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Coolies, Recruiters and Planters:  
Migration of Indian Labour to the  
Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations  
during Colonial Rule.

Rana Behal

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# Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations during Colonial Rule

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

Modern industrial capitalism and the consequent colonization of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world by the British triggered a massive mobilization of Indian agrarian communities across these diverse geographical localities. The growing demand for raw materials and other tropical agricultural products in the West led to the establishment of large-scale plantations using European capital for the production of export commodities, for which a labour force was mobilized from different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Between 1834 and 1937 an estimated 30 million migrants from India went to the overseas colonies of the British Empire like Burma, Ceylon, British Malaya, Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean, and East Africa. Nearly 98 per cent of the total movement outside India during the colonial period was of labourers (Mckeown 2004; Mohapatra 2007; Amrith 2011). For the past few decades the concept of transnationalism has been en vogue in migration studies (Vertovec 2004). While the concept of migrant transnationalism has been a useful tool in the analysis of contemporary diaspora societies, its applicability to colonial migratory flows is problematic. This concept eschews the role of capital in the mobilization of millions of people across time and space in general. The labour flows under the imperial systems were driven by the growing demand for labour by European capital for its overseas plantation enterprises during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The plantation complex in tropical Asia in the nineteenth century differed from the much older Atlantic plantations in one important respect: they did not have a history of slave-based production. The main similarity between the two plantation systems lay in the export-oriented nature and industrial organization of agricultural production. Nineteenth century Asian plantations were also similar to their Atlantic counterparts in that both utilized indentured labour, except in Ceylon, transported to the plantations over a long distance and employed under contractually specific conditions. The two most important aspects of indentured servitude were, first, the provision that a breach of contract resulted in criminal prosecution, and second, the widespread penal sanctions granted to planters.<sup>2</sup> It was the unfreedom inherent in indenture, namely the inability of the worker to withdraw his/her labour-power to bargain over the terms of the contract or for higher wages, which led to it being viewed as a 'new system of slavery' (Tinker 1974; Rodney 1981; Gillion 1962).

There are contesting views – with emphasis on the economic rationality of a system, which the revisionist historians argue benefited employers and labourers alike. They consider indenture

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<sup>2</sup> In Ceylon the indenture contract was not in operation, but the law enforcing penal sanctions for noncompliance of work was put in place in the plantation regimes there.

emigration as voluntary and essentially a facilitating device that enabled labour to flow from low labour productivity areas (Asia) to high labour productivity areas (Caribbean or North America). The powerful attraction of economic opportunity was sufficient to 'prompt many migrants over the course of three centuries to enter indentures giving up much of their freedom for a period of years in hope thereby to amend their estate' (Galenson 1984: 25). A rational and deliberate choice on the part of migrants driven by hopes of bettering their future is presumed; emigration is viewed as an 'escape hatch' for relief from social and economic oppression at home (Galenson 1984; Emmer 1986; Emmer 1990). These arguments emphasizing the benefits of indenture are very similar to those advanced by contemporary defenders of indenture systems, notably planters and colonial officials. Contrary to their arguments the indenture system was designed not so much to provide economic opportunities for the labourer as to secure for the planters a labour force whose wages were determined completely outside the labour market. In the case of non-indentured immigration to Malaya and Ceylon, where the notion of 'free' immigration was floated by the contemporary official reports and planters, the *kangani* operated through a system of debt and advances, as will be shown below, which tied labour to particular employers. The mediating agency of *kanganies*, while outside the purview of Governments, did not emerge independently of the network of employers. One significant feature in all three cases was the immobilization of the mobilized labour force within the plantation complexes both under indenture and *kangani* systems. The nature of work process adopted and the frenetic pace of expansion of tea and rubber plantations during the last two and half decades of nineteenth and early decades of twentieth centuries created residential compulsion for the labour force. When the labour intensive drive for expanding production faced the challenge of 'bolting', 'absconding' and 'deserting' coolies, the planters used legal, extra-legal and economic coercion to control and immobilize the labour force. Indenture penal contract and right of private arrest without warrant awarded to planters in Assam and indebtedness through advances for passage fare and penal provisions for non-compliance of work in the case of *kangani* system in Ceylon and Malaya were the instruments through which the immobilization process operated.

This paper attempts to tell the story of marginalized agrarian communities, who were economically depressed as a consequence of colonial land revenue policies and became the hunting ground for recruitment and transportation as emigrant labour for Assam, Ceylon and Malaya plantations. With the introduction of alien land tenures, the colonial state dispossessed large sections of these communities. This brought about the creation of an enormous population that had been alienated and uprooted from their land, the main source of their livelihood (Ghosh 1999). Various aspects of different recruitment and transportation systems bringing a very diverse range of Indian agrarian communities from different geographical locations to work as labour there in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will be compared. The study will focus on two important areas of this labour mobilization and transportation across geographic locations in the British Empire: (a) the agencies of recruitment and recruitment systems, i.e., the European recruiting agents, the indigenous *kanganies*, *sirdars* and *arkatis*; and (b) the nature and process of transformation of the immigrant Indian agrarian communities while performing labour in the plantations set up in the enclaved, isolated and sparse geographical localtions in Malaya, Ceylon and Assam. In order to understand the processes of mobilization and transformation of immigrant Indian labour, they will have to be placed within the larger context of the fluctuating fortunes of these colonial plantation enterprises in the world market, which impacted the nature of demand and supply of labour force. Equally significant will be the study of the networks of recruitments and recruiters across spatial boundaries and localities that operated under the control and supervision of the colonial state and British capital. This study contributes to Crossroads Asia research on the long-term impact migration

has on social change among communities who were mobilized across geographic spaces. The paper introduces a new trajectory in the debate on migration. The Indian agrarian communities were first demobilized from their catchment areas and mobilized to work in the plantations set up with British capital across borders and distant frontiers of the British Empire. Upon arrival they were immobilized within geographically sparse and isolated locations to meet the increasing labour requirements of producing plantation commodities for fast growing global markets. During the process of demobilization, mobilization and immobilization, these agrarian communities were transformed into plantation coolies to be a 'tamed', 'disciplined' and controlled labour force.

With the onset of colonial rule, British capital investments in the plantation enterprises in tropical Asia began to flow around the beginning of the nineteenth century and continued into the early twentieth century: sugar emerged in the 1830s and coffee in the 1870s in Malaya followed by the 'rubber rush' at the beginning of the twentieth century (Sandhu 1969; Sundram 1993; Kaur 2006); coffee arose in the 1820s but was replaced by tea in the 1880s in Ceylon (Heidemann 1992); and tea emerged in the 1840s in Assam (Griffiths 1967). One interesting feature common to these colonial plantations was the nature of their financial structures for their control and management in the form of managing agency houses. The emergence of these managing agency houses stimulated amalgamation of a number of smaller plantations into large-scale enterprises under managing agents who acquired monopolistic control over their operations. The transition from proprietary to corporate ownership corresponded to the emergence of more monopolistic forms of capital. These developments took place in Malaya and Ceylon with the decline of coffee and emergence of rubber and tea plantations during the 1880s and the turn of the twentieth century. In Assam the collapse of the speculative boom left a 'tea mania' in its wake during the 1860s, and by the end of the nineteenth century the seven top managing agency houses controlled nearly 61 per cent of all tea gardens (Bagchi 1972). They controlled and managed practically the entire business of production, transportation and marketing of these plantation products in the international markets. In many cases they also functioned as recruitment agents and transporters of the emigrant labour from the catchment areas to plantations in Malaya, Ceylon and Assam (Sundram 1993; Forrest 1967; Bagchi 1972; Rungta 1970).

For the expansion and growth of these plantation enterprises in the three colonies of the British Empire, the colonial state provided generous assistance in the form of vast tracks of land offered extremely cheaply and on liberal terms, financial loans at very low interest rates, infrastructural facilities of communications, ports, railways and roads and subsidies for the transport costs of recruited immigrants.<sup>3</sup> However the most crucial aspect of the colonial state's assistance was the large-scale mobilization of a labour force from the agrarian hinterlands of the Indian subcontinent. This was crucial given the growing demand for sugar, coffee, tea and rubber in the international markets during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and the corresponding increase in plantation acreage in Assam, Ceylon and Malaya. The impressive growth of the plantation enterprises by British capital would not have been possible without the mobilization of a substantial labour force. The catchment areas for recruitment of immigrant labour were districts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in eastern India for Assam; Southern India, predominantly Tamilnadu districts, for Malaya and Ceylon. In the case of Assam the recruitment was carried out under the indenture system from the 1860s onwards, which was also the case in Malaya until it was

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<sup>3</sup> There was also the rhetorical assertion of 'civilizing the wildness' in the colonial discourse among the planters and colonial officials (Lee 1863).

banned in 1910. With the emergence of rubber plantations, Malaya shifted to the *kanagni* system of labour recruitment during the 1890s while in Ceylon it had already been operating since the opening of coffee plantations. As compared to the indenture system, the *kangani* system was perceived among the colonial officialdom as a 'free' recruitment system – a notion accepted uncritically in some scholarly works. In both cases was 'assisted' is used as a euphemism for the employer-sponsored nature of recruitment and transportation of immigrant labour. This mobilization toward plantation destinations was more accurately described contemporarily as the 'coolie-trade' (Parliamentary Papers 1864: [124]). Through the process of recruitment, transportation and employment, the colonial plantation regimes were transforming the Indian agrarian communities of tribals, aboriginals and poor peasants into labouring 'coolies'. The colonial state provided legitimacy to the indentured servitude of immigrant labourers through passing of various legislative measures. In the case of the *kangani* system the colonial state intervention did not formally intervene, but the regularity devices were put in place to provide the planters control over the process of recruitment and transportation of the immigrants.

