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19-20th Centuries, A.D.

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Adapa Satyanarayana*

The main objective of this paper is to examine, in a long-term historical and comparative perspective, the course, nature and effects of migration of Telugu-Tamil speaking communities, “*Madrasis*”/”*Coranghees*”¹ from South India to Southeast Asian countries, with special reference to Burma and Malaysia. It deals with the process of historical formation of immigrant labour communities and classes in the unorganized and unregulated sectors of employment in the Southeast Asian countries. It also explores the process of constitution of an immigrant community and its interaction with and contribution to the host society. An attempt is made in this study to develop a comprehensive perspective on migration and settlement patterns and a migration paradigm that encompasses both free/voluntary and indentured/forced non-western intracontinental migration in the 19-20th centuries. It also addresses issues related to the types of migration, systems and methods of labour recruitment and control, motivations, perceptions and aspirations of the migrants, also the forces and factors that shaped the process of migration as well as the social origins/caste-community background of the migrants.

Historiographical Comments

In the historiography of Indian labour migration conflicting interpretations and divergent views are expressed by various scholars in recent years. One group of scholars “nationalist”, ‘anti-colonial’; ‘neo-marxist’ school² maintain that migration of

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¹ The Telugu speaking people in Burma were known as “*Coranghees*” to the local people as well as the press and government. Since the Andhra migrated in earlier times from a port called *Korangi* in the present day East Godavari District of Coastal Andhra Pradesh in South India, they were identified with that place. The Telugu speaking communities in Malay Peninsula were identified along with the Tamil speakers as *Madrasis*. Local population and the government tended to treat the entire south Indian people alike. The specificity of Telugu language and culture was subsumed under Tamil identity.

² See P.E. Baak, “About Enslaved Ex-Slaves, Uncaptured Contract Coolies and Unfreed Freedmen” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.33, No.1, 1999, p.124. H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, London, 1974, R.P. Behal and P. Mohapatra, “Teas and Money Versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Teas Plantations, 1840-1908” in *Journal of Peasant Studies* (hereafter JPS) vol.19, No. 3/4, 1992. ; R.D. Gupta, “Plantation Labour in Colonial India” JPS ; R.D. Gupta, Structure of Labour Market in Colonial India” in *Economic and Political weekly*, (hereafter EPW) vol . XVI, No. 44-46, 1981; R.D. Gupta, “From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of Labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850’s-194” in *EPW*, vol XXI, no. 4, 1986. G. Omvdt, “Migration in Colonial India: The Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State” in *JPS*, vol. 7, no.2. 1980, p. 185-212; J. Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Social Order in Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1997.

Indian labour abroad under indenture system as a “new system of slavery” and the image of the migrant as a victim of various forms of greed, deception and colonial coercion/manipulation. It has been said that unfreedom was the distinguishing character of indenture, whereby the worker was unable to withdraw/discontinue his or her labour power to bargain/negotiate over the terms of contract for better wages and living conditions. Moreover, the scholars of “coercion point of view” stress the ignorance of the workers and argue that they were misled and misinformed by recruiters regarding the nature of plantation work and were even made captives and transported to foreign countries against their free will. Hence, in such cases it is not possible to define migration as a “free choice”. The workers were often drawn into debt trap/bondage by the labour recruiters and the contractual relations between the employers and the employees were not really voluntary. It has also been emphasized that the employers used extra-economic and penal methods to control labour and the workers were forced to live in a state of virtual bondage. Whereas the “modernization”, imperialist”, “colonialist” and “revisionist” school suggests that “migration was made economically beneficial”. To quote Emmer, “a leading revisionist”, “new research concerning the government supervised, long distance migration movements of indentured Indians has clearly revealed that the considerable improvements achieved over time in living and working conditions made this migration stream a small but important escape hatch for migrant labourers from India”³. Further, he also argues “that indentured emigration from India to overseas colonies was the result of rational and deliberate choice on the part of migrants, prompted by hopes of bettering their future”⁴. In my opinion both these approaches tended to view the emigrant either as an object of sympathy or appreciation, and neglected to take into account the subjective considerations involved in the migration process and its complex patterns. These scholars either put emphasis on “subsistence-oriented” push factors or “betterment-oriented” pull factors as the most important determinant of emigration. The proponents of “new slavery” theory, for instance, have ignored the fact that over a period of time migrant labourers were increasingly familiarized with the conditions abroad through relatives, friends, neighbours etc. and that the choice of a destination by a prospective migrant also depended on migration patterns and strategies comprising networks of kith, kin and family as well as fellow-villagers and friends, who often provided vital information and paid for passages. For example, new comers arriving in Burma were bound for relatives and/or friends. Although the labourers were moving across the Bay of Bengal they did not leave their net-works. These ties channeled migrants into specific segments of the host societies’ labour market and into specific areas. This trend also kept migrants within communities of fellow-villagers and castemen. The coastal Andhra women in domestic service and prostitution invited other women from their villages and neighbouring areas to come and offered to help find jobs in Burma. The port-towns like Cocanada had also played a significant role in this type of migration. Likewise, the *dalit* and lower caste men increasingly brought others to work and earn money. The revisionist scholars like Emmer tended to highlight the pull factors and equate colonial migration with that of European migration to America and thus he neglected to account for the sufferings and sacrifices of the earlier generation of emigrants to plantations.

³ P. C . Emmer, “Was Migration Beneficial?” in J. Lucassen and Lucassen (Ed), Migration, Migration History, History, Berne, 1997, p. 123

⁴ Ibid.

“The central flaw of both theories is their failure to analyse crucial changes in recruiting strategies which helped to maintain the dynamism of overseas labour mobilization”⁵.

Recent researches have also clearly shown that the debates about whether or not the emigrants were free or unfree ignored the complex and multi-dimensional historical reality and reduced the whole migration process into its most simple form of either this or that⁶. What has been forgotten is the fact that migration of labour under colonial conditions was varied and mixed. No unilinear pattern of transition from unfree to free labour could be discerned in the case of south Indian migrations. As we shall show later, south Indian labourers experienced both unfree and free migration situations during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Different forms of migration coexisted and the south Indian coolies were both free and unfree at the same time, resulting from and depending on the changing strategies of employers, government and labourers over time. For instance, in the case of emigration to Malaysia, though indenture system was adopted between 1860-1910, free labour recruitment through middlemen ‘*Kangany*’ also took place in the same period and, in fact, it became quite popular. Similarly, migration to Burma was free, private and unassisted i.e. without any government regulations, supervision or control, yet elements of debt-bondage and unvoluntarism were very much present. It can also be said that free and unfree types of migration were also socially conditioned. In the case of south India, the upper caste merchants and professionals migrated freely and voluntarily; by and large these people were more influenced by the pull factors, for they were enterprising and self-seeking individuals who took advantage of opportunities abroad to improve their career prospects and business profits. But the vast majority of *dalit* and lower *sudra* castes were subjected to debt-bondage and hence their migration was forced and involuntary, i.e., the migrant labourers were more pushed than pulled. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the socio-historical context of migration process and patterns and situate the freedom/unfreedom of labourers and the role of push and pull factors in a proper historical perspective. In this paper it will be argued that it is impossible to make any fundamental and clear-cut distinction between free and unfree migration and as Lucassen has argued elsewhere, any definition of migration would be incomplete if it does not encompass both free and unfree types⁷. In other words, a *priori* distinction between free and unfree labour migration is difficult to substantiate. Thus in this paper migration is conceptualized as unity and continuous process, although the motives and aspirations of individual migrants and social groups differed substantially. In this study, I want to suggest that within the context of push and pull factors the prospective migrants had a reasonable choice and decision-making power over their life-conditions, though such a choice was subjected to severe socio-economic constraints. I also want to emphasise that particularly for the lower social groups and castes migration meant opportunity, equality and emancipation. Thus the history of south Indian labour migration is also the history of social reform in the modern period.

