation industries of rubber, sugarcane, oil palms and tobacco as Indentured labourers in the early nineteenth century. They were mostly South Indians. It has been found that these labourers were brought by recruiting agents from their villages to the depots like Negapatnam and then boarded them to ships to various port of Malay Peninsula. These labourers were sold under the contract of certain period upon reaching Penang. This labour system however abolished in 1910.

Keywords: Indentured, Indian, migration, Malaya, labourers.

INTRODUCTION

References to early Indian settlements in Malaya appear in Indian literature as early as the sixth century B.C. Various studies indicate that the knowledge of the Malaya in the South East Asian

* This research paper is based on my Ph.D. thesis entitled Indians in South East Asia with special reference to Punjabis in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand (2016).For more information see my two articles on "Indians in Singapore and Malaysia: Some Aspects of the labour migration from the late 19th century to early 20th century (2015) and Indians In Southeast Asia: A historical perspective (nineteenth century-twentieth century) (2014)

region traced back in Puranic texts (Majumdar, 1986). These islands reflect the spread of the trade and most sought after commodities like gold from Suvarnadvipa (Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula). Indian traders were sailing to these lands and further in search of gold and other valuable items. There are references to sea voyages and sea borne trade with Southeast Asian region in Ceylonese and Javanese chronicles also (Mookerji, 1962). R.C. Majumdar mentioned Indian literature *Kathasarit-sāgara* which contains the various stories regarding the voyages made to Suvarṇabhūmi by ambitious merchants for the trading purposes and exchanges the goods in return. References related to Suvarṇabhūmi and Suvarṇadvīpa also found in Greek, Latin, Arabic and Chinese writings. Most of the writers also mentioned the trade products exchanged between these two regions.

The continuous interaction led to the formation of Indian states that were influenced by Indian cultural ideas and values. These states prospered and played important role in the trade and maritime activities of the Malay Peninsula. Kernal Singh Sandhu defines the age of these states as the highest point of Indian influence in Malaya, while Sinnappah Arasaratnam mentions that these states influenced the cultures of societies around them. Indian influence further strengthened with the matrimonial alliances between these Indian rulers of states and local rulers of Malaya.

Many Arabs and Central Asian merchants and religious leaders came to India with the rise of Islam. They tried their best to settle by establishing matrimonial relations with the local women. They settled in main port cities in Bengal, Golconda and Gujarat and established trade relations with Malay Peninsula. Along with them, religious leaders traveled to Malaya from the thirteenth century onwards and contributed towards the spread of Islam. These merchants played a significant role in its rise as a big market as well as the port city of the South East Asian region with the rise of Malacca in early fifteenth century. They tried to gain the confidence of the newly formed Islamic state through matrimonial alliances and gained high positions in Malay courts subsequently. Gradually they became prominent in the maritime activities of the Malay port. Studies indicate that many Hindu merchants sank into poverty due to the gradual loss of their wealth (Kernal Sandhu, 1973). On the other hand, members of the Muslim merchants who were involved in the trade activities with Malacca prospered continuously.

This economic linkages and mercantile fortunes however disrupted with arrival of Europeans in the last decades of fifteenth century. After realizing the profits in the spice trade linked to the exports of textiles from India to Malay Archipelago, they tried to control and monopolize the trade by putting various restrictions on Indian traders dealing with textile and spice trade. They tried to control the maritime trade between India and Malay Archipelago by putting various restrictions like *Cartez* system and by forcing all the ships going to Malacca ports to pay tolls at

Goa which was under the control of Portuguese. Situation further aggravated when other European powers started to take interest in this trade.

Position of Indian traders became insignificant with the emergence of British East India Company in Indian subcontinent. Starting with their factory at Surat, Madras and Cuddalore, East India Company gradually monopolized the spice and textile trade with Malay Archipelago. Balance of trade now shifted in favour of East India Company. British company further extended their dominance over this maritime trade against other European powers with the occupation of Penang (Malay Peninsula) in 1786 and Malacca in 1824. In order to satisfy their commercial interests, plantation estates and mines were established and requirement of labourers was fulfilled by Indian convicts and slaves and later on South Indians were encouraged to migrate to work as labourers. The nature of this migration was different than the earlier migration of Indian traders.

