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Toddy, Temples, and Tamil Festivals: Cultural Resistance on British Malayan Plantations, 1910 - 1938

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Abstract: *This paper examines the cultural experiences of South Indian migrant labourers on British Malayan plantations during the early twentieth century. Challenging colonial and nationalist depictions of 'coolies' as passive, marginalised, and degraded, it highlights everyday practices - rituals, temple festivals, wage negotiations, toddy consumption, sports, and vernacular education - as forms of cultural preservation and subtle resistance. Using Annual reports from Indian Agents and the Malayan Labour Department, alongside contemporary newspaper articles, it argues that plantation labourers were active agents shaping diasporic identities. By foregrounding leisure, religion, and community, the study repositions labourers within broader histories of subaltern agency and cultural resilience.*

Keywords: *South Indian Labour, British Malaya, Marginalisation, Toddy, Cultural Resistance.*

Introduction

Work on the construction of the new Kuala Lumpur market is temporarily held up as a result of a lightning strike called by coolies employed at Batu Caves Messrs. Kenneison Brothers who have a considerable portion of the construction of the concrete work of the new market assigned to them.

More than 500 coolies, it is understood, are affected and work at the granite quarries is at standstill.

The strike it is understood was called upon refusal of the company to comply with a request of the coolies that they should be paid their Deepavali advances last Saturday instead of on Monday, the beginning of the month, as hitherto.[1]

The cultural and social worlds of migrant labourers formed an indispensable dimension of their everyday existence. Despite marginalisation in multiple spheres of life within colonial plantation regimes, practices of cultural

preservation and communal engagement persisted and adapted to new contexts. Labour migration from different parts of India constituted a major strategy to resolve the labour crisis in the British Empire that followed the abolition of slavery. Under a rigorously structured, state-regulated indenture system, labourers were bound by contracts (girmit) and transported to plantations across Ceylon, Burma, British Malaya, Mauritius, and Fiji, among others.[2] Within colonial and nationalist perceptions, these labourers were often categorised as impoverished, immoral, and uneducated 'coolies', politically passive and culturally stunted. Such representations served to rationalise paternalistic governance, distance elite diasporic identities from plantation workers' 'coolie' image, and obscure the complexities of labourers' lived realities.

Focusing on the South Indian labourers who migrated to British Malayan plantations, mostly from the Madras Presidency, through South Indian intermediaries or kanganies, this paper challenges those reductive categorisations. It contends that plantation labourers actively negotiated their socio-cultural environments through a wide repertoire of practices that sustained continuity with their homeland, fostered internal cohesion, and asserted moral claims that colonial power structures could not fully suppress. Ritual life emerges as a critical arena of agency. Investments from toddy shop revenues into temple construction, festival maintenance, and ceremonial expenditures were not incidental but reflected intentional community strategies to maintain sacred spaces and temporal rhythms of cultural life. Actions such as collective demands for wage advances during Deepavali or the negotiation of leave and resources for thimithi (fire-walking) ceremonies illustrate how religious celebration became a terrain where labourers leveraged economic bargaining to secure cultural rights. These were acts of subtle defiance, reframing their identity beyond mere units of labour. Beyond religion, the labouring community cultivated recreational and affective solidarities through sports, Tamil theatrical performances, music, and occasional hunting expeditions. Such engagements produced shared leisure spaces that temporarily relieved the coercions of plantation discipline, while simultaneously strengthening networks within and across estates. Drawing upon Annual Reports of the Indian Agents and the Malayan Labour Department, correspondence between colonial administrations, Malayan English newspapers, and nationalist critiques, this study situates plantation life within broader historiographical debates on labour agency. It argues that far from existing as passive subjects of colonial discipline, South Indian plantation labourers in British Malaya were active participants in shaping diasporic cultural worlds. Their everyday negotiations over culture, economy, morality, and leisure reveal a dynamic interplay of resistance, adaptation, and community resilience that complicates dominant narratives of plantation subjugation.