In the context of the British planters' failure to persuade natives to take up employment in their new enterprises, the idea of importing immigrant labour acquired greater significance (Sandhu 1969: 52; GOB: 1861 Report). The 'native' Malay, Ceylonese and Assamese were stigmatized as 'indolent' and 'lazy' by the planters and the colonial bureaucracy for their unwillingness to accept employment as coolies on their terms in the plantations (Griffiths 1967: 101; ACP MS 9925 1941-44; Roberts 1966: 2). Earlier, the efforts to employ Chinese labour in Malaya and Assam had been unsuccessful as they were found to be 'disorderly' and 'troublesome' (Sandhu 1969: 54; ACP, Ms 9925, 1841-44). Failing to convert the natives into coolies, the plantation enterprises resorted to procure imported coolies through distance recruitment. The large-scale and spatially sustained mobilization and transfer of labour over several decades was achieved through a diverse network of Indian recruiters like *sirdars* and *arakatis* in the case of Assam plantations, and *maistries* and *kanganies* for Malaya and Ceylon. They worked for and under the control of European planters and their recruiting agents.

Both quantitative and qualitative data for this study were collected and used from a combination of documents in the colonial archives and secondary works. Colonial bureaucracy extensively documented the process of migration and transportation of Indian labour to the plantations in overseas colonies of the British Empire as well as within the Indian subcontinent. The need to maintain documents emanated from the statutory requirements under various labour laws enacted by the colonial state to regulate and control the labour migration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## **2. Assam**

In Assam the tea cultivation began in the 1840s and it grew slowly with uncertainties with the end of the 1850s. It experienced a short period of dramatic expansion and collapse during the speculative boom of the 1860s. From the 1870s onwards the acreage expansion acquired consistency and achieved the highest growth rate during the last 30 years of the nineteenth century and continued unabated for the next four decades of the twentieth century (Table1).

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

Year	Hectares (thousands)
1872	11.3
1880	51.4
1882	60.2
1885	66
1890	77.2
1895	92.4
1900	112.8
1911	118.5
1920	140.5
1930	144.8
1940	146.8

Source: Report on Tea Operations. 1873-1874:13; Tea Culture Reports 1892-1926; Indian Tea Statistics.1930 and 1940.

### **3. Recruiting under the Indenture System: Assam**

Long distance recruiting was practically coterminous with the inception of plantations in Assam. The Assam Company, the first private tea enterprise incorporated in London in 1839, initially relied on European contractors to supply them with labour, these contractors worked through paid native agents who did the actual recruiting in districts of Bengal and Bihar (Griffiths 1967: 64). As the first half of the 1860s witnessed the above-mentioned 'tea mania' with its massive expansion of tea plantations in Assam, the demand for labour grew dramatically. The arrival of a regular steamer service on the Brahmaputra river facilitated this process. The planters delegated the task of labour supply to private recruiting agencies in Calcutta. These agencies utilized the services of professional native recruiters (*arkattis*), who operated in various districts of Eastern India and forwarded the recruited migrants by rail to Calcutta, from where they were sent to Assam through a river route. However, the successful mobilization of labour through these agencies came at the cost of a high mortality rate among migrants – during the voyage and after reaching Assam – a tragic consequence of the 'coolie trade' during the 'tea mania' years. Recruitment of immigrant labour had been taking place before 1863 without any state control or check. Colonial state intervention in the recruitment and labour system of the Assam tea plantations began in February 1863, when the Bengal Native Labour Act III was passed in order to control and regulate the recruitment and transportation of labour (GOB 1868). This Act stipulated that all recruiters be licensed; that every intending emigrant should be produced before a



magistrate of his own district; that the period of contract was to be four years and that this be explained to him in front of the Superintendent of Emigration; that every intending emigrant had to be medically examined; and that adequate sanitary arrangements for the conveyance of labour be provided by the recruiters. The origin of colonial state intervention in the establishment of a penal contract system has to be placed in the context of the rapid expansion during the early 1860s, when the appalling conditions of fraudulent recruitment and insanitary transportation led to high mortality rates and large-scale desertions from the plantations: of the 85,000 labourers imported into Assam between 1863 and 1866, no less than 35,000 were reported to have died or deserted (GOB 1868). A Special Commission appointed in July 1862 to conduct investigations into the whole affair presented an appalling picture of miseries, mortality and desertions among migrant labour during transit. The Commission reported complete lack of medical supervision and overcrowding of depots (where the immigrants were housed during transit) and the prevalence of substantial abuse. The supply of labour was regarded as an ordinary commercial transaction between the contractors and planters, 'all parties considering duty and responsibility discharged when the living are landed, and the cost of the dead adjusted' (GOB 1868: 25). Conditions did not improve on arrival in the plantations for the immigrant labourers. The sudden influx of workers created food supply shortages. Surplus food production in the tea districts was not sufficient to meet the abrupt increase in demand. Food for the imported labourers consequently had to be imported. The frenetic rush to import large numbers of coolies to meet the demand caused by major extensions of the area of speculation plantations took priority over the importation of food. As a result the supply of food did not keep pace with the increase of mouths leading to serious scarcity of food. A British official reported that 'tens of thousands of the imported labourers died from disease' he believed to be 'brought on or aggravated by want of proper food' (GOB 1874: 18).

The Act failed to prevent desertions, as well as high level of sickness and mortality among the immigrant labourers and they continued to fall prey to unscrupulous contractors. The Commissioners reported: 'The labourers have too often been deceived by unprincipled recruiters; they have come up expecting much higher wages and very different kind of life from what they found. From the time they were recruited until they reached their final destination, they have been guarded not unlike prisoners. They have been told that they were going to a garden in a country where the means of living were plentiful and cheap; where they would receive very high wages and have little to do. They have found themselves set down in swampy jungle, far from human habitation, where food was scarce and dear, and where they have seen their families and their fellow labourers struck down by disease and death, and where they themselves, prostrated by sickness, have been able to earn less by far than they could have in their homes' (GOB 1868: 36). Death and deception continued to haunt large numbers of immigrants who were brought to Assam to produce tea for the global market. This was both, a scandalous and uneconomic situation. They were proving to be expensive, both dead and deserting.

The Bengal Act III of 1863 was amended by Act VI of 1865. The penal contract system was introduced in Act VI of the Bengal Council in 1865, which stipulated minimum monthly wages (Rs 5 for men and Rs 4 for women),<sup>4</sup> a three-year contract, a nine-hour work day, and a government inspector of labour empowered to cancel the contract of labourers on complaints of ill treatment. The crucial provision of the Act lay in the sanction of power of arrest without warrant to the planters for breach of contract which led to the imprisonment of labourers for refusal to work and 'absconding.' However, the Act applied only

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<sup>4</sup> Euro 0.065 and 0.052 at the current exchange rate (Internet).

to newly recruited labour, and not to time expired labourers or locally recruited labourers, who were now increasingly contracted under the Workman's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859 which was extended to Assam in 1864 (GOI, 1906:136). Subsequently, all labour contracted under the Labour Immigration Acts was referred to as Act labour, while the rest of the labour force, including those contracted under the Breach of Workman's Contract Act XII of 1859, was termed non-Act labour in official reports (Das 1931).<sup>5</sup> The Act XIII of 1859 was supplemented by sections 490 and 492 of the Indian Penal Code (Act XLV) of 1860, making the breach of service contract by a workman (during the journey to and at the place of work) a criminal offence in case the employer had paid for his journey (Das 1931: 26). By the beginning of the twentieth century the 'time-expired' labourers were increasingly engaged by planters under this Act. Apart from the time-expired labourers, the newly imported ones were also increasingly engaged under this Act as most managers considered it 'absolutely necessary that a more rigid form of contract should be retained for new arrivals' (RALEC 1906: 75). This necessitated having cheap and pliant labour that could be worked under a strict work regime supervised by the planters. To preserve their authority and control, the management devised and evolved the indenture regime to keep this labour docile, disciplined and intimidated. The colonial state put the stamp of legitimacy through legislative enactments (Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The labour intensification strategies adopted for increasing production required immobilising migrant labour within the confines of plantations through strict control over their work-place as well as living space (Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The use of physical coercion was yet another mechanism to maintain discipline and control over the labour force. The right of private arrest of labour provided under the penal system to planters became an important tool in containing labour mobility significantly. This practice originated under section 33 of the Act of 1865 and remained as law under Act I of 1882 as well as Act VI of 1901, the legislations passed to legitimise the indenture regime in the Assam plantations (Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The indenture contract system was reinforced in modified forms by the Act I of 1882 and Act VI of 1901. The penal clauses were removed from it in 1908 and the system itself was finally abolished in 1926. These legislative enactments laid and sustained the foundation of the indenture system in Assam tea plantations under which the recruitment of immigrant labour was carried on even after its official abolition in 1926 (Behal and Mohapatra 1992).