The advent of British East India Company as a political power started a new chapter in relations between Malaya and India. The establishment of British rule in India during the eighteenth century coincided with the industrial revolution in England. Major policies were adopted to discourage Indian indigenous industries with heavy excise and export duties while cheap British manufactured products were allowed to enter in Indian markets at nominal duty to cater the needs of British industrial capitalist's interests. The British industrial capitalist's interests to acquire raw material at cheap rates and to sell their products in Indian markets were supported actively by British Indian Government. Imposition of unfavourable tariffs had adverse effects on Indian indigenous industries. Indian industries could not compete with cheap British industries made goods. This situation created heavy burden on agriculture as majority of artisans became agricultural labourers at very low wages. They had no choice but to search for jobs outside their surroundings. It was in this background that migration of Indians started in the beginning of nineteenth century.

This migration was mainly comprised of uneducated labourers who arrived in Malaya to work on sugarcane plantations and rubber estates unlike the earlier migrants which were traders and merchants. The present study deals with the historical representation of Indian Indentured labour migration to Malay Peninsula. This study is based heavily on the Emigration as well as Home, Revenue and Agriculture Government proceedings. Many secondary sources are also consulted. In specific terms, the study is designed to analyse...

- Reasons for the Indian labour migration to Malay Peninsula.
- The selection and journey of these labour migration.
- Problem faced by these labourers in the new destination.
- Living conditions of these Indentured migrants in Malaya

- Ordinances and Acts for regulation of Indian labour.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

East India Company took control over province Wellesley (also known as Seberang Perai) in 1800 and Malacca in the year 1824 for their commercial purposes. With the commercialization and industrialization, many rubber estates were established. Large numbers of labourers were required to work here. Earlier, this requirement was fulfilled by the convicts and slaves who were here from India to the crown colonies named Malacca and Penang (Neelakandha Aiyer, 1938). Later on, with the abolition of slavery in August 1833 there was the shortage of labourers. Government first diverted their attention to the locals. But soon, they realized that local Malays are not suitable for this job. Local Malays were satisfied with their farms and fishing business and were reluctant to work hard in the fields for hours. Neelakandha Aiyer described the reluctance of Malay in this way: “they always shunned the plantations and mines and wisely escaped from the enslavement by capitalistic enterprises”. British authorities then turned to India for cheap labour force which was satisfied by the labour migrants from India. Indians were suitable for this job and were very hard working. They were willing to work under low wages. Emigration proceeding of year 1871 mentions the migration of Indians to Malay Peninsula in this way (NAI.proc.1-9):

“poorness of soil of Malay Peninsula calls for the cheap labourers, that the Malay will not work as field labourer and the Chinese immigrants finds out other more profitable employment; immigration from India is therefore of vital importance.”

INDENTURED LABOUR SYSTEM: Working under the Indentured labour system is manifestation of these circumstances. Sinnappah Arasaratnam mentions that, “under the indenture system, a prospective employer of labour placed an order with a recruiting agent based in India for the supply of stipulated number of labourers. The recruiting agent thereupon sent his subordinate contact men into the villages, and picked the required number of men. These men, on signing a contract, were said to be under ‘indenture’ to the employer for a period of five years.” Emigration proceeding of the 1871 further mentions this recruiting process as:

“A ship owning merchant advances money to a head maistry who employs under him several subordinate maistries. These maistries have to go about the villages and persuade coolies (labourers) to emigrate. This they do by representing in bright colour prospects of enrichment and advances. The ignorant coolies (labourers) believe easily, and while some volunteer to go to try their fortune, many are persuaded. The maistries, get rupees 10 per head for every adult coolie they bring, all contingent expenses being paid. A less price is given for boys, who

are not in such demand and a somewhat higher rate for young good looking women. The coolies thus obtained are kept in godowns (or depots) in Negapatam until a sufficient number is collected. They are then shipped on the ship owner vessel, and accompanied by the head maistry to the port of destination. There they are sold under contract to serve for certain periods. Each man fetches about five pounds, and all expenses of maintenance, passage money are discharged by the purchaser. The shipper and the head maistry divide the profits. The coolies, after their teams of service have expired, continue to work on their own account, and manage to save small sum of money, with which they return to India."

Emigration to the Strait Settlement (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) was not under any rules and regulations which could protect the rights of labourers. Emigration proceeding for the year of 1871 gives the detailed account on this:

"A memorial from certain inhabitants of the Prince of Wales Island (Penang) and province Wellesley representing that for years, a voluntary emigration had been going on from Madras to the East coast of Bay, unregulated till 1857, when a law was passed to prevent overcrowding, that the price of passage being thus raised, it became necessary for the employers of labour in the Straits to send agents to Madras, to assist emigrants with advances of money and otherwise; that these agents worked with the knowledge and consent of the Madras government; that no contacts were formed with the coolies previous to their reaching Penang."