This paper is divided into four sections. The specific historical context of labour migration from south India in the nineteenth century, as well as patterns, various forms

⁵ M. Carter, “Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius” in *JPS* vol. 19, no.3/4, p. 122

⁶ Baak, *About Enslaved...* p. 151-3; T. Brass and M. Linden (Ed), *Free and Unfree Labour*, Berne, 1997, p.11-41; S. Amin and M. Linden (Ed), *Peripheral Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianisation*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 1-7

⁷ Lucassen, *Migration* p. 12-19

and nature of migration is discussed in section one. The second section deals with the systems of labour recruitment and labour control. The third section contains details about wages and working/living conditions of workers in Malaysia and Burma during the period under study. An account of the social background of the migrants and effects of migration is provided in the last section.

The Context, Pattern and Nature of Migration:

Historically, relations between the Andhra coast and lower Burma go back to a few centuries before the birth of Christ. For the Telugus, Burma was known as the *suvarna bhumi* - the golden land of plenty. The inhabitants of lower Burma were called as Talaings. It has been said that the local rulers of Ancient Andhra country-Kalinga conquered the natives and established their authority and trading relations. Phayre wrote, "From tradition and such scanty historical notices as have survived, we are led to look to the east coast of India especially to the country on the lower courses of the Kistna and Godavari, with the adjoining districts, in other words ancient Kalinga and Talingana, as the countries which at a very remote period, traded with and colonized the coast of Pegu. The people of Pegu are known to the Burmese, to the Indians thence to Europeans by the name of Talaing"⁸. The Indian influence began to penetrate the Malay region very early in time. "An Indian Era of Malay history" existed in Malaya until about the beginning of sixteenth century⁹. Most of the south Indians who migrated to Malay Peninsula during the early years went in connection with trade and commercial activities. The early migrants were basically drawn from the traditional trading communities of south India like the Chettis and Komatis; whereas those south Indians who emigrated to Malaya during the nineteenth century when the plantation economy emerged were chiefly "illiterate, cheap docile" labourers. A Telugu folk-song reads thus:¹⁰

It was in the early nineteenth century; we (Telugus) arrived in Malaya
Those were the days of British rule over Malay Peninsula
The days of flourishing Rubber and Coconut plantations
The Telugus from Andhra country were brought by the British to work in the plantation
We cut the forests, cleared the land for plantations
We laboured hard to make the country (Malaya) green and prosperous
(My own translation)

The growth of transport and communications facilities between Burma and Malaysia and the east-coast of India as well as the increasing demand for manual labour in the agrarian/plantation and urban economies of these countries had brought successive waves of south Indian immigrants, particularly since the late nineteenth century. Although the Coromandal coast had regular trade and commercial contacts with lower Burma and the Malay peninsula during the pre-colonial period, it was only after the 1870's when the regular fortnightly/weekly steamer services were introduced that the number of people who emigrated from south India witnessed a sharp rise. The principal role of the south Indians in the plantation economy had been that of labourers. In other words, south Indians and estate economy had been almost synonymous in

⁸ History of Burma, London, 1883.

⁹ K. S. Sandhu, "Indians in Malaya: Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957", Cambridge, 1969

¹⁰ B. Nukaiah and V.K. Sarma (Ed), Proceedings Volume of the Second World Telugu Mahasabha, (Telugu), Hyderabad, 1981, p.76-77.

Malaysia between 1870's and 1940's' The growth and distribution of the south Indian population in Malaysia was closely related to the growth of sugar, rubber, and oil palm plantations. For instance, the acreage under rubber had increased from about only 350 acres in 1877 to about 20,000 in 1914 and 43,000 acres in 1910 and by 1940 it reached over two million acres, making Malaysia by far the world's largest producer of natural "Raja Rubber". In 1918, exports of rubber from Malaya amounted to about 50 per cent of the world's total rubber consumption¹¹. Thus demand for the south Indian labour developed mainly in the context of the extensive growth of export-oriented crops and the exploitation of colonies as sources of supply of raw materials for production in the metropolitan countries of the West. In fact, during the late nineteenth century considerable quantities of European capital began to flow into the commercial and industrial sectors of Malaysia and Burma. Among the plantation crops, rubber - "the white gold" created massive demand exclusively for unskilled/manual labour. The "rubber rush" of the early decades of the twentieth century also allured and tempted the capitalists with fabulous profits and fortunes. Therefore, by 1913 British capital investments in Malaysia amounted to 40 million, by 1923 it rose more than 100 million¹². In addition to rubber, other plantation crops like sugar, coffee, tea, oil palm etc were also equally demanding with regard to labour requirements, while the construction of railways, roads and bridges needed thousands of labourers each year. Since the indigenous Malays did not come forward to work as labourers in the plantations for fixed hours of daily work, the planters looked towards south Indian labourers, particularly the untouchable and low caste Madrasis/Adi-Dravidas; who were considered to be the "ideal labouring material for the furtherance of capitalist endeavors in Malay". Most of the planters with their experience of south Indian labour in Ceylon considered them as the most suitable and satisfactory type especially for the simple, repetitive and routine works and hence they became the mainstays of plantations. It was said the south Indian labourer was "malleable, worked well under supervision and was easily manageable... he was the most amenable to the comparatively lowly paid and rather regimented life of estates... He had fewer qualms or taboos, than his Northern fellows, and cost less in feeding and maintenance"¹³. Similarly, a number of government officials and public works contractors also preferred the Madrasis who were the "best metal breakers" and specially adapted for road making. Hence, they found employment on all such projects as road and railway construction.

If plantation economy of Malaya was the main attraction for south Indian Tamil speaking labourers, the non-plantation sectors of Burma increasingly drew the largest number of Telugu speaking untouchable and lower sudra peasant castes. A longstanding British-India steamer circuit, Cocanada-Vizagapatam-Gopalpur-Rangoon had contributed greatly to familiarizing the people of coastal Andhra with the idea of Burma and thus stimulated an emigration flow. Its industry and commerce were so diversified at the turn of the century that the demand for labour had been steadily increasing. As the indigenous population became unable to meet the growing demand, employers drew their supplies mostly from south India/Andhra on account of its close proximity and advantageous terms. It has been pointed out by a prominent labour leader of Burma that: "under British control the industrial expansion of the Province has been so rapid that it has already attained prominence as a center of great industrial and

¹¹ P. Ramaswamy, "Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malay", in JPS, Vol.19, No.3/4, p.88-89.

¹² Sandhu, Indians...p.50.

¹³ Sandhu, Indian, p.56.

commercial activity... during the period from 1900 to 1930 the number of factories had increased by 653 *per cent*, while the number of persons employed had gone up by 431 per cent of children...¹⁴”. Rice fields, paddy processing industries, mineral oil and refineries, saw mills and timber yards, ports and harbours, railways etc., were the main sources of employment. It was largely the south Indian labour who transported the harvests, manned the industry, dealt with transport and cleared the streets and built the sewage system in the cities of Burma. As the Census Commissioner of Madras (1931) put it, “He (the south Indian labourer in Burma) tills the paddy fields... mans the railways... handles the cargoes at Rangoon. He functions largely in the domestic service, clerical employment claims him and there is nothing to which he cannot put his hand with acceptance...”¹⁵. He was indeed “the toiler and the drudge” and was found in all those occupations labeled “disagreeable and disrespectful” and forsaken by the local Burmans’ the immigrant labourers did the work uncomplainingly. As Narayana Rao remarked: “Burma could not have built her splendid Railway systems, cleared her inaccessible forest domains and transformed them into smiling fields, operated her factories amidst fumes and high temperature for a miserable poor wage but for these patient, long suffering, obedient, faithful and grateful but much maligned sons of India”¹⁶. Whereas in Malaysia the Madrasi was, as it were, a specialist, in Burma, he fulfilled a wide variety of functions. The vast majority of the Telugu labourers, around 90percent were engaged in unskilled jobs. In fact, they constituted the single largest group (more than 50 percent) unskilled labourers in Burma in the 1920’s and 1930’s. However, they worked mainly in the rice and saw mills, oil wells and refineries, shipping companies, and harvesting. In some fields and sectors they were virtually the dominant group, to name a few: rickshaw (*Lanachas*) pulling, sweeping and scavenging, rice mills, harbour and port labour. The Rangoon Gazette wrote thus: “In Rangoon alone about 80,000 Indian labourers find employment in various industries. Of this number about 55,000 are Telugus... The sweepers and *mehters* are Telugus. These classes are absolutely necessary as under no conditions would the Burmese agree to carry out the work of the *dhobis*, sweepers and *mehters*”¹⁷.

