
Making the Indian Diaspora: Occupation, Mobility and Community in Colonial Malaya (1870–1941)

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Abstract: This article examines the making of the Indian diaspora in colonial Malaya between 1870 and 1941, challenging interpretations that reduce Indian migration primarily to plantation labour. Using a historical-comparative approach, it draws on colonial administrative records, censuses, labour and immigration reports, official investigations, contemporary newspapers, and scholarship to trace diverse occupational migration streams. It analyses plantation labour alongside commerce and moneylending, policing, railways, clerical and professional employment, highlighting how occupation intersected with class, region, language, religion and caste. The article argues that occupational differentiation structured unequal access to capital, education, institutions, social status and mobility, while plantation communities remained sites of labour control, settlement and social reproduction. At the same time, religious institutions, schools, newspapers, voluntary associations, labour organisations and transnational networks connected otherwise differentiated groups. The study therefore conceptualises diaspora formation as a simultaneous process of differentiation and integration, through which a broader, constructed Indian identity emerged in colonial Malaya.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora; Colonial Malaya; Indian Migration; Occupational Mobility; Social Differentiation; Community Formation; Diasporic Identity; Colonial Labour.

1. Indian Migration and Occupational Diversity in Colonial Malaya

The history of Indian migration to colonial Malaya is an integral component of the broader Southeast Asian history of migration, labour and empire. The British built up their empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Malaya became part of a single economic unit, creating a consistent demand for migrant labour, commercial capital and administration. Indians played a significant role in the colonial population, notably in plantation farming, transport and public works. But plantation labour is a limited lens through which to examine the Indian population. It included regional, linguistic, religious, caste/ethnic, class, occupational and migration variants and classes in relation to the colonial state. The purpose of this article is to discuss the impact of the differences on the formation of the Indian diaspora from about 1870 to 1941. It is not difficult to associate Indian migration with plantation labour as this is what is usually done. The boom in rubber production created a huge demand for Indian labour, especially from the South. Kaur (2013, 2014) places Malaya in the context of the expansion of global labour migration under the British Empire, highlighting places of plantation, industrial and port activity, and public works. Her research shows that Indian migration was not an event separate from the larger process of reorganisation of labour within imperial capitalism but was an integral component of that process between India and Malaya. Kaur (2006) also demonstrates that recruitment was not merely a personal choice of

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the individuals, but was also part of a colonial and regulated recruitment process involving governments, labourers, and intermediaries.

However, an interpretation based on the plantation context is not valid for the whole Indian population. With regard to the early period of immigration, from the end of the eighteenth century to independence, Sandhu (1969) has shown how it has evolved. He distinguishes the much larger labour migration brought about by colonial economic expansion from earlier traders, merchants and priests. The most important of his contributions has been to demonstrate that the migration of Indians was not a single uniform plantation movement, but rather varied in accordance with the economic demand, the policy of the colonial administration and the changes in Malaysian society.

Kaur (2014) also sees Indian migration as a series of “differential migration streams”, noting the importance of multiple modes of migration and the creation of long-term economic and social linkages. This method proves useful since it helps break the focus from plantation workers’ numerical strength and focuses on the variety of institutional and occupational options available for Indians to make themselves at home in Malaya.

Further evidence of this internal diversity was provided by Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2017). They define Tamils as the largest group together with Telugus, Malayalees, Gujaratis, Chettiars, Sikhs and Indian Muslims and categorise three broad economic groups - labour, business and civil service. They have highlighted how the business class of Chettiar businessmen proved to create unequal relationships within the diaspora through their analysis of the Chettiar business community. In particular, the credit enjoyed by the Chettiar and the indebtedness of working-class Indians demonstrate the existence of capital and occupational position in relation to different sections of the Indian population (Suppiah & Raja, 2017). Therefore, occupational diversity was not only demographic but economic power and social differentiation were structured.

Taking the cue from this scholarship, the present article addresses a central question: **how did occupational diversity shape the social formation of the Indian diaspora?** The plantation labourer, brought into the colonial economy from southern India, was in a much less privilege situation than the merchant, moneylender, clerk, policeman or professional. Both employers and colonial authorities closely monitored labour migration, while commercial and professional migrants had access to other networks and kinds of economic or educational capital. Overall, therefore, the overarching term “Indian” was not an accurate definition of a homogenous group, but contained inequalities in status, mobility, and institutional access.