Historiography

The historiography surrounding the indenture system has extensively examined the exploitation of Indian labourers abroad, alongside the various ways in which these labourers exercised agency, emphasising individual efforts and conscious decision-making. Amit Kumar Mishra notes that these immigrant workers were bound by contracts and were primarily dispatched from three key ports: Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay.[3] Brij V. Lal has pointed out how several imperial powers reserved their labourers for their own network of colonies, and hence Indian labourers were meant for plantations within the British Empire.[4] Hugh Tinker has called this 'a new system of slavery' or a lifeless system, wherein human values mattered less than the drive for production.[5] These overseas Indian labourers were widely known as 'coolies', used as a pejorative. Goolam Vahed has pointed out that in Tamil, kuli referred to payment for menial work, for persons without customary rights.[6] Arunima Datta has mentioned that while the term 'coolie' does not have any meaning attached to it, rather the socio-economic, political and racial concerns influenced the usage of the term as pejorative and associated with derogatory ideas.[7] She has further highlighted how the 'coolies' were seen as objects serving the needs of capitalism, colonial or nationalist politics and especially, the women were seen as victims of coolie men. However, she argues that the coolie women were not passive victims, but rather showed situational agency.[8] 'Coolies' were further stereotyped as habitual drunkards, violent, and known for immoral activities.[9]

There is a vast scholarship on the nationalist critique of the indenture system and the emigration of Indian labourers to overseas colonies. Sunil Amrith has pointed out that the category of the 'Indians Overseas' emerged out of the tussle between Indian nationalists and the imperial structures of the government.[10] Srikant Dutt has argued that the presence of Indian labourers in different colonies like Fiji, Mauritius, Malaya, etc. gave rise to a stereotype of all overseas Indians belonging to the nation of 'coolies'.[11] Marina Carter has pointed out that the overseas 'coolies' became a symbol of degradation and discrimination to Indian politicians in their struggle to overthrow British rule.[12] Ashutosh Kumar has posited that the opposition of Indian nationalists to the indenture system in the early 20th century was primarily driven by the discrimination faced by high caste Indians abroad, who were labelled as 'coolies'.[13] He further noted that this opposition was rooted in concerns that the indenture system posed a threat to the Brahmanical social order, as it resulted in high caste migrants being relegated to the status of lower caste labourers.[14] The historiography of post-indentureship points towards the legacy of the 'coolie' stereotypes upon the Indian labour diaspora. Alexandra Sundarsingh has shown how racialised discourse developed around the habit of drinking toddy and its vices, especially among the South Asian population in Singapore.[15] Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves highlighted the differences between the experiences of the South Asian migrant

communities born out of slavery, indenture or convict labour with that of a contemporary South Asian migrant IT professional.[16]

Sinnappah Arasaratnam has argued that the Indian nationalists were more concerned with the labour recruitment and emigration to distant colonies than the closer ones.[17] Despite Indian nationalists being anxious about the place of Indians in the world, Amrith points out that the idea of Southeast Asia as an eastward extension of India complicated the uniform clamour against Indian labour emigration to Southeast Asia.[18] Scholars have emphasised the cyclical nature of migration in this region, which experienced shifts in patterns during the slump in the rubber industry in the 1920s and particularly during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Mishra identifies two primary methods of recruitment for these labourers. The indentured labourers were sourced through professional agents and recruiters, while a less formal maistry system was utilised in Burma, alongside the kangany system in Malaya and Ceylon.[19]

After the discontinuation of the indentured labour supply to Malaya in 1910, kanganies became the primary and official recruiters, sending labourers from South India to British Malayan rubber plantations. K. S. Sandhu has pointed out that although indenture system was discontinued but the labourers brought by kanganies, who were also known as free labourers, were not 'completely free'.[20] He points out that the kanganies used to recruit Dalit labourers from North Arcot, Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Salem, Chingleput, and South Arcot and in most of the cases they used to recruit from their respective neighbouring villages. There were reports of kidnapping and exploitation of labourers by the kanganies.[21] However, labourers were not just victims; they often collaborated with recruiters to achieve their interests.