A definite regional and linguistic pattern could be observed in the emigration of south Indian labourers to southeast Asian countries in the 19-20th centuries. Migration to Burma was basically a Telugu/*circars* phenomenon. The mainstream of emigration to Burma was from the northern coastal districts of Ganjam, Vizagapatam, Godavari and Kistna: together they contributed 70 percent of labour migrants from the Madras Presidency in 1921, the rest came from the extreme south viz., the Tamil districts. Available data also show that the immigrants from the Telugu districts were by far the largest group among unskilled labourers of Rangoon which was primarily a city of immigrants. The share of Indian population in Rangoon increased from 26.5 in 1872 to 51 percent in 1901¹⁸. Also, in Rangoon 75 percent of unskilled and 70 percent of skilled labour was Indian. Burma was certainly an important factor/feature in the ordinary life of the labouring classes of northern coastal districts. It was noted that among all the Telugu districts, Ganjam sent the largest number of labourers in any given year and thus provided more immigrants in Burma than any other Indian district, except

¹⁴ A. Narayan Rao, Indian Labour in Burma, Rangoon, 1933, p.1-17.

¹⁵ Madras Census Report, 1931, Vol.XII, pt.I. p.82.

¹⁶ Narayan Rao, Indian, p.16.

¹⁷ Narayan Rao, Indian, p.61-2.

¹⁸ Adas, The Burma Delta, Economic Development and Social Change in an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852 & 1941, Wisconsin, 1974.

Chittagang in 1921. The Burma Census figures of 1921 on migration indicate that approximately 5 percent of the population of Ganjam, 3 percent each for Vizagapatam and Godavari districts were in Burma¹⁹. The only district of coastal Andhra in which the population decreased was Ganjam, where it had fallen by nearly 2 percent during the decade 1911-21, mainly due to emigration. Burmese developments had a profound influence on the coastal Andhra region and the presence of about three *lakh* Madras in Burma in the 1930's was an indication of the importance of migration movements. In fact, the largest number of Telugu-speaking communities outside the coastal Andhra districts lived in Burma during the pre-1947 period. According to the Burma Census Report of 1931, the total Indian population was 5.22 *lakhs*, of whom Telugu were 1.32 *lakhs* or about 25 percent²⁰. Despite the unfavourable conditions in the 1930's, the lack of employment due to depression and anti-Indian troubles and riots, the Madras-born enumerated in Burma was 25,000 more numerous than in 1921, which indicated the hold that it had upon Madras labour. The difference between Burmese born found in Madras and Madras-born in Burma in 1931 was 2,94,000 in favour of the latter as against 2,71,000 in 1921: the percentage of increase in this difference was 8.5²¹.

Whereas emigration to Malaysia was essentially a Tamil phenomenon, though not so pronounced as in the case of Ceylon, for few Telugu districts like Ganjam, Vizagapatam, Godavari, Chittoor etc., also contributed their labourers regularly. Hence, the Telugus constituted the second-largest ethnic group among the Indian immigrants in Malaya in the 1920's. For instance, in 1921 they accounted for 8.5 percent of Indian population and 9 percent of the total south Indians living in Malay Peninsula²². In Malaysia, the Telugu coolies were conspicuous by their overwhelming presence in the rubber plantations of West Coast, viz., the lower Perak region. However, the great majority i.e. nearly 90 percent in Malaysia was from the southern districts of Madras province. The Madras-born persons in Malaya were 3.66 *lakh* in 1921, but by 1931 it increased to 5.83 *lakhs*. Thus, the Census Commissioner remarked: "Madras found abroad in Census time were more numerous in 1931 than in 1921"²³. Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Salem, south and north Arcots districts made up the bulk of emigration to Malaysia. Available census figures show that the number of persons born or associated with Trichinopoly, who at Census time were removed from their district was 19 percent of the 1921 district population, for Pudukkottai it was 13 percent, and 7 percent each for Tanjore, Ramnad and Tinnevely. Although, if looked at in terms of the whole of Madras Presidency the volume of migration might look insignificant, but for the specific districts and groups of people it was indeed very important. The three coastal Andhra and the Kaveri valley/delta districts in the south accounted for the greater incidences of migration. Similarly, for the lower castes viz., Adi-Dravidas and Adi-Andhras migration abroad was central to their economy and life-conditions. In fact, from an economic point of view the most important streams of emigration from Madras province were those to Ceylon, Burma and Malaya, which acted as a "safety valve". It must also be said that south Indian migration to southeast Asia was not a new phenomenon, for it goes back to centuries; yet its labour had heavily contributed to industrial prosperity of Malaysia and Burma particularly since the late nineteenth century.

¹⁹ Madras Census Report, 1921, Vol.I, p. 20.

²⁰ N.R. Chakravarty, The Indian Minority in Burma, Oxford, 1971, p. 24.

²¹ Madras Census, 1931, p. 80.

²² Sandhu, Indian, p. 56.

²³ Madras Census, 1931, p.32.

Nevertheless, the most important and noticeable feature of south Indian labour migrations to Malaysia and Burma were steady, seasonal and cyclical (see tables 1-2).

Table-I
EMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION TO BURMA 1888-1929

Year	No. of Persons Arrived in Burma	No. of Persons Departed From Burma
1888	38,018	N.A.
1889	34,048	N.A.
1890	33,048	N.A.
1891	43,717	N.A.
1892	45,881	N.A.
1894	49,281	42,672
1895	38,978	35,888
1896	61,020	35,517
1897	71,190	36,554
1898	71,113	44,427
1899	78,452	47,336
1900	99,038	50,745
1901	84,329	54,488
1903	100,646	81,266
1904	100,622	83,721
1905	124,365	96,216
1906	152,207	135,354
1907	105,614	93,792
1908	119,742	89,516
1909	131,587	112,827
1910	133,495	125,984
1911	144,503	109,328
1912	116,610	112,061
1913	130,725	N.A.
1914	79,757	105,382
1921	117,449	N.A.
1922	117,578	112,658
1923	158,438	N.A.
1924	156,436	N.A.
1925	145,194	N.A.
1927	157,807	N.A.
1928	151,354	N.A.
1929	149,799	N.A.

Migration to and from Burma mostly took place only at certain periods, i.e. between the months of October and December labourers went to work and returned during the months of March and May. This was partly due to monsoon conditions and partly due to the demand for seasonal labour in agriculture and rice mill industry. Of course, the migration of labourers was mostly controlled by the vicissitudes of season and agricultural conditions in the places of origin than on the conditions in Burma. During

favourable seasons people generally did not migrate and the Telugu labour migration to Burma mostly took place during the harvest time. While migration to Malaysia from the southern districts was predominantly a hot weather feature; it was greatest in April-June and least in October-March months of the year (see Table-II below).