Table 2 shows that more than three million sponsored immigrant labourers (including Act and non-Act) were recruited and transported to Assam for over three-quarters of a century to work as coolies in tea plantations. One important feature of emigration to Assam, compared to Ceylon and Malaya, was a high percentage of women. The proportion of women labourers ranged from 40.3 to 46.2 per cent between 1886 and 1888 (GOI 1891: Para 8). This trend remained intact throughout the period of our study. A vast majority of immigrants were recruited from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Ranchi, Palamau, Singbhum, Hazaribagh and Manbhum districts of eastern India, and districts of Orissa, United Provinces and Central Provinces. A large section of the migrants to the tea gardens were drawn from the ranks of the aboriginal tribal groups from the Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Kols or Hos, Bhumij and Santhals, Kurmis and Murasis. The second most important group of migrants were from semi-aboriginal castes like Ghasis and Goraites, Bauris and Turi. Finally, a smaller number was drawn from among low caste Hindus like the Bhogtas, Rautias, Chamars, Dasadhs etc. (Census 1911 and 1921). The aboriginals and tribals, often referred to by the planters as 'jungles', represented

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<sup>5</sup> The Workman's Breach of Contract Act (XIII) was passed in 1859 at the instance of the Calcutta Trade Association and similar other interests. They memorialized the government, setting forth losses sustained by them owing to the willful breaches of contracts or desertion of service by workmen and servants, and asking for the application of summary remedies.

economically and socially the most backward strata of the society in the recruiting regions. Numerically they formed the largest group among the tea garden labour force in Assam (Census 1911 and 1921). The bulk of these groups were mobilized under two recruitment methods: through the agency of licensed private contractors and through *sirdars*, who were the employees in the plantations and were sent to labour districts by the garden managers for this purpose. During the 1860s the planters also sent out coolies from their gardens to recruit in their home districts, which came to be known as the garden *sirdari system*. After the passing of 1863 and 1865 Acts, both forms of recruitment came under government supervision: recruits had to be registered in their districts of recruitment and medically examined, and their conveyance to Assam had to follow government health regulations. Although the contract period was formally extended from three to five years, in practice, the vast majority of the immigrants were reemployed through coercion, both economic and physical. The short term indenture contract became a generational servitude. Another important feature of Assam immigration was that the employers financed the cost of recruitment and transportation from the labour district to tea districts.

**Table 2: Import of Emigrant Labour (men, women and children) into Assam Tea Plantations 1873-1947**

Year	Numbers (thousands)
1873-80	287
1881-90	327.6
1891-1900	596.9
1901-10	367.2
1911-20	790.8
1921-30	361.5
1931-40	247.9
1941-47	293.9
Total	3,272.8

Source: Assam Labour Reports. 1873-1932; Reports on Emigrant Labour (Act XXII of 1932), 1934-1947.

The immigrants, after having been recruited from the catchment areas of the hinterlands of Eastern and Upper India, were forwarded by rail to Calcutta, where they were temporarily housed in the numerous depots owned by the recruiting agencies/contractors. Batches of the assembled individuals were later taken to Koostea, about hundred miles from Calcutta, and dispatched by steamers and flats to Cachar and Assam tea gardens. On arrival at various river *ghats* the rest of the journey to the tea gardens was completed by walking through the forest areas. The long and tedious journeys of the Assam steamers commuting on the river Brahmaputra, usually took longer than the

passages of the 'coolie ships' to Mauritius and reported significantly higher rates of mortality. Assam steamers were reporting rates as high as 20% to 50% (GOB 1868; GOB 1874).

Between 1865 and 1882, the tea industry grew steadily, and recruitment continued to be under the supervision of the government while a penal contract system came into being in Assam. The planters' persistent complaint was high cost of recruitment, which they attributed to the restrictions imposed under the law. It was pointed out that the cost of bringing coolies up to Sibsagar district had increased from Rs 35 per head in 1875 to an amount between Rs 66 to Rs 84 in 1878 (GOI 1880).<sup>6</sup> The trigger for the next round of changes in the legislation and labour system was provided by the slow but steady drift downwards of prices of tea from 1878 onwards. The planters now launched a campaign for drastic cost-cutting measures combined with rapid expansion. One notable aspect of this expansion during the last two decades of the nineteenth century was that a bulk of it took place in a context of steadily falling prices: between 1880 and 1900, tea prices fell by half. All these features had an important bearing on the structure of recruitment for the development of labour (Behal and Mohapatra 1992).

Since labour was the main component of production costs, the Indian Tea Districts Association (ITDA) in a memorandum to the Government of India in April 1880 stated that the 'future of the tea industry hinged on the maintenance of an adequate supply of coolie labour at a cost calculated to leave a fair margin of profit on the capital invested' (GOB 1880: 2). The Association argued further that the most important hindrance to the expansion of the tea industry was the 'excessive cost of recruitment largely due to the stringency of labour laws' (GOB 1880: 2). The high rate of desertions and the three-year contract period were considered serious constraints for the growth of tea industry. They sought harsher punishment for coolies committing 'offenses' and defaulting on contract. The planters demanded the abolition of all governmental regulation on recruitment and the extension of the terms of the penal contract from three to five years (Assam Labour Report 1880). The Government of Bengal appointed a Commission headed by Mr Mackenzie which included representatives of Calcutta agency houses and planters (GOI 1880). The Commission agreed with the planters in their demand for deregulation of recruitment (GOI 1880). As a result of planters' lobbying, their demands were met in full, and despite some dissenting voices of some district officials, the Labour Districts Emigration Act I was passed in 1882. The 1882 Act remained the major legislative device for the regulation of recruitment and the labour system in Assam until 1901. The major features of the Act, namely deregulated emigration and freedom for local contracts, were clearly designed to serve the need of planters to regulate an expanding labour force. It is crucial to locate Act I of 1882 in the context of the strategy adopted by planters in the face of two important developments in the world market: first, the need to acquire the pre-eminent position in exporting tea to the UK market, where the main rival was China, and second, the steady yet fluctuating decline of tea prices from 1878 onwards. The planters' twofold response was to expand production at an unprecedented scale while simultaneously attempting to cut costs of production.

#### **4. Functioning of the 1882 Act**

Although the 1882 Act, which introduced the system of free or deregulated emigration, was designed to encourage private recruitment through garden *sirdars*, an immediate result was the increase of unregistered recruitment by unlicensed contractors which outstripped registered recruitment by a ratio of 4 to 1 (GOB, 1883: 3). This development was facilitated by the emergence of the 'Dhubri contract' system. Unlike the earlier practice when emigrants were registered at their district headquarters and signed the

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<sup>6</sup> Euro 0.85 and 1.1 at the current rate of exchange (Internet).

contract, the unregistered emigrants were taken straight to Dhubri in the Goalpara district of Assam. From there they were taken by steamer to the tea gardens. Goalpara, which did not have a single tea garden, had been declared a labour district under the new Act. A large number of recruits under the unlicensed system were made to sign their contracts in Dhubri, nearly 400 miles away from their homes, in front of a magistrate who, by all accounts, made only perfunctory inquiries as to the willingness of the coolie to emigrate to Assam (Assam Labour Report 1887: 2-3; Griffiths 1967: 276).

Unregistered emigration and Dhubri contracts became the standard practice for the recruitment of indentured labour in the era of deregulated emigration. The first casualties of the new recruiting system were the old agencies of licensed contractors and recruiters. In 1882 there were about 20 licensed contractors and 1,000 licensed recruiters in the field, but by 1890 they had vanished from the recruiting districts of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas: many licensed contractors and recruiters were reported to have gone over to unlicensed recruiting (GOI, 1891). There was a similar decline in the number of licensed tea garden recruiters (*sirdars*); the latter were recruiting only about two coolies per head in 1895, compared to about ten per head in 1882 (GOB, 1896: Para 66). In many cases, garden *sirdars* went to work for the local agents of the Calcutta managing agency houses, who were also unlicensed contractors. Thus many *sirdari* recruits were in reality unlicensed contractors' coolies, and the garden *sirdar* often acted as a chaperone for these coolies on their journey to a specific tea garden. This system, known as 'mixed *sirdari*', was very common in the Assam Valley and Cachar (GOI, 1891: Para 19; ALR, 1884: 3).

The deregulated recruitment system had at its base the *arkatti*, or the village recruiter, and at its apex the great coolie recruiting firms of Calcutta controlled by managing agency houses (Begg and Dunlop, Balmer and Lawrie) who also had a great many tea gardens under their control (Griffiths 1967: 295). The village *arkatti* was not in any sense a creation of the 1882 Act, and there is much evidence to show that he played a crucial role even in the phase of controlled emigration. In 1877, the magistrate of Ranchi, the largest coolie recruiting district, noted that most of the recruitment under the licensed recruiting system and garden *sirdari* was actually done by *arkattis*, who received Rs 2 to Rs 5 per coolie supplied (GOI 1878).<sup>7</sup> The village *arkatti* was variously described as 'belonging to the very class of people who emigrate as labourers and live and move among them', or in more uncharitable terms as being of 'notoriously bad character', or consisting of 'the scum of the country' in the form of 'ex-convicts, burglars, thieves, dacoits and notorious badmashes' (GOI 1889: Para 14). The sphere of operation of the *arkatti* was usually a small group of villages around a weekly market or *haat*. Above the village *arkatti* was the *sudder arkatti*, who normally resided in major towns of the recruiting districts and often fixed deals with the local agents of the coolie contractors. The function of the local agent was to finance the *sudder arkatti* through cash advances, and to confirm the suitability of the recruits. The coolies would then be sent to the depots which dotted the major towns of these districts or railheads, whence they were sent with contractors' escorts to the forwarding depot at Dhubri. Accordingly, this system involved three to four distinct levels of transaction, and officials often disparagingly referred to the *arkatti* recruitment and transfer of coolies through various intermediaries as the 'sale system' (GOI 1883: Emigration, September Nos. 4-5, Para 2).