Despite of the enactment of various laws regarding the regulation for Indian labourers, the situation remained the same. Later on, with lots of complaints and abuses regarding recruitment system and transportation of Indian labour, the migration was prohibited by the Parliament, but this step was not effectively implemented. Strait Settlements became a crown colony in 1867 which made the emigration of Indian labourer to Strait Settlement illegal. However with the Indian Act V of 1877, there was the controlled Indian migration to the Straits Settlements until 1884(NAI, proc no 35-36, 1918).

Indentured labour system mainly caters the need of sugar plantations. This plantation demands steady and regular supply of labour. A commission was appointed in order to meet the requirement of labour. Emigration proceeding of year 1918 mentions that,

"Under the secretary to the Government of India, Mr. E.C. Buck and Colonel Bowness Fischer were deputed, to visit Malaya and as a result of their report, the Strait Settlement Government passed an Indian Immigration Ordinance 1884, and the Government of India repealed Act V of 1877 in 1885. Recruitment in India

was under the new arrangement freed from legal restrictions, but, under executive rules recruiters sent over by persons in the Straits to recruit labourers in India were registered and granted licenses by the Strait Immigration agent, such license did not, however, confer on the recruiter any legal powers or rights whatever. Persons engaged under these rules were also registered and on arrival in the Straits came under the provisions of the Indian Immigration Ordinance 1884; and all persons who had received advances as defined in the ordinances were bound to execute three year contracts on arrival at the Strait or to repay the advances received. No recruiter was to receive any commission for any labourer not registered as emigrating under advances".

CRITICISM: This labour system was defective in many aspects. Sir William Hunter named this system as slavery, while many nationalist leaders Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi criticized this system by designated it as semi-slavery; Kingsley Davis rated the system as in-between free labour and slavery. Agents responsible to recruit these indentures were usually paid by the commission. More the recruit, more the commission they could get. They didn't respect the moral high ground during the recruitment process. They provided the colourful pictures of working environment conditions, medical facilities, living conditions and the possible stability and security from the job (Latiffa Khan, 1963). By doing so, they were able to attract large number of needy Indians willing to work in these plantations. Labourers on the other hand decided to migrate, left India without proper knowledge of the nature of the work, possible hardships and employment contract. In the words of N. Gangulee's (1947):

“How could a contract be something real when one party was entirely ignorant of the nature of the work and of the environment in which he would have to live.”

Further, this system was also defective because of the fixed duration of the contract. Even after the completion of the contract, many employers of these labourers tried their best to keep the labourers with them, by posing serious financial problems; or sometimes trying to sign the fresh contract. Labourers, who were already in miserable conditions, sometimes fell into the web of these recruiters and continue to suffer. In addition to this, criminal charges could be imposed on the labourers if they try to break the contract.

Friend of India dated 14 April 1870 commented on this system (NAI, 1871):

“An organised system of kidnapping men and children of both sexes has been discovered and broken up in the Tanjore. The captives were shipped from Negapatam for Penang and other countries, where the males were employed as coolies and females sold to a life of prostitution.”

C. Kondapi (1951) further mentioned the idea of Sir Thomas Hyslop regarding Indian labourers.

“We want Indians as indentured labourers but not as free men.”