A great majority i.e. nearly 80 percent did not go to these countries with a view to settle down but only for a temporary stay of two-three years; though many returned for subsequent spells on the plantations, rice fields and mills. The labour emigrants consisted mostly of single adult males aged between 15-40, who went for comparatively shorter periods, intended to return as soon as possible with money saved. Hence, they were the “birds of passage”. This male-centered migration caused tremendous disproportion of sex ratios. Telugu Males easily out-numbered the women in the proportion of four/five to one; for instance the number of females for every 1000 males in Burma during the period 1921-31 was 208, compared to 430 among Tamils²⁴. Thus the proportion of females was very low among the communities from coastal Andhra districts. In fact, Ganjam district, which had sent the largest number of labourers to Burma also, contributed the least number of females in 1921; 1,366 females to 21,907 males. Surprisingly, Telugu migration to Malaysia was more family-oriented; 717 women for every 1000 males, compared to 515 among the Tamil labour communities in 1931²⁵. This sort of enforced system of celibacy quite often resulted in the widespread practice of keeping mistresses and concubines. For Malaya, “a certain number were regularly received for prostitution in the new labour settlements”. A colonial official remarked that “no Tamil women can go to the federated Malay states and return with a rag of reputation left”²⁶. The fact that Telugu women go in large numbers for the purpose of prostitution is confirmed by various accounts provided in the official documents, contemporary writings and local vernacular press. The Manual of Madras Administration mentioned: “Women go in numbers for the purpose of prostitution, and stay some years. A temple was recently built at Coringa in the Godavary district at a cost of Rupees 10,000 by a woman of this class who had saved money and returned”²⁷.

²⁴ Census, 1931, p. 79.

²⁵ Census, 1931, p. 82.

²⁶ G.O.143 (Public) 16th Feb. 1907 and G.O. (Public) 568, 16 July, 1907.

²⁷ Manual of Madras, p.

Table-II
EMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION TO MALAYA, 1881-1941

Year	No. of Persons Arrived in Malaya	No. of persons Departed from Malaya
1888	22,299	N.A
1889	19,800	N.A
1894	15,016	14,012
1895	16,162	14,843
1896	20,474	13,163
1897	21,141	17,143
1898	15,539	14,880
1899	20,266	13,876
1900	39,585	14,263
1901	27,950	16,040
1903	22,960	N.A
1904	28,249	21,173
1905	40,900	21,173
1906	52,306	N.A
1907	62,537	32,503
1908	58,773	30,571
1909	48,719	30,745
1910	85,015	N.A
1911	109,189	51,268
1912	107,842	60,992
1913	117,783	N.A
1914	49,028	59,038
1920	95,720	55,481
1921	45,627	61,551
1922	59,169	34,475
1923	57,684	45,733
1924	62,001	37,326
1925	88,678	52,286
1926	159,061	N.A
1927	145,181	N.A
1928	52,599	N.A
1929	101,517	N.A
1930	55,360	N.A
1931	19	N.A
1932	02	N.A
1933	01	N.A
1934	28,639	N.A
1935	13,267	N.A

N.A.= Not Available

(Source. Compiled from the Emigration and Immigration Reports of Madras Presidency)

It was also reported in the Telugu press that nearly 50 per cent of the female labourers worked as prostitutes and the rest as domestic servants and other menial

workers. Most of them were drawn from the professional caste of Devadasis, known as *kalavantulu/Bhogam* and from other lower sudra and untouchable castes. “Many of the low-caste Hindu women found in Burma, particularly those from Telugu-speaking areas, were prostitutes who thrived in the slums of Rangoon, where large numbers of single, young males were crowded into squalid tenements with little divert them after long hours of hard labour”²⁸. A contemporary observer remarked: “The moral conditions of the labourers are no less pitiable than the civil conditions. The proportion of women to men is so small that it is far less than that which shocked me so much in Fiji. For here in Burma, the proportion of women, which go over on the ships, is less than one to five. Gangs of dock labourers employ a single woman to cook their food for them, and use the same women for the purpose of prostitution. These things are told to me openly, shamelessly; they are published in pamphlets and newspapers and not contradicted. They are not contradicted, because they are true”²⁹.

Nevertheless, the temporary, seasonal and long-distance migration of working adults from south India was caused due to many factors. No single factor could be said to be predominant such as push or pull. They were many and varied; growing pressure on land, poverty, unemployment, adverse seasonal conditions, natural calamities, proximity of prominent trading routes and ports undoubtedly stimulated emigration. One could also see the effects of certain sudden events like a famine, flood and cyclone. These occurrences at the local/district level would also enhance the number of persons migrating from affected areas. Hence, a definite correlation existed between natural calamities and increased migration in certain years. Available data suggest the significant impact of crop failures, bad seasons, famines etc, on migration flows over a period of time. The Madras Census Report of 1921 mentioned about a prominent Telugu district which contributed regular flow to Burma thus: “the only district in which the population has decreased in Ganjam where it had fallen by nearly 2 percent during the decade 1911-21. This decrease is due to emigration on account of the famine which visited the district in 1918-19”³⁰. The Annual Emigration and Immigration Reports of the Madras Government also mentioned about the role of local conditions and the external demand in the emigration of labour communities abroad³¹. Here are some evidences; “The large increase from Tanjore district is ascribed to a greater demand for labour in Burma” (Report for 1898); “The increase is chiefly contributed by the Ganjam and Vizagapatnam districts, which is due to the great demand for labour in Rangoon and to the liberal wages received there by the coolies and also partly due to the unfavourable character of the season in the district”. (Report for 1899); “The increase in the number of passengers to the Straits settlements is attributed to larger demand and better wages for coolie labour in the rubber plantations “. (Report for 1913) “The special feature of the year was the failure of the north-east monsoon in the chief recruiting districts which resulted in a large increase of emigration in the cold weather, usually the slack season owing to harvest time”. (1923). Recent studies have also indicated that the “Pressure to migrate, in the economic sense, has always been great enough to provide a stream of immigrants”. Adas, in his study of Burma remarked: “Although the movement of Indians between the subcontinent and Burma was influenced by a combination of “push” and “pull” factors, specific events in India were largely responsible for fluctuations in the volume of net migration. As early as 1865-66

²⁸ Adas, The Burma, p.89-90

²⁹ Indian Review, Nov. 1924, p.708.

³⁰ Census Report, 1921, p. 20.

³¹ Emigration Reports for 1898, 1899, 1913 and 1923.

and again in 1899, large-scale emigration from Vizagapatnam to Lower Burma averted the spread of famine from neighbouring areas into that district...In 1896-97 the number of emigrants from Ganjam to Burma doubled and those from Vizagapatnam tripled as a result of widespread famine in these districts”.³²

Recruitment of Labour: *Maistry* and *Kangany* systems:

Labour recruitment for the growing number of mills, factories and plantations in the southeast Asian countries was mainly drawn from the rural areas of south Indian coastal districts³³. It was the recruiters of labour who performed the most important and crucial function of linking rural society of India with the plantation and urban economies of Malaysia and Burma. Rice and sawmills, petroleum refineries, transport etc. were some of the principal industries in Burma, which employed Telugu and Tamil labourers. The planters in Malaysia and the mill/factory owners in Burma rarely engaged the labour they needed directly. They delegated the task of labour recruitment to a special class of people called the *maistry* in the Telugu districts and the *Kangany* in the Tamil area. The employers often entered into a contract with such labour recruiters for the adequate and regular supply of labour to mills and plantations. For their services, the employers paid them a certain premium of rupees 5 to 10 for each person supplied/recruited. Since these middlemen belonged to the rank and file of the grass roots (local) society, they were empowered to engage, discipline, control as well as to providing elementary knowledge about the tasks to be performed in the factories and plantations. The planters and other employers engaged the services of the recruiters essentially to overcome the shortages of labour supply. These middlemen jobbers frequently visited the rural areas and lured the economically and socially vulnerable villagers by narrating/painting plantation life in bright colours and offered them travel and other expenses as an additional inducement. By their personal approach and standing in the local society they could and did influence the decisions of the prospective emigrants. Since the factory and plantation owners delegated the distribution of much sought after and praised employment opportunities to *maistries* they could build up a position of considerable strength. Consequently the *maistry* and his men (agents) maintained a relationship of mutual but unequal interdependence that could be described as a form of patronage and exploitation. The employment relationship was basically between the *maistry/Kangany* and his labourer. The *maistry* or contract system of recruitment of Telugu labour for Burma was in essentials comparable to other systems like Kangani, Sirdari, Jobber etc. The system of advances, the initial indebtedness of the labourers, the subordination of labour to the middlemen, innumerable illegal deduction from the wages of workers, under employment, compulsory contribution of free labour were the main features of the *maistry* recruitment. The *maistry* system was also graded and hierarchical. Kondapi wrote:

“The Labour Contractor, the Head *maistry*, the Charge *maistry* and the Gang *maistry* constituted the hierarchy of middlemen employers. A man in charge of a small gang of between 10 and 20 labourers was a gang *maistry* and a *maistry* having under his control several such gangs was a charge *maistry*. A *maistry* in charge of the entire labour organization of a particular firm or company was the Head *maistry*, while the Labour Contractor was a superior individual who was

³² Adas, *The Burma*, p.95.