The boom in unlicensed recruitment led to the proliferation of these professional recruiters on an unprecedented scale. In 1890, by a conservative estimate, no less than 5,000 *arkattis* were said to be operating in Ranchi district alone (GOI 1891). By 1895, the Bengal Labour Commission (1896: Appendix) found that coolie contractors in Purulia, the major recruiting station in Chotanagpur, each had about

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<sup>7</sup> Euro 0.026 and 0.065 at the current exchange rate (Internet).

500 to 1500 *arkattis* on their books, and there were no less than 14 coolie contractors in the town. The high density of *arkattis* could only be explained by the increasing profits of the recruitment business. In 1877 *arkattis* received between Rs 2 and Rs 5 per head for each coolie supplied to the contractors. In 1883, immediately after the promulgation of the 1882 Act, the price paid to village *arkattis* had nearly doubled to Rs 10 per head. By 1888 it was reported that *arkattis* got Rs 20 per coolie supplied to the *sudder arkattis*, who in turn were receiving Rs 50 to Rs 60 per head from the depot owners and local agents of the contractor (GOI 1891).<sup>8</sup> The high rates paid to *arkattis* also affected the price of garden *sirdari* coolies. Many tea gardens and their managing agents complained bitterly in 1889 about the practice of garden *sirdars* selling their coolies to *arkattis*, since the price they received was invariably much higher than the commission paid by the tea gardens (GOI 1889). The profit of recruitment at the lowest level was replicated at all stages of coolie transactions, the net result being a steady increase in the cost of recruitment to the planters. The rising cost of recruitment had been cited as the primary reason for the planters' demand for deregulated emigration, yet the results were contrary to their expectation. In 1875, the cost of importing coolies in Sibsagar district of Assam was reported to be Rs 35 per head (GOI 1880). By 1889, evidence suggests that the cost of recruitment had more than doubled, a leading contractor estimating the cost to be about Rs 90-100 per head (GOI 1891). In 1895, the best coolies – the tribal labourers from Chotanagpur – were costing planters no less than Rs 150 per head, the average cost for an average coolie being estimated at Rs 130 (GOB 1896: Para 76).<sup>9</sup>

While *arkattis* performed the functions of coolie recruiters on behalf of the private recruiting agents, the *sirdars* were the employees of the plantations and were sent to recruit labour from the areas of their native villages. After recruiting labour they accompanied them to the garden, worked alongside with others as labourers and sometime functioned as field supervisor at the lowest rank of the power hierarchy in the Assam tea plantations. They received commission on recruiting work plus their normal remuneration. They also resided in the coolie lines with other labourers. While they were important for recruitment purposes and – as supervisors on the field – enjoyed a slightly better status in the plantation social hierarchy, they did not seem to enjoy any special or extraordinary privileges over their co-workers. There were, of course, incidents of their participation in the physical coercion of their fellow labourers on the behest of the garden managers and assistant managers (GOA 1904).

It is not our argument that all recruiting was subject to fraud and deception. Push and pull factors played an important role in the immigration for Assam plantations (Mohapatra 1985). However, the existence of a fair amount of evidence of official reporting of abuse, deception and fraudulent practices in recruitment for Assam does not conform to the revisionist arguments of 'safety hatch', 'voluntary' emigration. The sympathies and concerns of the colonial bureaucracy for British capital, with some exceptions, were not unknown given the nature of their cultural and racial affinities and regular socialization with the British planters. Among the Bengal officials J Ware Edgar, starting with his early posting in Cachar and his report on Assam and Bengal tea plantations in 1873, remained the most vocal critic of the recruitment system for Assam plantations during his long career. In 1882 after the passing of Act I of 1882, as Commissioner of Chota Nagpur Division, he reported in great details the abusive nature of *arkati* and other professional recruiters in the flourishing 'coolie trade' for Assam tea plantations. His report, based on information provided by local officials and Christian missionaries, revealed a very sordid picture of deception, fraud and illegality in the recruitment system for Assam (GOI 1883). Expressing his strong disapproval of the employers and their

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<sup>8</sup> Euro 0.13, 0.26, 0.65 and 0.77 at the current rate of exchange (Internet).

<sup>9</sup> Euro 1.16, 1.29, 1.93 and 1.68 at the current exchange rate (Internet).

recruitment system he warned that 'there are very grave dangers in the attempt now being made by some employers to evade the law in recruiting districts, and take advantage of it in the labour districts' (GOI 1883: Proceeding 4-5). In 1889 Harrington Tucker, a police officer deputed to investigate into the charges of fraud and kidnapping connected with the recruiting of coolies for Assam, revealed the prevalence of many 'evil malpractices' (GOI 1888). He indicted several native and Eurasian recruiters in the enticement who were, as he wrote, 'assuming various disguises by which they induce men and women to join them in pretended enterprises and somehow getting them under pecuniary obligations and taking them to recruiting depots, and there making them over to contractors who ship them off to Assam.' His investigations convinced Tucker that so long the 'free recruitment' under the Act I of 1882 existed without any official control over the *arkatis* and sub-agents, the abductions and malpractices will continue. 'The whole thing is now a trade and a very paying one.' (Parliamentary Papers 1889: 51).

The revelation of these sordid tales of the recruitment system by Tucker did not find much appreciation in the higher echelon in the Governments of India and Assam. The Government of India did not extend Tucker's tenure further. It was argued that his investigation showed 'very small cases of oppression and fraud' that were of 'trivial character' and, therefore, it was concluded that 'no such abuses exist.' Tuckers efforts were belittled and rebuked, and the period of his investigation was not extended (GOI 1890: 2). This apathy and lack of serious concern allowed the abuses and malpractices to flourish in the recruitment system under Act I of 1882, and the Assam plantations remained an unpopular destination in the recruitment districts. R Macleod, the officiating Superintendent of Emigration in Calcutta, reported in 1891 that unlicensed recruitment system under Act I of 1882 had paved the way for serious abuses like 'falsification of the description' of intending emigrants when they were produced before the registering officers (GOI 1892: 46). The Bengal Labour Commission of 1895 and the Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported the continuation of abuses and malpractices in recruitment for Assam: 'There is same tale of deception, of false inducements, of entrapping people...' (RALEC 1906: 22). The consequences of this were acknowledged by Sir Charles Rivaz in the Imperial Council, namely that 'a horde of unlicensed and uncontrolled labour purveyors and recruiters sprang into existence, under false pretences, ignorant men and women, chiefly from the most backward districts of Bengal and Central Provinces, to allow themselves to be conveyed to Assam, and by practically selling these people to the planters for the purpose of being placed under labour contract' (PCLC 1901: 47).

## **5. The Labour System under Indenture**

By making emigration to Assam unpopular, *arkatti* recruitment and its related host of intermediaries no doubt contributed directly to the increasing cost of recruitment. However, the most important reason for the existence of the *arkatti* system, as well as the rising cost of recruitment, was the ever increasing demand for labour that emanated from the operation of the penal contract system in Assam. The question to be asked is: despite the migration of one million persons to Assam over the last two decades of the nineteenth century, why did the tea garden labour force amount to only 400,000 workers in 1900? The Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 also commented that the total labour force of the Province did not increase equally with the increase in importation (GOI 1891). Planters and government alike justified the existence of the penal contract system in terms of a chronic labour shortage in Assam. Is it not pertinent to ask rather to what extent the penal contract system itself was a factor in causing the shortage of labour?

The characteristic feature of the labour system in Assam was the extensive use of the penal contract. In this, the 1882 Act marked the watershed. Prior to this only 22 per cent of the labour force was under penal contract. By 1891, at its height, 55 per cent of the labour force was contracted under the 1882 Act and another 40 per cent of the labour force was under the Act XIII of 1859 (Assam Labour Report 1891; GOI 1891). The widespread use of the 1882 Act during the period in which the tea industry expanded strengthened planters' power in relation to their work force immensely. This expansion was carried out under the statutory minimum wage provision of the Act (in effect the maximum wage was never paid), since the major function of penal sanctions was to keep wages down, by preventing the operation of a labour market. It did so by checking competition among planters for scarce labour, and by preventing workers from taking advantage of this situation. Henry Cotton had reported that between 1880 and 1901 the wages of Assam tea garden labourers remained below the statutory minimum amount (PCLC 1901: 94).

## **6. Labour Intensification, Mortality and Reproduction Problems**

Along with a low living wage and also a consequence of it, the plantation system in Assam was characterized by a persistent problem of work force reproduction. Throughout the period during which the indenture and penal contract system was in operation, labour force mortality constantly outstripped the birth rate, with the result that the net reproduction rate was negative. Between 1882 and 1901 the average annual death rate for adult workers was 3.93 per cent. More significantly, over the same period, the death rate of workers recruited under the 1882 Act was 5.4 per cent (ALR 1882-1901). In other words, one in every four adult workers recruited under the 1882 Act did not survive the full period of the contract. There is much official evidence to show that the mortality pattern was intimately connected with the rigours of the penal contract system. The high mortality figures were compounded by a low rate of reproduction of labour force in Assam tea plantations. The penal contract system systematically militated against a normal rate of reproduction by the labour force (GOI 1891: Para 189). The low birth rate was attributed by medical opinion to the widespread practice of abortion amongst women labourers (GOI 1891). The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee reported that there were widespread abortions on account of adverse living conditions (RALEC 1906). The lower rate of reproduction was further compounded by high child mortality in the plantations. The labour force in the Assam tea gardens was constantly depleted as a result, necessitating significantly increased labour recruitment every year.