It is confirmed by contemporary documentation. In the report, Srinivasa Sastri (1937) analysed Indian labour with regard to recruitment, estate labour, wages, health, settlement and representation. The International Labour Office also segmented the employment on plantations from factories, public works, municipalities, railways and defence services. Kaur (2012) also shows how the labour migration was a multi-layered process of brokers, transportation and recruitment, and employment, with the colonial authorities and the private employers. Such evidence shows the relationship between the location of the occupation and the occupational relationship with employers and the state and local communities.

Not all forms of differentiation, however, necessarily constituted autochthonous communities. Religious institutions, schools, associations, newspapers, commercial networks and other organisations established linkages between occupations. The development of a wider Indian identity was thus a process, not a given. Migrants may have been able to recognise themselves in terms of region, language, religion, caste or occupation, while at the

same time being a part of a larger Indian community. Diasporic formation, therefore, entailed differentiation as well as integration.

The article makes three propositions: first, Indian migration was not a single occupational and migration stream, but many; second, occupational position, alongside class, region, religion and community formed differential opportunities and forms of social mobility; and third, these divisions did not preclude the formation of communities, but rather they gave a sense to the emergence of a broader Indian identity.

The main research question is: How did occupational diversity affect the processes of social differentiation and social mobility within the Indian community in colonial Malaya from c. 1870 to c. 1941? This is built from questions related to occupational and migration flows, to intersections of occupation with region, language, religion, caste and class, to community organisation and social and economic mobility, and to the definition of a broader Indian diasporic identity.

The method used for the article is historical-comparative, which involves collecting data from colonial administrative records, censuses, labour and immigration reports, official investigations, contemporary newspapers, and scholarly literature, and analysing the data found in them. Other terms used for categorising colonial people like “Indian labour” and “Indian immigrant” are also treated with a degree of criticism as they were administrative terms and are not necessarily synonymous with the identity of the migrants. Such occupations as plantation labour, Chettiar commerce and finance, Sikh and North Indian policing, and clerical and professional work are thus studied comparatively as complementary elements of the colonial economy.

It is a time of the consolidation of British rule, expansion of plantation, mining, transport and administrative facilities, institutionalisation of Indian migration, and the development of more durable Indian communities between 1870 and 1941. The year of 1941 is an analytical threshold as the Japanese occupation then changed the political, economic and social situations in Malaya.

The main theme is that the Indian community in colonial Malaya can no longer be seen as a single entity which was created mainly by the plantation migration of the Indians. Instead, it's a historically differentiated formation, made up of several streams of occupational migration. Economic opportunities, social status and institutional participation within the workplace were structured by occupational diversity, and links were formed by shared colonial experiences and the formation of community networks. The Indian community abroad was diverse but also interconnected, bifurcated in terms of their occupations, classes, regions, religions, languages, etc., but also becoming more interconnected in terms of institutional, economic and colonial relationships.

2. Colonial Economic Expansion and the Formation of Occupational Migration Streams

A significant Indian presence in colonial Malaya cannot be divorced from the economic changes which occurred in the peninsula during the nineteenth century. British intervention also brought about a change in the ways in which land, labour, capital and mobility interact, and the growth of export production demand more labour and skills than could always be locally sourced. However, care should be taken not to view this process merely as a tale of the attraction of Indians to British plantations. Migration was organised in a specific institutional way, and there were institutionalised channels of recruitment for various types of employment, as well as varying degrees of state involvement and social backgrounds of migrants. It was not only a numerical

expansion from about 1870-1914, however, as several separate Indian migration streams developed relatively recognisable occupational profiles during this formative period.

2.1 Colonial economic expansion and the demand for migrant labour: During the nineteenth century, the British spread of political power and the growth of export-oriented production speeded up the economic transformation of Malaya. There were labour needs in various sectors such as plantations, ports, transport infrastructure and commercial centres. Building on a previous approach by Kaur (2014) who set the context of Indian migration in the context of colonial commodity production, the paper suggests that European plantation expansion depended on labour systems that could provide and regulate a massive foreign labour force. Indian labour, in other words, was not a movement in itself but rather was part and parcel of the institutionalisation needed for plantocracy.

Sugihara (1981), building on this argument, links the migration of Indians with the larger phenomenon of their integration into an expanding export economy from 1890 to 1920. His investigation on the kangani system or maistry system proves that recruitment was not only a mechanism of economic exploitation, but also a system of social organisation that was a part of the capitalist system of labour control derived from the South Indian patriarchal and caste system. The social organisation in the sending area might then be used to decrease the expense of recruitment and supervision of labour in Malaya. Migration thus linked the agrarian and social systems of South India, to the export-oriented colonial economy.