³³ Narayan Rao, *Contract Labour in Burma*, Rangoon, 1933, p.14-23, and Kondepi, *Indians Overseas*, 1839-1949, Calcutta, 1951, p.41-5 and p.46-51.

under a contract to supply and maintain the necessary labour force as stipulated in the contract. Hence the Labour Contractor was usually a man of financial standing and influence”.³⁴

Therefore, under the *maistry* system the labourer was indeed the servant of his contractor and not of the factory or plantation.

The contract *maistry* system of recruitment of the Telugu labour for Burma began in the last quarter of the 19th century, particularly in the context of growing demand from the West for Burmese rice and the establishment of steam mills. The Indians were considered to be the “backbone of the labour force in the rice mills”³⁵. The failure of local government authorities to tap the indigenous labour from upper Burma districts led to persistent efforts from 1874 onwards to attract Indian emigrants both as agriculturists and labourers. In 1876 a Labour Act was enacted which provided for the appointment of a recruiting agent for Madras labour in India³⁶. Between 1876-78 around 15,000 Indians migrated to Burma as free settlers. But by 1883 it went up to 85,000.³⁷ The growing recruitment was possible due to the operation of *maistry* system in the Telugu districts of South India. Besides the *maistries*, the shipping company like the British India Steam Navigation Company also carried Telugu labourers to Burma through their commission agents. For the sake of increasing their income and profits from commission they got for each passenger (labour) booked/recruited by them, the unscrupulous agents stationed at port towns like Gopalpur, Baruva, Kalingapatnam, Bimlipatnam, Vizagapatnam, Cocanada etc. used to send a large number of sub-agents into interior localities to influence and lure as many persons as possible to go to Burma. They also visited many village fairs, pilgrim centres and propagated the advantages of emigration to Burma by means of the word of mouth, exaggerated success stories, tom tom, leaflets and other ingenious devices. The illiterate and ignorant village folk got enticed by the rosy/bright picture of Burma tend to fall prey and borrowed for their transport and other expenses from the village moneylenders or/and the recruiting agent himself at exorbitant rate of interest. Thus it could be asserted that a fair percentage of the immigrant labour of Burma found their way through the shipping agents. However, from the beginning migration of Telugu labour to Burma was free and voluntary. The Finance Member of Burma opined that of the immigrant labour into Burma 70 per cent was absolutely free labour coming without the intervention of the *maistry*³⁸. Perhaps a considerable number of the Telugu coolies were free agents in the sense that they emigrated to Burma without the mediation of labour contractor. Yet the recruiting agents of the shipping companies might have induced most of them. A large majority of these free labourers after reaching their destination were bound to fall into the clutches of the *maistries* for employment and livelihood. In that sense those who had actually migrated voluntarily and worked as free labourers might be a small fraction. Thus debt-bondage and enslavement of labour to the middlemen was the hallmark of *maistry* system. Different layers of *maistry* system at various levels curtailed and restricted labourer’s freedom for bargain and betterment. The extent of the *maistry*’s control and his opportunities for extortion were evident for the fact that he advanced loans to labourer as an inducement for immigration, regulated labourers’ employment,

³⁴ Kondapi; *Indians*, p.46.

³⁵ H. Tinker, *A New System*, p.35.

³⁶ Manual, p.501.

³⁷ Kondapi, *Indians*, p.48.

³⁸ Narayan Rao, *Indian*, p.28.

controlled the disbursement of wages, besides being vested with an arbitrary power of selection and dismissal of labourers.

The employment of south Indian labour on Malayan plantations had begun around the 1830's. Initially Tamil and Telugu labourers were brought to work on sugar plantations under indenture system. The organization of labour recruitment for Malay Peninsula was unique, for both the indentured and the *kangany* system coexisted for about half a century. The *kangany* system was basically a Tamil phenomenon, which seemed to have originated in the late 1860's. Indeed, the *kangany* system of labour recruitment started to function nearly half a century after the indenture system came into being. After the abolition of indenture in 1910, *kanganies* recruited most of the labourers for the Malayan plantations. Subsequently various other forms of labour recruitment's coexisted with the *kangany* system. Compared to Burma where free and voluntary forms labour migration existed under the *maistry* system, in Malay Peninsula indenture, *kangany*, voluntary and other forms of labour recruitment were followed. The *kangany* system in Malaya was closely linked to the growth of plantation economy because in the years 1865-1897 nearly one thousand recruits were brought to Malaya annually³⁹. The growth of *kangany* system was also linked to the changing nature of plantation economy. Most of the south Indian labourers on the sugar plantations came under indenture but with the expansion of coffee plantation in the 1880's and 1890's the planters preferred and encouraged *kangany* system of recruitment. Subsequently, when rubber displaced most of the sugar and coffee plantations in the early decades of the 20th century *kangany* system gained in importance and popularity. The acreage under rubber increased in Malaya from 50,000 in 1900 to 5,43,000 in 1910. The rubber plantations heavily depended on *kangany*-recruits and the government also adopted a policy of supporting *kanganis*. The increasing number of *kangany*-recruits revealed the fact that *kangany* became the mainstay of labour recruitment for rubber plantations. From 1903 to 1906 their number doubled every year in 1903-1858, in 1904-3375, in 1905-7729, in 1906-1977⁴⁰. It has been estimated that more than 62 percent of the total assisted labour migration and nearly 44 per cent of all labour immigrants into Malaya was *kangany*-recruited⁴¹.

The *kanganis* were themselves worked on the plantations as foreman and even as labourers of some influence and standing. Although not all of them were foremen, a considerable number of them were also elderly labourers who had worked in the plantation for some time. They were said to be "generally of good caste and had preferably to be heads of large families and persons of influence among others and subordinate castes in the village.... The *kangany* had to be a person who could command the respect of as wider a sector of the community of his village and district as possible"⁴². Available evidence suggests that the *kangany*, like the *maistry*, had played a role in the countryside, which was a combination of patron, patriarch, businessman, ambassador, self-appointed welfare officer etc. A contemporary newspaper wrote thus:

"The *kanganis* are easily believed by the simpletons because he...shines like a tin-god clothed in gorgeous velvet coat and lace turban and bedecked with costly jewels in his ears and his fingers... he

³⁹ Sandhu, *Indians*, p.96.

⁴⁰ F. Heidemann, *Kanganies in Sri Lanka and Melayasia*, Munchen, 1992, p.55.

⁴¹ Sandhu, *Indians*, p.96.

⁴² S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malayasia and Singapore*, London, 1970, p.17.

is passed by all as real and sympathetic gentleman. He shows he does not care for money and gives any amount to his newly acquired friends... He takes an interest in all matters concerning the welfare of the village or town he resides in ... Soon he becomes popular with all and is generally invited to all social and public functions. His gold attracts like magnet everybody, and his position is envied by many. He instills in the mind of these ignorant seekers of fortune that Malaya... (Is an) EI Dorado... where they could become very rich in the course of an (sic) year or two. Thus the ignorant people of the village are enticed away from their homes. Husband and wife are separated, young girls kidnapped... (and) boys are spirited away from their... parents...⁴³.