Scholars have looked at why labourers resist and how their cultural identity influences this resistance from different angles. Research indicates that Indian labourers did not lose their social structures when relocated to colonial plantations. Prabhu Mohapatra has argued that these migrants brought with them institutional elements of caste, kinship, and ritual practices that shaped both their lived experiences and their ability to voice dissent.[22] Behal has shown that collective celebrations, music, drinking, and ritual performances among the labourers in Assam's tea plantations preserved cultural memory while unsettling the stereotype of workers as passive and compliant.[23] Vandana Saxena and Nithiya Guna Saigaran have worked on the songs of Tamil plantation women of Malaya and have stated how these songs portray the plantation as a space of contestation, power struggles, negotiations and competing memories.[24] The labourers who were thought to have no attachment to their homeland found ways to preserve their cultural identity through various practices on the plantation estates where they worked.[25] Such perspectives reveal that the hegemonic discourse of the ignorant, passive, and immoral 'coolies', reproduced by colonial authorities and often internalised by Indian nationalists, obscured the workers' own rational choice-making abilities.

This study foregrounds labourers' agency and everyday resistance within the Malayan plantation system. It identifies the negotiations over advance wages, the tactical use of religious festivals and social norms to assert identity, claim autonomy, and moments of refusal that unsettled planters' control. By highlighting the everyday negotiations over culture, leisure, and morality, the paper situates plantation labourers within broader histories of labour agency and cultural resistance. This paper argues that plantation labourers were historical actors whose conscious agencies emerged not only in dramatic revolts but through subtle acts that blurred boundaries between acquiescence and contestation.

Indian Labourers, Toddy and Morality

The intricate relationship between Indian labourers, consumption of toddy, and the moral discourses surrounding these practices provides a critical entry point for examining the intersections of cultural values, social regulation, and economic life within plantation society. After the discontinuation of the indentured labour supply to Malaya in 1910, free labourers brought by the kanganies increased rapidly in number with the expansion of the rubber industry. Amarjit Kaur considers this a personal or informal recruitment system that introduced a chain of migration from specific recruitment areas of South India, and they were employed to act as regulatory tools in controlling the migrations of free labourers across the borders in Asia and in ensuring compliance with state regulations and planters' needs.[26] She states that from 1844 till 1938, 62.2% of the total Indian labour population in Malaya were brought by the kanganies in comparison to the 13% of the indentured labourers.[27] Ravindra Jain states that the labourers who migrated to Ceylon and Malaya through kanganies were mostly agrestic 'serfs' like Paraiyan and Palla from villages of Tanjore and Tinnevelly, and non-Brahmin castes like Palli or Vanniyar.[28] Rajshekhar Basu has argued that the labourers or the agrestic 'serfs' were exploited in terms of debt and caste hierarchy in such a way that they considered this overseas employment as an opportunity to break free from the hereditary bondage and caste exploitations.[29]

Following Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's campaign against racial discrimination towards Indian immigrants in South Africa, the issue of Indian emigration became an intrinsic part of the Indian nationalistic discourse.[30] The Indian nationalist voiced through several outlets, such as The Indian Review, condemned the free labour system and highlighted the 'mistreatment' of the labourers on Malayan plantations.[31] They highlighted the plight of the labourers on Malayan estates. In an article titled Indian Coolies in the Federated Malay States published in July 1913, The Indian Review, the correspondent accused kanganies for assisting European managers in 'violating' Indian womens' chastity on the estates. They facilitated the supply of women to bachelor officers and were known to separate wives from husbands, favouring the 'beautiful'

ones. While the agency of female labourers is often overlooked, Arunima Datta's recent work on women indentured 'coolies' in Malaya shows how they challenged the stereotype of Indian women as passive victims.[32] Charu Gupta discusses the representation of indentured women in the Hindi public sphere, emphasising how their portrayal added a moral and ethical dimension to nationalist discourse. Gupta highlights the perception that it was the righteous duty of Indians to protect indentured women from exploitation by White overseers and managers.[33] In response to the criticism presented by The Indian Review, the Planters' Association of Malaya appointed an Indian Brahmin residing in Malaya, Ambikapat Rai, to write a rebuttal in 1914. Rai portrayed plantations as a redemptive space, 'uplifting' the labourers from their immoral activities. He mentioned,

> "On payday there is sure to be a serious disturbance of the peace on one or other of the Estates and one who passes by the toddy shop can not fail to see the large army of Panchamas engaged in their bacchanalian orgies."[34]

