



Ethnic Indians in Burma and Malaya: A Study of the Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

India has one of the worlds most diverse and complex migration history. Migration can be defined as an ethnic minority group of migrant origin residing and acting in host country but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with its homeland. In modern times, Indian migration was largely a creation of British colonialism in India. Since the 19th century, ethnic Indians have established communities on every continent of the world. A sizeable Indians migrated in Burma and Malaya. To know ethnic composition in Burma and Malaya is the focusing point of this manuscript.

KEYWORDS: Kangani, Indentured, Paramount, Munsif

INTRODUCTION

The arrival, distribution and eventual settlement of Indians in South-East Asia were closely related to colonial history. There were many ethnic Indians in South East Asia. The migration of Indians began in 1834 following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. There was a severe shortage of labourers working in sugar, tea, coffee, rubber plantations in their colonies. India became the obvious alternative source of labour. Indian labourers had already been useful in various colonies where as slaves and convicted prisoners they were employed in public work- roads, harbours, offices and jails.

The expansion of capitalist economy in the British Empire created a great demand for labour and trading classes. As a result, in India a combination of the following factors led to the Indian exodus overseas: the distress of the small peasantry, frequent and widespread famines throughout the nineteenth century, the decline of handicraft industry and sluggish industrialization. Excessive dependence on agriculture, seasonal unemployment, mass illiteracy and a caste-bound occupational structure were additional contributory factors in creating a class of proletarians, a fraction of which was compelled to seek substances abroad. It was in the beginning of 20th century that some Indians connected with the terrorist movement in India went to Japan, Burma, Malaya and Thailand and started revolutionary activities with the object of liberating India from the foreign yoke. Realizing that there was no scope in India of an armed revolution or secret subversive activities, they shifted the sphere of their work to foreign lands. Historically many distinctive patterns of Indians immigrants can be identified: indentured labour migration, the Kangani/maistry labour migration, free or passage migration, assisted independent labour migration, non-assisted labour migration, non-labour migration, Indian convicts, Indian revolutionaries etc.

Burma

The origin of Indian community in Burma could be traced from ancient times. India's cultural influence on Burma, though stopping short of domination, was profound. Modern Indian immigration into Burma was entwined with the British penetration. Politically a part of India until 1937 Burma had a large Indian population. In 1931 Indians in Burma numbered 1,017,825. Indian labours migration to Burma in the late nineteenth century was an important aspect of British colonialism in South-East Asia. Indian immigrant flows to Burma greatly exceeded similar flow to Malaya. Between 1910 and 1935, Indian inflows to Burma totalled 2,04,8000. A full scale Indian immigration into Burma began after 1852 when the Irrawaddy delta was annexed by the Company. A large percentage of Indians in Burma was born in India. The gradual growth of the Indian population in Burma is indicated in the following table:-

Year	Total Population	Indian Population	Indian Percentage
1871	2747148	136504	4.9
1881	3736771	243123	6.5
1891	8098014	420830	5.1
1901	10490624	568263	5.4
1911	12115217	743288	6.1
1921	13212192	887077	6.7
1931	14667146	1017825	6.9

Table No. 1: Growth of the Indian population in Burma.¹

The largest immigrant group of Indians was Chittagonian. Over 50 percent of Indian population was from North India. Tamil and Telugus to gather constituted less than 33 percent. The majority of Indians in Burma were immigrants to the country. The sex ratio for Indians in Burma was typical of an immigrant's population. In 1931 there were 387 females per thousand males. The majority of Indians were between the ages of 15 and 40. As a religious community, over half the Indian population was Hindu by religion. Muslims formed the only other large group. Other religious groups were Buddhist, Christian and Sikhs. Religious composition in 1931 out of 1,017,825 as follow:

Religion	Numbers
Hindus	565,609
Muslims	396,594
Christian	30,135
Buddhists	12,600
Sikhs	10896
Others	1991

Table No. 2 Religious composition in Burma.²

The Indian community in Burma contained a wide spectrum of ethno-linguistic groups. South Indian appeared to predominate in relative terms. According to the census 1931, there were six major ethno-linguistic groups in Burma from Southern India. These groups were Chittagonians (basically Muslims), Telugus

(predominantly Hindus), Tamil (the majority being Hindus with a sizeable Christian community), the Hindustanis (Hindus in general), the Bengalis (majority beings Muslims but a sizeable Hindu community was also present) and the Oriyas (Hindus). Other most prominent groups comprising the entrepreneurial and mercantile class from northern India were Gujarati, Marwari and Surtis.³ There were also Punjabi who were quite well-off and Sikhs who formed a distinct religious sub-group within Hindu community. In 1941 there was following Indian community set-up:

Community	Numbers
Chittagoniaans	42561
Telegu	67845
Hindustanies	52760
Oriyas	27102
Bengali	7139
Tamil	7081

Table No. 3 Indian communities in Burma.⁴

MALAYA

India's contacts with Malaya go back to the pre-Christian era. The period of modern Indian migration into Malaya dates from the foundation of Penang in 1786, but it became a significant feature in Malayan demography only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the establishment of British paramount in India and the consolidation of British power in Malaya. Furthermore, whereas the earlier migrants primarily financiers and traders, the modern Indian migrant, until the Indian government ban on assisted labour emigration in 1938, was chiefly uneducated labourers going to work on some plantation or government project.

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

The indentured migration to Malaya was essentially a South Indian phenomenon, the others being only a few hundred recruits from the Bengal area of the Ganges valley. It is not possible to measure exactly how many Indians entered Malaya as indentured labourers from the origin of the system to its abolition in 1910. Statistical data is available only from 1866. From this year until the abolition, 250,000 indentured Indian labourers had gone to Malaya. One of its worst features was that it imposed on the labourers a criminal liability for the most trivial breaches of the contracts in place of the civil liability which usually attached to such lapses.