The *kangany* system of labour recruitment right from the beginning was defective and the *kanganis* indulged in coercion, malpractice and other abuses. The principal irregularities noticed during the course of *Kangany* recruitment included: Kidnapping minors and catching recruits at the weekly shanties (markets), seducing youngmen with the promise of getting them married in the colony (Malaya), working upon the petty domestic quarrels between son and father, husband and wife etc and inducing them to leave their home, matching strangers as brothers, father and son, brother and sister and husband and wife to avoid legal hurdles, misrepresenting the nature of the work and the rates of wages on the estates, substituting one person in the place of another duly passed by the village munsiff and forging the village Munsiff's signature on licenses, taking recruits as ordinary passengers or as non-emigrants, getting persons from professional recruiters, brokers and hotel-keepers, getting the recruits passed by the munsiff of a village other than that of the recruits, not taking the recruits before the village munsiff at all but getting the munsiff's signature forged in the licence⁴². There were also many instances where the *kanganis* colluded with the corrupt village officials and enticed ignorant villagers to emigrate. The monetary inducements/commission/premium offered by estates to *kanganis* did tempt them to recruit labour unlawfully through fraudulent methods.⁴⁴

The planters willingly accepted the *kangany* system. One of them put it thus: "The *kangany* or *maistry* system at its best is probably the best system evolved ... It is strictly patriarchal. The men brought only their relations from the villages and were responsible for looking after members of the family... the head *kangany* ... is practically the father of the estate"⁴⁵. After the decline of the indenture system, *kangany* became almost indispensable as a labour -recruiter and gained more power over the labour force and importance among the planters. In fact, the plantation owners' encouragement to *kangany* recruitment with all its abuses and irregularities was based on the assumption that the *kangany*, who was himself an immigrant working on the plantation, could be expected to exercise greater care in the choice of labourers. Moreover, as a person known to the local community undertook the recruitment and who spoke their language there would be a greater willingness to volunteer as emigrants. Furthermore, the *kangany* also had subtle means of keeping the labourer on a lead, attached to and dependent on him. As long as power and authority of the *kangany* kept the labour under check and facilitated smooth functioning of plantation economy

⁴³ Cited in Heidemann, *Kanganies*, p.59

⁴⁴ *Emigration Reports* for 1924-26.

⁴⁵ Cited in G. Omvedt, *Migration*, p.193.

the management allowed the *kangany* system to continue. The *kangany* was given the authority by the management to mete out severe punishment to the labourers. The dominant and hegemonic *kangany* “was rather free in establishing his own interests, values and ideas as the social norm. And he was free to choose the methods of social control, which ranged from paternalism to brutal arbitrariness. Therefore, there was a clear intersection between the planter and the worker, and the dominant *kangany* was the undisputed master in the worker’s section⁴⁶” The *kangany* was not “a mediator of conflicts between labour and capital; he was very much the agent of capital and his primary role was to subject labour to the rigorous discipline required by the plantation production system”⁴⁷. Until about the middle of the 1930’s, when the *kangany* system began to decline the *kanganis* played a significant role in the management of labour relations in the plantation economy of colonial Malaya.

Wages and Working Conditions of Labour

Manual and unskilled labourers were the most numerous immigrants in Burma and Malaya. The fact that the vast majority of south Indians in southeast Asian countries constitutes the working class the question of wages is important. Although the *kangany* and *maistry* systems were the bane of Indian labour, cash advances and the prospect of making a fortune in the above countries did act as a powerful allurement in influencing the south Indian labour to cross the Bay of Bengal. In spite of the fact that cash advances were not in the interest of the labourers and they bound them in perpetual slavery to the middlemen- recruiters (*maistry* and *kangany*), yet the money wages offered in rice mills and plantations attracted the attention of many a labourer. Available information indicates that work in the factories and plantations were well paid than comparable employment in rural south India. Hence the migrant labour was also pulled by the prospect of better wages and higher income in the industrial sector. It is difficult to get reliable/ authentic and comparable quantitative data on standard and cost of living, income, wages, earnings, expenses etc., Various survey reports and statistical data provided in the government and other reports reveal that, by and large, the contract labourer in Burma obtained three to four times the wages they received in their native places. The following table shows the average cash wages paid for the adult male agricultural labour, which was almost wholly the occupation of the emigrants, in the districts from which they were recruited in large numbers

⁴⁶ Heidemann, *Kanganies*, p.70-1.

⁴⁷ Ramaswamy, *Labour Control*, p.99.

Average Wages paid in Burma

District	Sowers and Transplanters Rs. An. Ps.	Weeders Rs.An.Ps	Reapers/ harvesters Rs.An.Ps
Vizagapatam	0-4-6	0-4-2	0-4-3
Chinglepat	0-6-2	0-5-6	0-6-1
North Arcot	0-5-11	0-4-6	0-5-3
Chittoor	0-4-9	0-4-1	0-4-5
Trichinopoly	0-6-3	0-5-0-	0-6-0
Salem	0-4-10	0-4-1	0-4-6

	Rs.An .P
Stevedore/Dockyard Cooly	1-12-0
Burma oil company Cooly general	0-15-0
Oil fields General labour	1- 0-8
Rice mill unloading/storing cooly	0-15-0

Note: Rupee=16 annas: 1 Anna=12 paise.

(Source: Compiled from data contained in Government Order No.1614 (Law General) 8 May 1926. p.3 and A. Narayana Rao, Indian Labour in Burma, p.170-171.)

The average monthly earnings of unskilled labour in Burma varied between Rs.20 -25, while in south Indian districts it was between 6.25 to 9 .50 rupees. Similarly in the case of Malaya, from the figures noted in the Kangani's recruiting licenses and from information gathered from return emigrants it has been calculated that the average wages of a working adult man was 42 cents per day which converted into Indian money works out to 10 1/2 annas, viz., more than double the wages obtained in South India⁴⁸. However, in comparing the wages in Malaya with those prevailing in India it must be noted that the cost of living in Malaya was higher by about 40 per cent and that work was not available in India for the agricultural labourers throughout the year. In Malaya work was fairly continuous (about 25 day in a month). The average monthly incomes of plantation labourers in Malaya ranged between 12-15 rupees⁴⁹. From the above figures it could be seen the south Indian manual labour in southeast Asian countries did receive more money wages, although the cost of living was also relatively high in those countries. Hence there was a great rush of emigrants during the hot weather, partly owing to seasonal conditions and want of labour in the districts and partly owing to the greater demand for labour in the plantations, dockyards and other sectors. The fact that south India plantation and factory workers could and did save money and send remittances home on a regular basis is also confirmed by the available data as seen below.

⁴⁸ Emigration Report for 1926, p.3.

⁴⁹ G.O. (Law Genl) 8 May 1926.

**POST- OFFICE SAVINGS/ BANK ACCOUNTS OF INDIANS IN MALAYSIA,
1906-1924 (Selected Years)
(in Malaysian Dollars)**

Year	Amount
1906	199,048
1907	208,504
1908	N.A.
1909	278,508
1910	342,856
1911	400,848
1912	461,917
1922	476,182
1923	894,704
1924	1166,443

AMOUNT SENT TO INDIA BY MONEY ORDERS (IN MILLON RUPEES)

Year	Amount in Millions
1906	2.04
1907	2.57
1908	-
1909	2.23
1910	2.82
1911	3.40
1912	4.29
1920	2.23
1921	5.07
1922	3.67
1923	3.35
1924	3.22

Although the occurrence of financial remittances cannot be taken as the evidence of comparative prosperity, it did indicate that certainly sections of the immigrant labourers saved money. Evidence is also not lacking about some of the returned migrants became well-to-do and bought landed property and other assets in the rural/urban areas. However, it is difficult to say whether these remittances from abroad to the rural areas in south India could be described as substantial. There are conflicting views among the labour leaders and administrators/government officials with regard to the benefits of migration to labour communities, the actual conditions of their living, indebtedness and exploitation by labour contractors⁵⁰. There is not much dispute about the rate of gross money wages paid to manual labourers in Burma and Malaya, but opinions differed greatly regarding net wages, savings and surplus, Most of the colonial government official reports tended to present an exaggerated and rosy picture of labour conditions in the plantations and factories. While emphasising the higher wage rates obtained by the workers, they did not take into account recurring hazards like disease

⁵⁰ See Emigration Report for 1926, p.3.

sickness, stoppage of work, withholding of wages, and indebtedness, which substantially reduced net wages and possible accrual of surplus to the labouring poor.