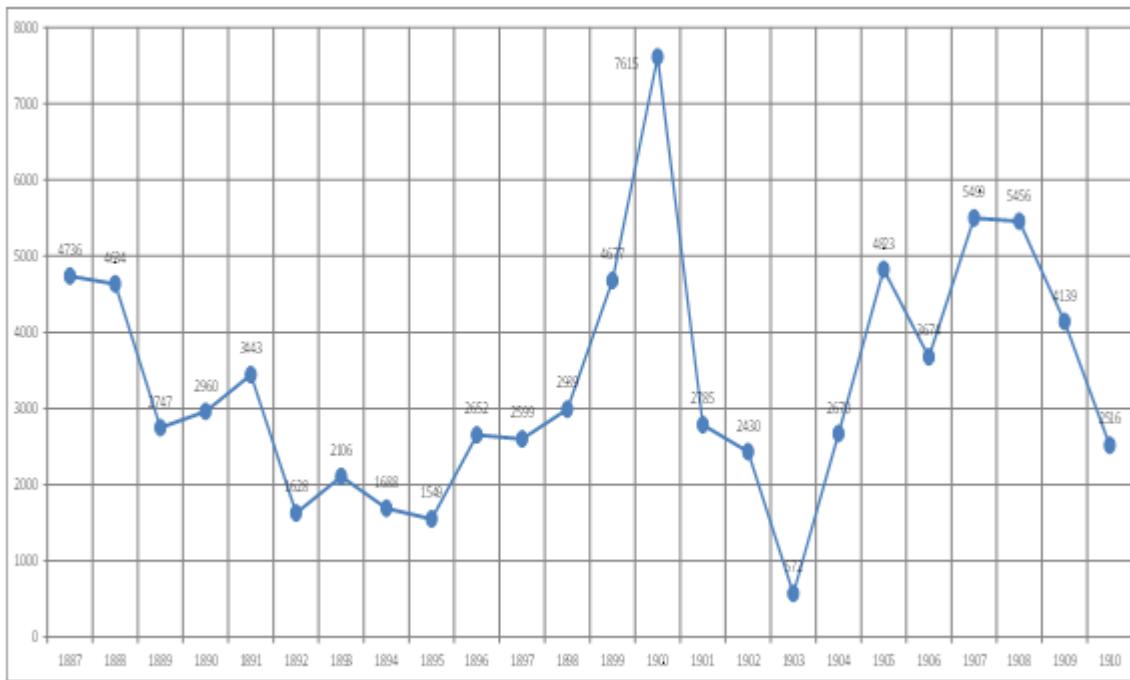
This system was abolished in the wake of abuses criticism in 1910. Indentured labourers to Malaya were of South Indians as the main constituents. Following is the statistical data of indentured labourers available from 1887 to 1910 till its abolition.

Table 1: shows the Indentured labourers in Malaya from 1887 to 1910 up to its abolition.

| Year | Number of Indentured Labourers | Year | Number of Indentured Labourers |
|------|--------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|
| 1887 | 4736 | 1899 | 4677 |
| 1888 | 4634 | 1900 | 7615 |
| 1889 | 2747 | 1901 | 2785 |
| 1890 | 2960 | 1902 | 2430 |
| 1891 | 3443 | 1903 | 572 |
| 1892 | 1628 | 1904 | 2670 |
| 1893 | 2106 | 1905 | 4823 |
| 1894 | 1688 | 1906 | 3674 |
| 1895 | 1549 | 1907 | 5499 |
| 1896 | 2652 | 1908 | 5456 |
| 1897 | 2599 | 1909 | 4139 |
| 1898 | 2989 | 1910 | 2516 |

Sources:

- NAI, (Emigration, Revenue, Commerce, Industry and Agriculture) 1897, 1899, 1900, 1905, 1906, 1918.



GRAPH INDICATES THE FLOW OF INDENTURED MIGRANTS FROM INDIA TO MALAYA (1887-1910)

Following table and graph indicates the fluctuation in the number of the indentured labourers. Beginning with just few, their number reached up to seven thousands with some minor ups and down. However, the graph and table only shows the number of indentured labourers worked there for sometimes rather than the arrival of these labourers under indenture system. Actual arrival of labourers under indenture might be many more but few of them return back to India. Graph shows the steep decline and fluctuation from the year 1889 to 1891 and later on upward movement from 1895 to the year 1899 and record breaking year 1900 with the highest number of indenture migrants. These fluctuations may be explained by the enactment of various laws prohibiting the flow of labourers to some extent. Demand for these labourers increased every year as they were required to work for government projects, plantations and estates etc. Highest number of labourers in 1900 can be explained with shortage of food due to bad harvest in India. They left with no choice but search for jobs elsewhere. Next year their number again shows downward movement and decline to the lowest of 572 in the year 1903. This decline can be explained due to the development of industries back in India which increased the demand of labourers back home. However, demand for labourers in Malaya again increases due to the increase in the prices of rubber. In 1910, the indentured system was abolished and majority of Indian labourers recruited in another labouring system named as Kangani system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Conclusions based on the analysis of National Archives files and observation during data analysis as follows:

- Migration to Malaya has undergone through different stages of history.
- In the ancient time, Indians were the main beneficiaries, however with the advent of colonial rule, they were called upon to work as labourer in sugar plantations and British owned estates.
- Foreman or labour recruiter was sent to Indian villages to recruit more labourers in lieu of commission for work in plantations under Indentured labour system.
- Indentured labourers once signed the contract (five years) remained in the clutches of employer even after the completion of that period.
- Many nationalist leaders criticized this system due to possible lack of moral concerns on the part of recruiting agents.
- Indentured labour system was abolished in 1910 and replaced by Kangani labour system.

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