## **7. Ceylon**

In Ceylon coffee cultivation began during the 1830s. Coffee plantations were the major modern enterprise in Ceylon set by the British capital during the 1830s. Between 1835 and 1837 four to five thousand acres of forest land had been cleared and planted with coffee around Kandy (Jayaraman 1967: 320; Roy 2003: 161). As in Assam during the 1860s, the offer of extremely lucrative land grants by the colonial government stimulated a speculative boom in coffee cultivation. The area devoted to coffee expanded to 31,843 hectares within a span of five to six years; in 1841 alone 14,973 hectares was planted. Most of the initial entrepreneurs were employees or ex-employees of the East Indian Company. The boom busted in 1847 with the fall of coffee prices. By the next decade the coffee industry was on the road to recovery and the area expanded to 71,225 hectares by 1869 (Roy 2003: 161). Coffee production went into a decline afterwards due to a fungus outbreak, shrinking from 101,981 hectares in 1880 to 39,659 hectares in 1886.



As coffee cultivation declined, Ceylon planters switched to growing tea on former coffee plantations (Heidemann 1992: 22). The institutions of imperial science like the botanical gardens in Calcutta in India and Peradeniya in Ceylon played a significant role in making production of tea possible. These institutions had been set up to experiment with plants and make them commercially productive (Roy 2003). Tea production in Ceylon had a spectacular run of expansion from the 1880s onwards; from 405 hectares in 1875 it expanded to 40,469 hectares in 1885 and reached 155,399 hectares in 1900. The secular trend of high growth continued into the twentieth century (Table 3).

Most of the coffee and early tea plantations in Ceylon were small British partnership owners who were based in Ceylon and Great Britain. They employed superintendents and assistants to manage the properties for them. With the expansion of tea plantations this structure changed considerably. Through the process of rationalization by an amalgamation of a number of gardens, the Managing Agency houses, incorporated in Ceylon and the UK, took over the management of several tea plantations, an experience similar to India tea industry. Agency houses arranged warehousing, shipping and selling of tea for multiple estates (Roy 2003).

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

Year	Hectares (thousands)
1875	0.4
1880	3.1
1885	34.1
1890	73.6
1900	128.4
1910	129
1920	135
1930	162.8
1940	184.6

Source: Forrest 1967: 288

## **8. Labour: Recruitment and Transportation**

Coffee production was very labour-intensive and seasonal in nature. The harvesting season lasted for four or five months. In the beginning local labourers worked in the clearing of forests but were not interested in working as coolies. Coffee planters turned to the South Indian hinterlands for the recruitment of labour. There are reports of about 10,000 south Indian labourers working in the coffee plantations during the 1820s and the 1840s. Most of the immigrants returned after the harvest season was over. Initially the planters sent their own men to recruit labour (Roy 2003; Jayaraman 1967; Heidemann 1992). But with growing demands for labour, the recruitment from

South India was increasingly carried out by *kanganies* or headmen. With the massive expansion of tea cultivation in Ceylon, the *kangani* system of recruitment became the dominant feature of the mobilization of immigrant labour from South India for Ceylon plantations. The immigrant labourers recruited for Ceylon plantations were predominantly Tamil agrarian communities from the districts of Trichinopoly, Salem, Tanjore, Madura, Ramnad, Padukkottai, South Arcot, North Arcot, Chingleput, Tinnevely and Coimbatore etc. (Jayaraman 1967: 333). The majority of the emigrants to Ceylonese plantations belonged to Parayan, Kallan, Vellala and Pallan castes of Tamilnad. Depressed castes constituted nearly 38 per cent of this labour force (Census Reports, Madras 1911, 1921 and 1931; Jayaraman 1967: 337).

Tables 4, 5 and 6 give us an idea of the number of immigrants recruited and taken to work in Ceylon plantations for the one hundred years between the 1830s and 1930s. The figure also indicates that unlike the earlier practice of seasonal immigration there was now a marked tendency for many to stay back and in due course create a permanent labour force in the plantations. Unlike coffee, tea was not a seasonal crop. The very nature of the production process adopted, both in Assam and Ceylon, created the necessity of a resident labour force on the plantation throughout the year. Tea plantations also employed considerable numbers of female and child labour. The proportion of women and children among the immigrants increased beginning in the later part of the nineteenth century (Jayaraman 1967). The immigrant labourers from Southern India were brought to Ceylon via three different routes: by Paumben Mannar and the North Road; by Tuticorin and Colombo; and from Madras ports of Ammapatam and Tondi to Colombo. In 1899 Colombo was allowed to be the only port of entrance because of the plague epidemic in India (Arbhuthnott Report 1904: 18)

**Table 4: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour (including men, women and children) into Ceylon, 1839-1870 (in thousands)**

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

Source: R. Jayaraman 1967: 322-24.

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

Year	Arrival	Departures	Surplus/Deficit
1898	136.9	105.7	+31.2
1899	68.4	81.6	-13.2
1900	208	112.9	+95
1901	120.6	118.3	+2.3

1902	87.8	93.9	-23.8
Total	621.7	512.4	109.3

Source: Arbuthnott 1904: 16.

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

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

Source: Jayaraman 1967: 330-31 and 340.

During the coffee cultivation period the recruited emigrants suffered an enormous amount of hardship during their travel to Ceylon. They covered long distances first to reach the Indian coast and then by sea. The sea travel was unregulated and mostly in overcrowded and unstable sailing vessels. After crossing the sea in small boats to north-west Ceylon, they walked the 220 km distance through the malaria and wild animal infested tropical jungles on the North Road without sufficient water or any rest facilities. The lack of drinking water and shelter combined with the demands of high altitudes took a considerable toll. Living conditions upon arrival on the plantations were insanitary, overcrowded and in an unfamiliar colder climate. Vulnerability was further compounded by the physical coercion to perform labour at the hands of the planters and many succumbed to death (Kondapi 1951; Roberts 1966; Heidemann 1992; Peeble 2001; Roy 2003). How many died is not certain in the absence of statistics on the immigrant labourers who were taken to work in Ceylon plantations. According to Kondapi 272,000 labourers arrived and 133,000 departed in 1849; of those remaining 50,000 stayed on and as many as 70,000 may have died on plantations. Even more died during the journey or succumbed to epidemic outbreaks. The labour force was replenished quickly because the 1877 famine pushed 167,000 Tamilians to Ceylon plantations of whom 88,000 returned and 87,000 stayed on (Kondapi 1951: 175). Mortality rates were high during the 1870s as the plantations were very poorly equipped with medical facilities. The planters blamed high death rates on the emaciated physical conditions of immigrants (worsened by their hard journeys) rather than on any inadequacies in medical care on the plantations. The Governor James Longden supported the planters' assertions. Plantations generated lucrative revenues for the colonial state in Ceylon (Peeble 1901: 94-7). High mortality among the Indian labourers on the coffee plantations drew both public and state attention. A series of articles appeared in the newspapers in October 1849 raising a debate on the accuracy of figures. The subject remained in the public domain for some time. The Government of Ceylon appointed an immigration commission in 1857 and efforts were initiated for transportation, shelters and basic medical care. Part of the cost was to be shared by the planters (Peeble 2001: 91-2). Large numbers of deaths were proving to be a rather expensive business.

One distinctive feature of the Ceylon labour immigration was that unlike the indenture system in Assam, the labour was not put under long term contract. It was considered free migration as the labourer had the legal right to quit his employer's service at a month's notice. The *kangani* system involved a short-term (usually 30-day) contract, which was generally verbal rather than written. The labourers were free to leave whenever they wished. Ceylon plantation labourers, however, had to pay the costs of their transportation and recruitment, binding them to their employers through other means. Food, clothing and transit of the recruits during the trip to Ceylon were paid by 'coastal advances' secured by *kanganies*. These expenses were charged by plantation owners as 'debt' against the *kanganies* and ultimately transferred to recruits. A state of indebtedness from the very beginning left labourers tied to their *kanganies* and the planters. Having indebted labourers in Ceylon suited the tea planters, as tea required permanent labour. To further enhance their hold over the labourers, the tea planters were generous with advances. Workers were eager to supplement their inadequate wages, which they usually received in arrears – often two months late – and thus allowed themselves to be entrapped in debt bondage (Kondapi 1951; Wesumperuma 1986; Peeble 2001).

Labour migration to the Ceylonese plantations was not subject to Indian government regulations as it had been in other overseas colonies. It was exempted from the operations of the Indian Emigration Ordinances. The planter-labour relations were mediated by the labour laws enacted by the Ceylon colonial government. These laws enabled the planters to maintain control over their labour force. One such law enacted was the Ceylon's Service Contracts Ordinance No. 5 of 1841, based on Master and Servant Law in England and reinforced in 1865 and 1916, which regulated contract for hire and service in the plantations. The breach of contract provision of this labour law was rigorously enforced thereby strengthening the hold of the planters over their indebted labour force. It was also aimed at discouraging 'bolting' (or running away, known as desertion in Assam) of labourers from the tea plantations and prevented workers from moving to other plantations for employment. These provisions reinforced debt bondage relationships of the immigrant labourers with the planters and also thwarted the emergence of a labour market in Ceylon plantations (Kondapi 1951; Peeble 1901:87; Wesumperuma 1986: 25-17).