The provision of loans by the *maistry* and other labour recruiters was an important instrument to gain control over labour force and it was also the starting point of debt trap, because the job-seeking migrants generally asked the contractor or/and his agents for work and a loan. It has been said that, “ the *kangany* and *maistry* system of recruitment were based and reared on the indebtedness of the worker. While ordinarily everywhere lower wages led to indebtedness, in Malaya, Ceylon and particularly in Burma, the method of labour recruitment and control constituted the chief cause of indebtedness. The low wages and defective recruitment had a crushing cumulative effect in increasing indebtedness of the Indian workers in these countries”⁵¹. Labourers who arrived in Rangoon for instance did not possess much hard/ready cash. Generally they did not find work immediately on arrival, but somehow they had to make a living. In addition to this, they were obliged to pay the *maistries* some commission as the price of employment. Even after a job was secured, it did not solve the immediate problem of lack of cash. Rice mill and other factory owners in Burma invariably paid wages only through the *maistry*. Consequently in most cases employment by rice mill or a factory coincided with labourer entering into a debt relationship with the *maistry*.

“An investigation in 1925 of a number of labourers from Burma picked at random had shown that out of 163 labourers examined 61 or 37 p.c. were found to be in debt to the extent of Rs.15 to Rs.1, 000/- borrowed on interest at rates ranging from 1 to 25 p.c. per month. Illegal deductions, exaction and commissions varying from 35 to 50 p.c. of the wages, high rentals for living accommodation, drinking and extravagant expenditure on extras were found to be the other causes of debt”⁵².

Similarly, in the case of plantation labour in Malaya also the “*Kangany*’s moneylending activities constituted another important aspect of his paternal role. Money given on credit was recovered from labourers either by deduction from their wages or enrolling them in a saving scheme, a study of two estates, shows that in the early twentieth century, the management paid the wages of the labourers to the *kangany* so that he could deduct a proportion of them debt owed to him. Labourers always paid their debts to the *kangany* due to their social dependence on him”⁵³. It has been mentioned that majority of labourers did not receive their rightful wages. Minimum “standard” or “living” or “family” wage fixed by the colonial governments from time to time both in colonial Burma and Malaya were not anyway received by them.

In spite of denial of a decent wage the immigrant labourers continued to struggle to maintain a reasonable standard of living. The conditions under which they laboured were quite inhuman, pathetic and miserable. Industrial labourers in Burma, and particularly in Rangoon were housed in zinc or iron-sheets covered barracks and rented tenement houses, each room/hall accommodating 30-50 which resulted in a choking atmosphere and odorous. The Report of the Public Health Committee, Rangoon, wrote thus:

⁵¹ Kondapi, *Indians*, p.74.

⁵² Kondapi, *Indians*, p.78.

⁵³ Ramaswamy, *Labour*, p.99

“Dark, ill-ventilated houses on sites perennially flooded with rain or tide waters or with stagnant pools of household sullage waste, with scarcely a ray of direct sunshine in the inner room, are inhabited by hundreds and thousands of the poor class of the community; and with their poor wages, in addition to drink and drug, squalor and filth surrounding their social life, form a tragic total climax of their slum life. There are thousands of houses, huts and hovels in our town, which are unfit for human habitation”⁵⁴.

In addition to housing, medical attention and facilities offered to labourers were also very unsatisfactory. There were many defects in the public health system and most of the hospitals on the plantation estates in Malaya did not possess qualified medical and paramedical staff. Consequently many labourers on the plantations succumbed to disease. Several government reports referred to many complaints received regarding inadequate medical aid and attention during the voyages. The journey by ship under over-crowded and inhuman condition resulted in a high mortality. Innumerable cases were reported wherein the very journey across the sea and from estates to hospitals aggravated the conditions leading to death of the labourers.

Social composition of the Migrants and Effects of Migration

The victims of disease, illness, deprivation and exploitation in the plantations of Malaya and factories of Burma were the poor labouring communities of south Indian districts. The immigrant population in these countries were to a large extent also labouring communities. Therefore, it is pertinent to investigate into the social background of the immigrant labour. The Census and other reports throw abundant light on the social origins of the Tamil and Telugu-speaking people who emigrated in the 19th and 20th centuries. On the basis of available data it can be said that emigrants mainly came from certain social and economic groups. They overwhelmingly belonged to three types of caste groups viz., agricultural/peasant, trading/commercial, service/dependent/ artisan/ untouchable communities of coastal Andhra.

Telugu Emigration to Malaya

<u>Communities</u>	1935	1936	1937	1938
<i>Group- I</i>				
Agricultural/Peasants Castes	768	69	2213	72
Agricultural Labour Untouchable Castes	34	35	107	37
<i>Group-II</i>				
Trading/Commercial Castes	25	-	300	-
<i>Group-III</i>				
Service/depended/artisan castes	187	02	4789	31
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<i>Total</i>	914	106	7409	140

(Source: Compiled from the Emigration and Immigration Reports of the Madras Presidency)

⁵⁴ Kondapi, Indians, p.83.

However, the upper caste Brahmans were conspicuous by their absence: indeed they did not migrate in large numbers. Only a few among them went to southeast Asian countries and worked as priests of temples or purohits to non-Brahmans castes as well as professionals and employees (teachers, lawyers, doctors, Journalists etc). From the above figures it is clear that the Telugu peasant castes migrated in larger numbers than the untouchables. However, in the case of Tamils, untouchable castes like Parayas, Pallans, and Adi- Dravidas constituted about one- third or more of the total emigrants in the 1930's⁵⁵. In the case of Burma no such data regarding caste representation of emigrants is available, but from descriptive accounts it appears that the emigrants were a mixed group. In 1840 the collector of Godavari stated that it was mainly barbers, washermen, tailors and weavers who had gone to Burma, while Vizagapatnam collector mentioned (in 1863) that majority of the emigrants were weavers and there were no agricultural labour⁵⁶. In the twentieth century emigrants to southeast Asia were drawn from the agricultural communities, including the untouchable labour castes. Most of the migrants were not necessarily the settled *ryots* but poor/middle peasants and agricultural labourers who were used to moving from place to place in search of employment. The internal migration of agricultural labourers in the coastal region was an acknowledged factor of the agrarian economy. Among the agricultural communities emigrating to southeast Asian countries there were the non-Brahman castes of owner-cultivators, tenants, share-croppers, landless agricultural labourers like Kapu, Nayudu, Kamma, Reddi, Padayachi, vellaela, Muthiraj, Gavara etc. There were also the agricultural labourers belonging to the Adi-Andhra and Adi-Dravida untouchable groups of the Mala, Madiga, pallan, and parayan and chakkiliyan castes. The traders were drawn from particular castes like Komati, Chetti, Baliya etc. Castes such as Mangali (barber), Tsakali (Washermen), Kummari, (Potter), Golla/yadav (Shepherd), Sale (weaver), Mera (Tailor), Kamsali (goldsmith), Vadrangi (Carpenter), Gamandla/Settibalija (Toddy tapper) etc., constituted the dependent and artisan groups. The cultivating castes were able to find work on the plantations and mills, while the trading castes opened grocery/provision shops around industrial, commercial and urban centres. The dependent/artisan castes were able to pursue their traditional occupations, as there was demand for their services. Those who were not able to carry on their traditional callings joined the ranks of manual/unskilled labourers. Interestingly, there was a broad correspondence/correlation between caste and occupation. For instance, barbers, washermen, goldsmiths, carpenters were provided by the castes of Mangali, Tsakali, Kamsali and Vadrangi respectively. Likewise, labourers who were engaged as scavengers, particularly in Rangoon (Burma) belonged to Adi-Andhra and Adi-Dravida castes, while the traders and shop-assistants came from the castes such as Chettis, Komatis and Baliyas. The scope for occupational specialization, particularly in the caste of service/ dependent and untouchable castes, contributed for the perpetuation of caste-centered specialization and caste-oriented activities. Presumably, majority of the emigrants belonging to the service/dependent and untouchable castes would have been landless labourers and hence they worked as manual labourers. But it is also of interest to note that other agriculturists from high-to-middle scale in the caste hierarchy (Kapu, Kamma, Reddi, Velama etc.) chose to migrate. It was possible that deteriorating conditions in agriculture such as pressure on land, famine, flood and cyclone were responsible for their migration. Hence for them emigration became an escape route and a habit. Whereas certain non-Brahmin lower sudras castes like Agnikulakshetriyas (Fishermen), Settibalijas (toddy tappers), Gollas/Yadav (shepherds) etc., who migrated