This highlights the tension between labour and morality, depicting their celebrations or leisure as societal disturbance. It reflects the socioeconomic disparity and cultural differences, where the labourers' expressions of leisure are stigmatised and seen as disruptive to the social order. He also mentioned how toddy used to be adulterated with ganja (marijuana) powder or with the solution of the nuts of Oomettangkai.[35] The toddy shops were described as locations that negatively affect the moral and physical conditions of the labourers, particularly among panchamas, who, under the influence of toddy, used to become more prone to alcohol dependence, gambling, a lack of motivation to work, and involvement in criminal activities.[36] Parameswari Krishnan has pointed out how the business of toddy increased with the growth of rubber estates in Malaya, and this was used as a tool to bind the labourers to the plantations.[37] Later, the Indian agents in Malaya who were appointed by the Indian Emigration Act of 1922, highlighted this practice of toddy drinking among the Indian labourers, especially the Tamils in Malaya. The Indian agents appointed for reporting on the condition of the Indians in Malaya, especially for looking after the 'welfare' of the labourers.[38] During the context of the slump in the rubber industry in the 1920s and the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Indian nationalists, Indian intellectuals and Indian agents in Malaya gradually began criticising the Indian labour emigration to Malaya. While the Indian intellectuals were concerned about the representation and status of the Indians in Malaya, they were equally worried about the image of the Indian overseas who were equated with the 'coolies'. A similar tension echoed in the articles written by the Indian nationalists, reports submitted by the Indian agents and the letters written by the Indian intellectuals in Malaya. The Indian agents and the Central Indian Association of Malaya, which was founded in 1936, condemned the toddy consumption among the labourers as a sign of moral degradation.

The Indian agent, named Arulanandam Pillai how the labourers used to spend their money at the toddy shops and were not able to save money because of this 'Drink evil'.[39] Subbayya Naidu, another agent, mentioned in his reports how rampant toddy drinking was among the labourers. In Province Wellesley (Straits Settlements), 18897 gallons of toddy, costing $113365, were consumed by 5740 labourers in 21 toddy shops.[40] Kunhiraman Nair, another agent, highlighted how labourers were given toddy on credit or were given advances, in lieu of their check-rolls, to buy toddy in Seremban.[41] Nair further mentioned in his 1930 report:

> "Toddy drinking is a newly acquired habit to many of the Indian labourers in Malaya. The temptation provided in estates at their very doors is the real reason for this. Many estates have as many toddy shops as there are Divisions on them. Toddy has become a daily routine with the Indian labourers in spite of the fact that it was considered a luxury and excluded from their monthly budget. Many of them spend their earnings at toddy shops without providing for their food and other necessaries of life. Where the toddy shops were a little far away from the labourers' lines, there were many total abstainers and occasional drinkers, whereas the location of toddy shops close to their lines has converted almost the whole labour force into habitual drinkers, including, in some cases, women and children."[42]

It reflects the colonial stereotypes surrounding Indian labourers in Malaya, particularly through depictions of such excessive drinking. The recurrent image of the 'irresponsible drinker' constructs labourers as lacking discipline and foresight, thereby reinforcing assumptions about their moral and economic inadequacy. The portrayal of women and children as habitual consumers of alcohol further extends this stereotype to the familial sphere, implying cultural degeneration and the erosion of social order. In 1937, A. M. Soosay, president of the Central Indian Association of Malaya, submitted a report to the contemporary Indian agent recommending the prohibition of toddy for the 'welfare' of Indian labourers.[43] The Indian intellectuals were concerned about the 'respectability' of the Indian diaspora in Malaya. Hence, the Indian agents and nationalists were promoting 'healthy' lifestyles for the Indian labourers in Malaya and the need for 'uplifting' them.

Leisure, Collective Life, and Acts of Assertion on the Plantations

The sphere of leisure on the plantations functioned not merely as a respite from labour but as a vital arena through which labourers forged social bonds, expressed cultural identity, and, at times, articulated collective dissent against estate managers. The labourers, who have often been depicted as uneducated and impoverished individuals lacking awareness of their legal rights, frequently seized opportunities to become integral members of various networks. Despite the prevalent moral stigma attached to toddy shops, particularly in colonial

discourse that emphasised their deleterious effects on labourers' health, these establishments constituted a paradoxical yet significant socio-economic institution within plantation society. Revenue derived from toddy consumption did not merely line the pockets of colonial authorities or intermediaries. A considerable portion of these funds was channelled into the construction, renovation, and maintenance of temples situated within or adjacent to plantation estates. Such investments facilitated the preservation of religious infrastructure that anchored community identity and belonging among migrant labourers living far from their natal homes. Moreover, the profits collected from toddy shops enabled the organisation of major religious and cultural festivals such as the Fire Walking Ceremony, Deepavali, and other ritual observances.[44] These events allowed labouring communities to reaffirm ritual practices, kinship solidarities, and shared memory. They operated as vital spaces for spiritual sustenance and collective joy within an otherwise coercive labour regime. The revenues generated by these toddy shops during 1931 - 1935:

Year	Revenue
1931	$1,817,513
1932	$1,419,912
1933	$1,261,276
1934	$1,809,825
1935	$2,081,718

Table 1: Revenue generated out of Toddy shops[45]

By sustaining temple life and festival traditions like Deepavali, Thaipusam, and Panguni Uttram,[46] labourers enacted agency that defied the colonial objective of reducing them to a purely economic workforce or the nationalist stereotype of being a 'disgrace'. Participation in ritual culture not only reproduced collective identities but also articulated subtle modes of resistance by preserving cultural autonomy and sustaining social cohesion in the face of structural marginalisation.

These cultural celebrations functioned as critical conduits to ancestral traditions, enabling plantation labourers to sustain and express their cultural heritage despite the dislocating experience of migration and the disciplinary nature of plantation capitalism. Such festivities reaffirmed collective identity and social continuity, strengthening intra-community bonds in environments marked by exploitative labour relations. A striking instance that underscores the cultural and political significance of ritual observances occurred on 30 October 1937, when approximately five hundred Indian labourers at Messrs. Kenneison Brothers Works in Batu Caves collectively suspended work to demand the advance payment of wages for the forthcoming Deepavali festival.[47] Their action, documented in the report of H. T. W. Oswell, Controller of Labour, Malaya (4 November 1937), reveals more than a simple dispute over payment schedules. It demonstrates the labourers' insistence on the right to celebrate a

major religious festival with dignity and preparation, in parity with workers on neighbouring estates who had already received such advances. By mobilising around Deepavali, the labourers transformed a cultural demand into a collective act of assertion within the highly regulated world of plantation discipline. Their refusal to work, motivated by the denial of ritual observance, articulated a form of economic demand that challenged managerial control at the estate. In linking economic claims to cultural rights, this event exemplifies how plantation workers redefined the boundaries of legitimate protest, employing everyday religious practice as a vehicle for collective resistance and self-affirmation.

This act of organised protest underscores the centrality of religious and cultural practices in labourers' everyday lives and reveals their ability to mobilise culturally inflected economic claims as a form of resistance. Beyond religious and cultural practices, the labourers actively engaged in recreational activities that fostered a sense of community. They often participated in sports such as volleyball and football, enjoyed staging Tamil dramas, and went on group hunting excursions, all of which contributed to their social cohesion.[48] The kanganies, who were often criticised for their exploitative practices, played a significant role in these events and were involved as educators[49] in the estate's vernacular schools, further intertwining their lives with the labourers' cultural and educational narratives. The kanganies were also accused of taking away the savings of the labourers by making them part of the koottoo or a chit fund practice.[50] However, the labourers consciously chose to rely on their kanganies and koottoo over the co-operative movement introduced by the Indian agents and Malaya government for keeping their savings.[51] Through these varied avenues, the labourers not only maintained their connection to their homeland but also created a vibrant community life within the estate.

Conclusion

South Indian plantation labourers in British Malaya lived under harsh conditions of structural marginalisation, shaped by colonial authority, racial hierarchies, and exploitative labour systems. Yet their everyday practices demonstrate that marginality did not erase agency. Through ritual observances, community institutions, leisure networks, and collective negotiations over cultural rights, labourers asserted identity and sustained cultural continuity. The labourers' insistence on religious autonomy, collective celebrations, and mutual financial support destabilised colonial and nationalist narratives that dismissed them as culturally stagnant and politically inert. Their actions illuminate the ways subaltern actors navigated the constraints of empire by shaping their own social and cultural worlds. Recognising these forms of agency reframes Indian diasporic histories by revealing Indian labourers as active participants who reshaped cultural life while positioned at the margins of empire.

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