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a parallel system of labour recruitment was evolved for Malaya. This was the method of recruitment through a Kangani.⁵ Coffee and Rubber planters got most of their labour through a Kangani. The Kangani labour immigration into Malaya was also a South Indian phenomenon, predominantly Tamil with a learning of Telugu from Andhra Pradesh and Malayalis from the Malabar Coast areas. From the statistical data available from 1898; between

1898 and 1938 we get the figure of 1,186,717 Kangani recruits who landed in Malaya.⁶ In spite of the services done to Malayan labour market by the Kangani recruitment, the system soon became the centre of criticism. Bribery was frequently used to buy favours and it invariably entered into the several phases of immigration, especially where a lowly paid authority, as for example the village *munsif* was in a position to dispense privilege. Since the system was exploitative the Indian nationalist leadership also began to raise the question over the condition of Indian migrants. In the face of mounting criticism, the Kangani system was suspended during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Formal abolition of the system, however, came in 1938 when the Indian government placed a ban on all assisted labour emigration. The number of Indians in Malaya spiralled to 268,269 by 1911 to 470,180 by 1921, and to 621,847 by 1931. The following table indicates the year wise trend of Indian migrants:

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

Table no. 4 The number of Indians in Malaya.⁷

Besides labour immigration, there was also the non labour migration to fulfill the growing demand of clerks, security personnel due to the establishment of British rule in Malaya. Due to the better wages offered to clerks, teachers and technical assistants, promise of a steady job in a not too distant country and with the assurance of government pension; attracted the large number of Tamils, Malayalis or Telugu speaking English educated South Indians to Malaya.

Just as South Indians proved to be invaluable in the clerical and technical services, similarly Northern Indians, particularly the tall, sturdy Sikhs, were much sought after for such employment as soldiers, policemen, watchmen and caretakers. They were sufficiently mobile and poor at home and were quite prepared to migrate and work for three to five years for such low wages as \$9-15 per month, in the hope of living frugally and saving enough to return home to buy new land.

There were also commercial immigrants. Although North Indians were among the first commercial migrants in British Malaya; South Indians also made up the

majority of these migrants such as Malabar and Coromandel Coast Muslims and Chettiar Hindus. Until the early years of the twentieth century the Northern Indian commercial migrants consisted wholly of Benglis, Parsis and Guraratis. But with the increasing Sindhi and Sikh migration in the ensuing years the Gujratis, Parsis and Bengalis were superseded by these newcomers, together with a few Marwaris, both numerically and gradually commercially.⁸

The estimated number of Indian migrants in the Straits Settlements increased from an estimated total of less than 2,000 in 1786 to 15,073 in 1831, which further increased to 33,389 by the time of the first population census in 1871. By 1891, the Indian population had jumped to about 76,000 and ten years later to some 119,000. Their story of the growth of the Indian population after 1901 was tied very closely to the expansion of the government services and of the oil palm and rubber estates. The number of Indians in Malaya increased sharply to 268,269 by 1911 and 470,180 in 1921. Indian population was 624,009 in 1931 due to great depression. The increase of more than 75 percent on the Indian population between 1911 and 1921 was much higher than that for any other community. But such a high rate of increase was not maintained in the coming decades.

There were significant Indian ethnic communities consisting of Tamils, Telugus, Bengalis, Punjabis and Gujaratis. About five-sixths of the total Indian population were Tamils from South India. The following table gives information on the numerical strength of each community among the Indians up to 1931:-

Community	Year	Year
	1921	1931
Tamil	387,509	514,778
Telegu	39,986	32,536
Malayali	17,190	34,898
Sikh	9,307	18,149
Punjabi	6,144	12,794
Bengali	5,072	1,827
Gujarati	403	not available
Other Indians	3,736	5,479

Table no. 5 Indian community in Malaya.⁹

As regards religion, the great majority were Hindus, as might be expected considering the great preponderance of Tamil in population. The Mohammadans were also chiefly from southern India. The following table lists Indians by religion in 1931:-

Community	Numbers
Hindus	509,202
Mohammedans	56,506
Sikhs	18,180
Christians	36,614
Buddhists	1,204
Others	2,303

Table no. 6 Indian Religious Community in Malaya.¹⁰

Between 1921 and 1931, there was a considerable decrease in the number of Hindus per thousand Indians and an appreciable increase in the number of Christians and Sikhs. In the case of the later it may be explained by greater immigration, but the increase in the Christian population was most likely due to missionary activities.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we have noticed historic migration and settlement of the Indians in South-East Asia during the British period. Between 1800-1920, the large numbers of persons migrated to Burma and Malaya from India during the British period. Most of them came from Southern India. British colonial dominance of the Indian subcontinent facilitated the movement of Indians to Burma and Malaya. The arrival, distribution and eventual settlement of Indians in Burma and Malaya were closely related to colonial history. There were many ethnic Indians in Burma and Malaya. A large proportion of the Indians were Tamils, Telgus, Bengalis, Punjabi etc. The migrant Indians included Hindus, Muslims, Buddhist, Christian and Sikhs. The Hindus were in majority among the migrants followed by Muslims. There was also internal migration of Indians in South-East Asia. The settlement of the Indians was based on two factors. One was to live close to the work places and another was that they preferred to live close together with their own kind. The settlements included both urban and rural. In the Burma and Malaya the males were in more numbers and large proportion of them was between the ages of 15 to 35.

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