## 9. *Kangani* System: Organization and Control of Labour on Plantations<sup>10</sup>

A vast majority of the South Indian labour for the Ceylonese plantations were recruited and transported under *kanganies* system. The system received its name because of the peculiarly important role of the *kanganies*, or head men, who were recruiters and also incorporated by the planters into plantation management as supervisors on the field. They were sent by an employer or association of plantation owners to bring back immigrants to work as coolies from among friends, neighbours and relatives in their home districts. From the 1850s on the 'coastal advances' that planters gave to *kanganies* for recruitment expenses professionalized the system. In due course *kanganies* became a very significant link between the European planters and Tamil labour force in Ceylon plantations. They occupied the position of intermediary between the superintendent of the

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<sup>10</sup> In most of the literature on the immigrant labour in Ceylon plantations the *kangani* is seen as a patriarch. This perception was created by the contemporary planters and the colonial bureaucracy and found uncritical acceptance in academic works. Patrick Peeble is less enthusiastic about this perception and forcefully argues against the description of the *kangani* as a patriarch. According to him 'these accounts of 'patriarchal kangani' are repeated in annual reports of the Ceylon Labour Commission and in other official literature. In due course this became part of the scholarly construction view of the kangani' (Peeble 2001: 34).

tea estates and the labour. They acquired virtual control over financial affairs of labourers, as wage payments were routed through them to the labourers – with only a fraction being paid to balance their debt accounts. On the plantations rice was also issued to workers through them. The *kanagies*, apart from getting fixed monthly salaries, also received ‘pence money’ – a commission of 3 to 4 rupee cents a day for every one of his labourers who came out to work. To earn this commission the *kanganies* used their control over the labourers to ensure that they came out and performed a full days’ task. Every morning the labourers were mustered, divided into gangs and sent out to work under the charge of a sub-*kangani* or sometimes the head *kangani*. In turn they worked under the supervision of a European assistant or by a native assistant, a Jaffna Tamil, Sinhalese, Malaya or Eurasian (Arbhuthnott Report 1904: 20).

During the transition from coffee to tea cultivation, the *kangani* system developed a structure of power hierarchies where the head *kangani* was on top and several sub-*kanganies* worked under his command, both for recruitment as well as in a supervisory role on the plantations (Kondapi 1951; Davis 1951; Heidemann 1992; Peebles 2001). Thus a relationship of dependency emerged on the plantations between labour and the *kangani*. The head *kangani* grew in wealth and stature. He also became an entrepreneur by setting up shops on the plantations. Through the network of these hierarchies, the head *kanganies* ruled over the labour force and sustained their control over it in the plantations. On a few occasions the labourers had a chance to resist this control by ‘bolting’. This was not an easy choice because it was fraught with the risk of harsh punishment and forced return to work upon being caught. The best chance for a ‘bolting’ was to find work on a different plantation with the help of a different kind of *kangani*, called a ‘crimp’. The term ‘crimping’ was similar to ‘enticing’ in Assam wherein the labourers were persuaded to quit without completing their contracts in order to take up work on another plantation. During the period of labour shortage, ‘crimping’ became a profitable business for some *kanganies*. The operations of the ‘crimping’ *kanganies*, illegal and successful, caused planters enough concern that they introduced the tundu system in an attempt to counter *kanganies’* power.

Under the tundu system the planters with excess labour transferred their workers voluntarily to other employers through the *kanganies*. The planters discharged labourers on the condition of receipt of their outstanding advances, called tundu, from his *kangani*, who would then take his gang to work for another planter. The perspective employer facing a shortage of labour ended up paying higher advances. As labourers were tied up in debt with the *kangani*, they had no choice but to move to the place he had arranged. They, however, did not benefit from the higher advance paid for their employment, but continued to be in debt. Arbuthnott, an official from Assam, after his visit to Ceylon plantations in 1904, reported that ‘there is no doubt that majority of the Tamil coolies are more or less in debt.’ He estimated that there was an outstanding advance amounting to six million rupees against 400,000 coolies, ‘while indebtedness of the coolies to *kanganies* and *kaddy*-keepers may be double this amount.’ Comparing Ceylon plantation with the situation in Assam he reported that ‘the position of *kangani* is often one of considerable power and influence. He controls the labour on the garden. The coolies are his men, and do not belong to the estate, as in Assam’ (Arbuthnott Report 1904: 22). The idea of the tundu system was to make the labour supply flexible and check ‘crimping’. Instead it was the *kangani* who benefited and strengthened his position further vis-à-vis both the planters and labour and made more profits. He could withdraw his gang within a month since they were not under any long term contract and bargain for a higher advance from another planter (Heidemann 1992; Kondapi 1951; Peebles 2003).

During the expansion of tea plantations, when the demand for labour increased rapidly in the face of increasing competition from Malayan rubber plantations, the *kangani's* position grew even stronger in relation to the planters. The planter had not exercised any direct control over *kanganies* until the end of nineteenth century. Planters' dependence on the *kanganies* for sufficient labour supply gave the latter power and influence. In a further attempt to control the growing clout of the *kanganies*, planters set up the Ceylon Labour Federation in 1898 to check the increase in advances to *kanganies*. In 1901 with state assistance a 'tin ticket system' was introduced to keep down the advances and facilitate the cheap supply of labour. For the first time the Ceylon government became a direct participant in the process of controlling and supervising the recruitment for plantations. Tin tickets consisted of metal coins issued to *kanganies* instead of cash advances for recruitment and travel expenses. They could use the tin tickets to pay the costs of transportation and overnight stays in camps for themselves and for labourers. The government collected these expenses from the planters who in turn recovered them from labourers later on. To further check the growing power of the *kangani* and improve labour supply, planters created the Ceylon Labour Commission (CLC) in 1904 with the help of the governments of Ceylon and Madras and took over recruitment.<sup>11</sup> CLC, a private company, though shy of admitting that they were in the recruitment business, established control over *kangani* recruitment for Ceylon plantations. CLC financed the *kanganies* through tin tickets for recruitment transportation expenses. It set up recruiting stations in the recruiting districts to screen the recruits brought by *kanganies* (Kondapi 1951; Heidemann 1992; Peeble 2003).<sup>12</sup> Both these schemes helped curtail the powers of the *kanganies*. The planters also initiated efforts to establish direct control over labourers and further reduce the mediating powers of *kanganies*. The government passed Ordinance no. 9 in 1909 requiring direct wage payment to the labourers instead of routing through the *kanganies*. The planters organized themselves into the Planters' Labour Federation in 1911 and through this body collectively decided to keep separate debt accounts of labourers and *kanganies*. The planters then set up direct control over labourers and their debt. But they still could not fully reduce the private debts or loan seeking practices with *kanganies* and plantation shops. In the second decade of the twentieth century a system of licensed *kanganies* was created by the newly established office of Controller of Indian Immigration Labour in 1922. By the time the 'assisted' migration was banned by the Government of India, the *kangani* system of recruitment for Ceylon still operated but with their power and influence curtailed to a significant extent (Heidemann 1992). The life and world of immigrant Tamil labour however remained what Arbuthnott had ironically remarked in 1904: "The coolie" it has been said 'is born lives and dies, in debt' (Arbuthnott Report 1904: 26).

Ceylon planters used the *kangani* system both for recruitment and as an instrument of labour control from the very inception of coffee in the 1840s. During the coffee period emigration had more of a cyclical nature for a large number of labourers. The transition to tea changed this pattern of immigration into a permanent one with compulsion to reside within the plantation complex. *Kanganies* acquired a larger than life status during this period and became almost indispensable figures as the intermediary between the labourers and employers. The most significant feature of the *kangani* system was the fact that, despite the labourers being 'free' and unencumbered by

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<sup>11</sup> The Ceylon government's support in recruitment at this juncture is to be seen in the context of growing tough competition for labour in South India. The booming rubber plantations in Malaya drew labour from Ceylon plantations with their ill-reputed low wages and substandard living conditions.

<sup>12</sup> Their counterpart in Assam recruitment was the Tea District Labour Supply Association set up by tea companies who at that time controlled and supervised *sirdari* recruitment.

contractual obligations, they were tied up with their employers for long periods through the instrument of debt bondage. The colonial state in Ceylon refrained from directly intervening in the matters of labour relations in the plantations but introduced regulatory devices of debt clearance that helped planters to reinforce long-term servitude.

## **10. Malaya**

Modern European capital opened up plantations in Malaya from the 1830s onwards starting with sugar followed by coffee in the 1880s and finally reaching its crescendo with the 'rubber rush' beginning in the early twentieth century, after which most of the sugar and coffee plantations were replaced by rubber. During the rubber boom, which was spurred by the US automobile industry, rubber acreage increased from 20,234 hectares (in 1900) to 219,744 hectares (in 1910). Between 1910 and 1911 alone 259,000 hectares were planted. The rubber rush brought large investments of millions of pounds into Malaya to open up thousands of acres of new and reclaimed lands, both by bigger companies and individual planters (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969; Heidemann 1922). These investments provided instant profits. In 1910 some British rubber companies paid up to 300 per cent dividends and 60 rubber companies offered dividends of 68 per cent in 1912. However, the rubber market was very volatile and subject to violent fluctuations. For example, rubber prices increased from 0.61 cents to M\$ 1.50 per 0.5 kg between 1905 and 1906, and then plummeted from 8s. 9d. per 0.5 kg in 1910 to 2s. 6d. in 1915 and to 1s. 10.5d. by 1920. However, in spite of these severe price fluctuations and a general price decline throughout the 1910s, prices remained attractive enough to put on a total of 315,300 hectares under rubber cultivation by 1920 (Sandhu 1969; Sundram 1993). These fluctuations in the international markets impacted the labour recruitment flow during these years.