⁵⁵ Arasaratnam, Indian, p.26.

⁵⁶ Cited, Dharma Kumar, Land and Caste in South India, Cambridge, 1965, p.139.

to Burma in considerable numbers left their traditional occupation and worked as unskilled/manual labourers in paddy fields, rice mills, water transport etc. Infact, migration to Burma and Malaya was resorted to as a temporary measure to supplement family income. Normally, the single male emigrants were able to return after three to five years with some cash savings with which they tended to acquire some assets and property. Though castes are known by their respective traditional occupation, all the non-Brahman castes were dependent on agricultural operations directly or indirectly. By and large it was only the service/dependent castes that followed in most cases their traditional work. Nevertheless there was heterogeneity in the choice of occupations. This heterogeneity in the choice of occupations and occupational mobility in Burma and Malaysia did effect the caste system. The untouchable Adi-Andhra castes like Malas and Madigas or Adi-Dravida castes like Parayan and Pallan, though pursued caste-related occupations like scavenging and menial jobs in foreign countries they did not strictly perform their traditional occupation like leather-work. There were plenty of opportunities to diversity their professions. Although they worked predominantly as unskilled manual labourers either in the plantations of Malaya or rice mills/factories in Burma, their new occupations implied a break with traditional occupational specialization. Members of the service/artisan castes were also able to secure opportunities to practice other professions, besides or in addition to their traditional calling. It meant that the new occupational system prevalent in foreign countries did weaken caste rigidity and caused disjunction between caste and occupation. Consequently, caste feelings and other manifestations of caste sentiment were also minimized. Yet the caste system did not disappear.

The magnitude of the migration had also left its noticeable impact socially and economically. It was remarked that “the returning immigrant brought new habits of life and new values. He was more self-reliant, and possessed more self-respect. The large proportion of untouchable castes also had a salutary effect on the operation of the caste system. They generally benefited from this change, and when they came back did not submit to gross forms of discrimination against them”⁵⁷. Emigration also increased socio-economic mobility, since the emigrants returned with greater knowledge of agricultural operations and less willingness to abide by caste restrictions. A Census Commissioner reported that once at Nagapatam (port of embarkation) a Brahman chided a parayan who barged into him on the quay. To which the parayan replied: “I have taken off my caste and left it with the port officer. I won’t put it on again till I come back”⁵⁸. It is an indication of the fact that the effects of emigration were particularly strong for the lower castes, as they were ready to disregard traditional caste prejudices and restrictions. A colonial official remarked that “I have heard of depressed classes or at least of depressed individuals evolving into substantial farmers with the aid of the money earned and saved in foreign countries”⁵⁹. Most of the colonial officials held the view that emigration was beneficial to the lower caste labourers, because after few years of stay the emigrants returned with hard cash with which they bought a plot of land and cultivated on their own. It was also felt that emigration in the long run raised the general level of prosperity and the returned emigrants were much better off than before. More than the economic/material benefits, emigration did instill a sense of independence, equality, self-respect, self-reliance and dignity among the lower

⁵⁷ Arasaratnam, *Indians*, p.27.

⁵⁸ *Census Report*, 1911, p.26.

⁵⁹ *Census Report*, 1911, p.26.

castes/classes who went abroad. The Census Commissioner of Madras (1931) remarked:

“A man who, little removed from praedial serfdom...finds himself treated on his own merits like every one else when he crosses the sea, paid in cash for his labours and left to his own resources, must in the majority of cases benefit from the change, and it is probably the existence of the emigration current that has contributed most to the growth of consciousness among the depressed classes.... Labourers from well-run estates generally bring back to their village some of the ideas on cleanliness, food and comfort acquired while abroad. Evidences of this are to be seen in many a South Indian village and I have myself on several occasions had pointed out to me a house differing markedly from its neighbours as being that of some one who had been to Malaya....”⁶⁰.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper an attempt has been made to study the course, nature and effects of migration of south Indian labour communities to southeast Asia. An analysis of the patterns of mobility of the labouring classes that existed across the seas is also presented. Most studies on migration lack a comprehensive perspective and fail to link specific events and specific groups of migrants as well as the areas of origin and recruitment. There is a lot of controversy among scholars with regard to types of migration: whether labour migration under colonial conditions was free or unfree. In this study it has been found that different types of migrations coexisted and there was no unilinear pattern. It is difficult to draw a rigid line or make a clear-cut distinction between free and unfree types of migration. To begin with, emigration to Malaya was based on the indenture system, but Kangani-assisted free migration was also encouraged during the same period. Similarly migration to Burma was free and unassisted since its inception, but in course of time contract/*maistry* system of labour recruitment became dominant. It has been shown that the contract labour system contained many elements of unfreedom. Hence, in this paper it is suggested that no arbitrary distinction between freedom and unfreedom is possible in the study of labour migration. Both these aspects were present in the labour relations throughout the 19th -20th centuries. For instance, due to the introduction of the *kangany* system the abolition of government-regulated indenture system in 1910 to Malaya did not necessarily usher in a free plantation labour force. Like-wise the unaided free and voluntary migration to Burma did not grant real freedom to labourers because under the *maistry* system there were innumerable possibilities for labour enslavement. Nevertheless, *maistry* and *kangany* systems of labour recruitment represented a unique caste/cultural arrangement. Interestingly, these labour intermediaries had an overwhelming presence in the landscape of capital-labour relations and acted as the chief mediators between the employers and employees. They were an integral part of the caste/clan system of local society of south India. They were also, indeed, the crucial links in incorporating the rural economy of south India into the plantation and urban economies of southeast Asia in the 19-20th centuries. They undoubtedly acted as the important agents of regular, continuous and unbroken streams of labour migration.

Their poor economic conditions and unfavourable agricultural conditions necessitated the emigration of lower castes/classes. The general social dislocations and

⁶⁰ Census Report, 1931, p.93.

economic distress compelled them to migrate. It was a sort of “shoveling out paupers”. Especially for the lower sudra and depressed castes emigration also meant, “fleeing from caste oppression”. Migration to southeast Asia did provide them better opportunities and potential social mobility that were denied in their native places. As casual labourers/coolies in Burma and Malaya they were able to earn relatively higher wages. In many respects lower caste labour communities were better able to respond positively to opportunities abroad. Many of them also emigrated because friends and relatives, who had previously been to southeast Asia, had told them of the higher wages obtainable there and assured them that employment could easily be found.

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