The Malayan Government facilitated the set-up of plantations by offering lucrative deals in the form of low-interest loans, land grants on generous terms and taxes on new enterprises. The government also promoted research and experimentation and built necessary infrastructure like ports, roads and railways for the transport of imported immigrant labour and export of finished products (Sandhu 1969: 51). In 1887 the government of the Straits Settlements agreed to provide a steamship subsidy for transporting Indian labour immigrants. The Straits Settlements, Parak, Selangor and Johore agreed to contribute towards an annual subsidy of \$ 30,000 to reduce steamship fares between Negapatam, South India and Penang. Taking this into consideration, the European shipping firm Huttenbach, Liebert and Company agreed to run a fortnightly service for all bona fide agricultural labourers at a reduced fare (Rs 8 per head instead of Rs 15). Later, the remaining Malay States also joined the scheme, the annual subsidy was increased to \$ 250,000 and a new agreement was signed, this time with the British India Steamship Navigation Company, which extended the service to the other South Indian and Malay ports at even more frequent intervals (Sandhu 1869: 61; Sundram 1993: 285).

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

The trajectory of immigration of Indian labour to Malaya was different from other colonies in the British imperial system. While most of them, with the exception of Ceylon, used the indenture system, Malaya began with indenture recruitment and later also adopted the *kangani* system used in Ceylon. Thus, two systems co-existed until 1910 when indenture was prohibited. As in Assam and Ceylon, failure to attract the local population to work pushed the British planters to use imperial

connections to mobilize labour from South India. The port cities of Penang and Singapore already had a South Indian presence as a result of migration for the Indian shipping merchants. Therefore the existing networks initially served the transportation of new recruits to work in the plantation enterprises in colonized Malaya (Amrith 2010) beginning in the 1930s. It was, like in Assam and Ceylon, an employer sponsored emigration. The majority of recruited labourers were Tamils and Telugus who were brought under indenture contract to work for three years in sugar plantations. With the arrival of coffee and then rubber, Malayan planters switched to *kangani* recruitment starting from the 1880s onward (Kondapi 1951: 44). Most coffee planters had come from Ceylon where the *kangani* system was in operation. Table 7 shows the total of over 1.4 million immigrant labourers who were brought to Malaya between 1844 and 1938. The majority of them were *kangani* recruits. This was due to the fact that rubber plantations imported the largest numbers of labourers during the first two decades of the twentieth century under the *kangani* system.

**Table 7: Import of Indian Immigrant Labour (including dependents) into Malaya 1844-1938 (thousands)**

Year	Indentured	<i>Kangani</i>	Total
1844-1850	12.6	N	12.6
1851-1860	25.8	N	25,8
1861-1870	45.8	6	51.8
1871-1880	35.8	10	45.1
1881-1890	49.5	10	59.5
1891-1900	40.8	11.7	52.4
1901-1910	39.6	141.2	180.7
1911-1920	N	606.1	606.1
1921-1930	N	391.7	391.7
1931-1938	N	10	10
Total	249.9	1,186.7	1,436.5

Source: Sandhu 1969: 310-313.

In the Malayan case the colonial state was involved in the recruitment process from its very inception. It helped control recruitment mechanisms and immigrant labour in general through the use of regulatory instruments (Kaur 2006). A depot for recruiting labour was established at Nagapatnam by the Government of Strait Settlements. Emigration to Strait Settlements remained unregulated by any law for a long time. In 1870 an Indian colonial official, Hathaway, publically criticized and denounced the recruiting abuses in his district, Tanjore, which he characterized as ‘a regularly organized system of kidnapping’. He even issued a notice drawing attention to the illegality of emigration under the



existing law and further argued that female immigrants were 'destined to a life of prostitution' (Geoghengan 1874).<sup>13</sup> The Strait government contested Hathaway's denunciation. The colonial government in Malaya lobbied with the Colonial Office in the UK to persuade the British Indian government to allow emigration, which it did albeit with certain restrictions in 1872 (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969).

## 12. Indenture System in Malaya

Although Indian indentured labourers in Malaya were also employed by the government or private contractors for building infrastructure, sugar plantation owners were the predominant employers. The period of indentured servitude was initially set at five years, but reduced to three in 1876. The labour demand for sugar cultivation was high. Many Malayan sugar planters had been baptized in the Caribbean and Mauritius and preferred the indenture system for acquiring cheap labour that could be tied up for long term contracts. In a competitive global sugar market, cheap labour was imperative for them. Indenture labour appeared cheap enough. Sugar dominated Malayan plantations (Wellesley province) until the emergence of coffee in the 1880s. Until the 1870s much of the coolie trade appears to have been carried out by Indians themselves employing Indian-owned sailing ships. With colonial state intervention and the arrival of steam, however, European shipping companies took over the indentured traffic between India and Malaya. The planters procured their labour from South India through British companies based in Madras who worked with a network of local *maistry* recruiters. As in the case of Assam and Ceylon recruitment, the British district officials reported cases of deception, fraud and kidnapping by the speculators and recruiters. Malayan coolie trade, though illegal as per the Indian law under Act XIII of 1864, flourished and was profitable for *maistries* and ship owners. No convictions on this account were reported.

With the grant of formal permission in 1872, immigration to Malaya came to be controlled under regulatory devices of license recruiting, inspection of depots and registration of recruits etc. An Emigration Agent, appointed by the Strait Settlement government, was stationed at Negapatam, and a Protector of Emigrants was appointed by the Madras government for these purposes. The recruiting districts were Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Madras and occasionally Salem and Coimbatore. Recruiters limited the area for indentured recruitment to Negapatam, the main port, and its surroundings. The other port handling similar traffic was Madras. Upon arrival in Malaya indentured Indian labourers embarked at Penang and from there they were distributed to their employers mainly in Province Wellesley and Parak. These two areas absorbed 60 and 20 per cent respectively of all the legally indentured labourers with the remainder going mainly to Negri Sembilan. A notable feature of indentured Indian labour immigration to Malaya was the predominance of males between 15 and 45 years of age. Women and children constituted 20 and 10 per cent respectively. A very large proportion of them returned to their homes. In the long run, however, many became permanent resident labour on the plantations (Sandhu 1969: 80-82).

Indian immigrant labourers under the Malayan indenture regime shared several features of their life with their counterparts under Assam indenture regime. They faced long hours of hard work, harsh working and living conditions, low wage, insufficient food causing malnutrition, physical coercion by

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<sup>13</sup> Emigration of Indians to Straits Settlements was actually illegal at that time because it was prohibited by Act XIII of 1864 (Kondapi 1951).

planters (flogging was a common practice to discipline, tame and control labour), indebtedness, poor health and a high rate of mortality. Many of the plantations lacked proper medical facilities – if they were available at all. As a result, until the end of the indenture system in Malaya, 60 to 90 per cent of the labourers died within a year of their arrival on many plantations. Among the survivors many deserted to escape the miserable life under indenture despite the risk of severe penalties if caught. For example, there were 610 desertions out of a labour force of 1,026 indentured labourers on Gula estate, Perak, in 1894 alone. Conditions later improved, but even then the mortality remained high until the 1920s (Sandhu 1969). ‘Indenture in Malaya’, according to historian Karnail Singh Sandhu, ‘like its counterparts in the other colonies, was altogether an obnoxious device of recruitment and exploitation of cheap labour. It carried a criminal liability for any breach of contract – liable to imprisonment’ (Sandhu 1969: 85). The criminal liability under breach of contract was applicable in the Malayan plantations as it was in both Assam and Ceylon (Kondapi 1951). The sufferings of Indian indenture labour evoked a strong opposition to indentured emigration from the newly emerging nationalist intelligentsia. At the same time the Anti-Slavery Society in the UK mounted a campaign against the indentured labour system in the British Empire. As a result indenture recruitment for Malaya was banned in 1910 (Sandhu 1969: 85-86).

### **13. *Kangani* System in Malaya**

The combination of high mortality and desertion among Indian immigrant labourers in Malaya along with the expansion of rubber plantations created demand for more recruitment. Deaths and desertions were proving to be expensive. This led to the appointment of a Commission in 1890 to inquire into the labour situation in Malaya. The Commission found labour shortage a serious problem and blamed the monopoly of professional recruiters for the high costs. Lobbying with the Government of India helped to bring about a removal of all restrictions on emigration to Malaya in 1897. To ensure a cheap and plentiful labour supply, the coffee and rubber planters considered *kangani* or ‘free’ recruitment a better option. The entire process of *kangani* recruitment for Malaya was regulated, controlled and closely supervised by the planters and the state machinery. Together they established the Indian Immigration Committee and the Indian Immigration Fund in 1907 for this purpose. These bodies enjoyed quasi-legal status and were manned by the representatives of the government and planters. They supervised and controlled *kangani* recruiting until the end of the era of sponsored immigration to Malaya until the Indian ban in 1938 (Heidemann 1992).

A system of licensing of *kanganies* was introduced. The license forms were filled out at the plantations with details of name of the *kangani*, his commission, the permissible number of recruits and wage rates etc. From the plantations they proceeded to Penang or Port Swettenham, registered their license and embarked for India. On arrival in India their licenses were endorsed by Malayan Emigration Agent at two Malayan emigration depots at Avadi (Madras) and Negapatam. After completing these formalities the *kanganies* went to the financial agents of their employers – M/S Binny and Company or M/S Madura Company – and received an advance of Rs 20 for travel and recruiting expenses.<sup>14</sup> Most of the *kangani* recruits were from the Tamil speaking districts close to the Madras and Negapatam ports like North Arcot, Trichinapoly, Tanjore, Salem, Chingleput and South Arcot. Most of them were drawn from low social strata of untouchables or Adi-dravida castes (Sandhu 1969: 97). From there the recruits were taken by railway to the ports at Avadi or Negapatam where they boarded ships for Malaya after completing the formalities of checking licenses and

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<sup>14</sup> Euro 0.26 at the current exchange rate (Internet).

conducting medical examinations etc. He paid their fares from a lump sum advanced by the employer. The recruited Indian immigrant labourers entered Malaya at Penang, which was the only entry port until 1903. Port Sweettenham and Singapore became additional entry ports later on. The *kangani* recruits in Malaya, like in Ceylon, were on a short term contract, generally verbal, which could be dissolved at a month's notice on the part of either party. The passage costs were recovered from the labourers within two years from their wages. Though they could not be compelled to pay under the law, given the low wages it was extremely difficult to pay back and in the process got caught up in the cycle of indebtedness. Under the *kangani* system the debt-bondage condition of labourers persisted.

Like in Ceylon, the *kangani* in Malaya acquired a very significant position in the plantation hierarchy during the rapidly expanding rubber boom. During this period he acquired an aura of being indispensable to the planters as a procurer of labour. He brought labour from South India through the maze of agents, depots, ships, camps, inspectors, clerks etc. On the plantations the *kanganies* were also entrusted with supervisory work and occupied the interdependent roles of recruiter and foreman. The management rewarded the *kangani* with the authority over his gang, no labouring work to perform, and higher wages, all this in exchange for recruiting, controlling and replenishing labour. He was paid for recruits and also 'head-money' of 3 to 6 rupee cents per day for each resident labourer who showed up for work. Under the *kangani* system the chances of labour absconding were far lower as the *kangani* got head money for all working labourers. The *kangani* was able to exploit his position to his advantage, particularly to gain control over labourers to prevent them from 'deserting' or leaving the gang for another employer. And like in Ceylon under the *kangani* system also developed hierarchies on the Malayan plantations: head *kanganies* had subordinate *cinna* (minor) *kanganies*. Through the hierarchical structure labour was controlled and tied to particular employers for longer durations. The *cinna kangani* usually worked in the field, either as 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 to 12 rupee cents daily (Sandhu 1969; Jain 1970).

While the *kangani* augmented the labour supply very well for the Malayan plantation, complaints of deception and fraudulent recruitment methods began to surface and be reported by press. In addition the increasing clout of the *kangani* raised concerns but planters were content with the system nevertheless, as it produced a cheap and pliant labour supply. The practices of 'crimping' and shifting labour among plantations, like in Ceylon, reflected the growing influence of the *kanganies* with increasing demand for labour. The Marjoriebanks-Marakkayar Commission reported the cases of labour 'crimping' in 1917 among the planter fraternity. Though *kanganies* were licensed and operated under the control and supervision of the Indian Immigration Committee, the latter took notice of the abuses and considered action only in the 1920s. The volatile nature of international rubber prices was also affecting the recruitment process by this time. In bad years a very large number of labourers was repatriated. In addition, the government of India was exerting pressure through its newly appointed Agent in Malaya. But the planters were vehemently opposed to the abolition of the system and the Planters' Association exercised resistance, which allowed *Kangani* recruitment system to survive. But by the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, the *kangani* system was declining. A drastic reduction of wages following the decline of rubber prices during the depression brought the intervention of the government of India, and emigration to Malaya was banned in 1932. Loud protests from the Malayan government, however, led to its renewal in 1934. In

1936 Srinivasa Sastri toured Malaya to investigate labour conditions on behalf of the government of India. After his investigations he recommended the abolition of the *kangani* system. In the meantime deterioration in trade led to further cuts in wages and this time the government of India prohibited all assisted emigration from India in 1938 (Kondapi 1951; Sandhu 1969; Heidemman 1992; Sundram 1993).

The Malayan sugar planters adopted the indenture system of labour recruitment and employment of the Indian immigrant during the nineteenth century, which was abundant with the arrival of coffee and rubber. The indenture system was found to be expensive and the planters did not have direct control over the recruitment process. The Malayan indenture system also attracted condemnation of its harsher aspects of from the anti-slavery groups in the UK in the first decade of twentieth century. As a result it was being increasingly replaced by the *kangani* system among coffee and rubber planters even before the indenture system was eventually banned in 1910. Unlike in Ceylon the *kangani* system from its very inception in Malaya was closely supervised and controlled by the planters with the active participation of the colonial state. The Malay *kangani*, though still a very significant intermediary between employers and labourers, did not acquire the stature of his counterpart in Ceylon. Indian immigrant labour in Malaya was of both a permanent and transitory nature. The instability of the international market for rubber was often a major factor in the reduction as well as the repatriation of immigrant labour. However, long-term servitude through debt bondage was an important feature of Malayan plantations, just as it was in Ceylon. In both cases the immigrants were made to pay for their passage through a system of advances, which in turn became an instrument of debt bondage through the active collaboration of the *kanganies*.

## 14. Conclusion

One of the most significant features of all three colonial enterprises was that Indian agrarian communities were first demobilized from their respective home locations and then mobilized and transported to distant localities of the British Empire to perform labour in plantations set up by British capital. Upon arrival followed the immobilization of this labour force within the confines of the plantations, through penal contracts under the indenture system in Assam and Malaya and debt-bondage as well as penal sanctions under the *kangani* system in Malaya and Ceylon (Peeble 2003; Amrith 2010). The labour force was controlled, disciplined and tamed through physical coercion and extra-legal methods. British planters in Assam exercised their authority over labour force through the use of creole 'coolie-baat' (coolie talk), which became the language of command and of everyday communication directly with them. Ceylon and Malaya planters used the intermediary *kanganies* for this purpose as they did not know Tamil, the language of the labourers (Arubhutnott 1904).

Through the process of recruitment, transportation and employment, the colonial plantation regimes transformed the Indian agrarian communities of tribals, aboriginals and poor peasants into labouring 'coolies'. The process of transformation of communities of tribals and peasants from the regions of Chotanagpur, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and South India into plantation coolies began from the time they were recruited and pushed on their journey towards Assam, Ceylon and Malaya. They were herded together for a long and torturous journey to these distant lands by foot, rail, river and sea steamers, unprotected from elements of nature but always under constant surveillance. During the course of these journeys, individuals were subsumed into anonymous 'gangs' and 'muster rolls' to be confined into 'coolie lines' in the plantations for the rest of their lives. They were converted into, what James Duncan has described as 'abstract bodies... that are made docile, useful, disciplined,

rationalised, and controlled sexually' (Duncan 2002: 318). The colonial state lent legitimacy to the indentured servitude of immigrant labourers by enacting legislative measures. In the case of the *kangani* system the state put regularity devices in place to provide the planters control over the process of recruitment and transportation of the immigrants. The concept of Master and Servant Law in the UK was invoked both in Assam and Ceylon for a breach of contract to discourage labourers from 'absconding' and 'bolting' and from moving to other plantations for employment. These provisions reinforced the debt-bondage relationships between immigrant labourers and planters and also thwarted the emergence of a labour market in Ceylonese plantations. Contrary to the arguments of 'escape hatch' and 'rational choice' long-distance, sponsored emigration was not designed to provide economic opportunities for the labourer, but rather to secure for the planters a labour force whose wages were determined completely outside the labour market. Labour mobility in these cases was not market-driven and had to be sponsored by the employers. In the case of non-indentured immigration to Malaya and Ceylon, 'free' immigration was notional because, as has been shown, the labourers were entrapped into debt-bondage to their employers through the intermediary network of the *kanganies*. The mediating agency of *kanganies*, while outside the purview of governments, did not emerge independently of the network of the employers. The emigrants were not giving up a mere 5 years of their freedom for a better future as asserted in the revisionist arguments. A vast majority of them were immobilized after arrival at the plantations for a long and indeterminate period often leading to generational servitude.

In a long-term process of working and living on the British owned plantations, a large number of Tamil immigrants in Malaya and Ceylon were transformed into 'coolies' as they became permanent settlers in these two locations during the course of a century of immigration. However, in the early post-colonial period, the question of granting permanency to their residential status in the new nation states was a highly contested and political issue in both localities (Amrith 2011). Their 'ethnic distinctiveness' was considered a serious constraint to their 'assimilation' into the indigenous majority communities – a notion that persists today. In Sri Lanka they are seen as 'recent immigrants' or 'undomicile immigrants'. Hundreds of thousands have faced exclusion from citizenship (Peeble 2001; Amrith 2011). In Assam the tea plantation labouring communities continue to be seen as 'immigrants' and 'outsiders' nearly one and a half centuries after their migration. Their demand for their right to affirmative benefits under the Other Backward Caste (OBC) policy is contested and opposed by the 'indigenous' OBC communities and denied access despite the fact that their counterparts in their 'original' homes are beneficiaries of the same official scheme.

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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