Trimmer (2014) goes on to show that there was a massive institutional structure to recruit labour. British Malayan planters used multiple recruitment methods such as indentured, contract and government-assisted recruitment and kangani. She has outlined the efforts to centralise recruitment by the Madura Company using the relationship between the Protector of Labour in his office, recruiting agents in India and plantation companies in Malaya. The Indian labour was thus produced with the help of a migration machine, including agents, kanganies, immigration depots, employers and government departments.

2.2 Indenture, kangani recruitment and the institutionalisation of migration: The difference between indenture and kangani recruitment needs to be understood. Indenture involved contractual ties between workers and their employers; on the other hand, kangani recruitment was based on older workers and networks within the community. This does not, however, eliminate any overlap in these systems and the different ways in which a reliable supply of labour was secured.

Prior to the founding of the Tamil Immigration Fund in 1907, estates procured workers through South Indian agency houses or through licensed kanganies, as demonstrated by Rengasamey and Sundara Raja (2012). Competition for labour resulted in “crimping”, where workers could transfer from one employer to another in search of better conditions. The Tamil Immigration Fund and Immigration Committee tried to control recruitment and alleviate these problems for plantation investors. Kaur (2012) also shows how the colonial state was a regulator, mediator and employer; and how recruitment and transportation was a process that involved the Government of India, the India Office, the Colonial Office, Malayan governments, and European entrepreneurs.

Migration, therefore, is not simply ‘free’ or ‘forced’. Kangani recruitment was based on the practice of friendship and community relations, which would allow for the movement of labour but also act as a device for controlling labour. These same networks may then be able to assist migrants in finding family, friends, and familiar places and generate dependency, and community.

2.3 The making of a predominantly South Indian labour stream: Geographical distribution of Indian migrants was strongly linked with the structure of migration. The vast majority of the Indian labour that arrived in Malaya in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been through labour systems, and significant numbers of them were not only rural but also lower caste and landless agricultural workers from South India (Belle, 2017). This pattern was exacerbated by colonialist ideas about the appropriateness of South Indian workers to plantation jobs.

Periasamy (2007) also notes the focus on recruitment in Madras and the resulting influx of Tamil speakers among Indian labourers as compared to South Indians, Ceylon Tamils and Sikhs who were recruited to work in government service. Therefore, the labour supplied was differentiated perceptibly regionally and linguistically in the form of 'Indian labour'. There were key linkages between region, language and occupation, which were reinforced by colonial recruitment policies and employer expectations as well as existing recruitment networks.

2.4 Beyond plantations: public works, transport and state employment: Indian work in colonial Malaya was not limited to plantation jobs. Kaur (2006) distinguishes three groups: the first is the large labour group that was related to plantations, transport facilities and ports; the second is the auxiliary group comprising policemen, security personnel, clerical and sub-ordinate administrative workers; and the third is the commercial group of merchants and Chettiars. The plantation jobs were supplemented by jobs in the infrastructure, which enfolded migrants in railway, port, and municipal and urban settings that were socially different from plantation estates.

This dynamic is also reflected in Sikh mobility, as highlighted by Gera Roy (2016). The imperial government encouraged the recruitment of Sikhs into the military, police and railway services, while established Sikh networks facilitated voluntary migration into commercial, clerical and technical occupations. Gera Roy's (2016) concept of "immobile mobilities" draws attention to the inherent ambivalence of colonial mobility regimes, whereby immigration restrictions and exclusionary laws sought to constrain Asian mobility while simultaneously facilitating the movement of selected groups through particular occupational and institutional channel. The Sikh experience thus shows that the migration of Indians took place through different institutional channels. The research also suggests that police regiments and garrisons might serve as hubs of religious and social organisation for Sikhs (Kaur, 2013). Employment therefore had an impact on occupation, as well as on settlement and community institutions.

2.5 Commercial migration and Indian capital: The migration of Indians for commerce was a decidedly different story. The Chettiars are especially noteworthy. Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2013) demonstrate that Chettiar moneylending was built on family and temple institutions as well as ethnic solidarity and a history of property, which allowed the community to maintain a commercial presence and property accumulation throughout South India and Southeast Asia. The capital, kinship, caste and business networks were used by the commercial migrants as compared to recruited plantation workers.

However, there were economic linkages between commercial and labour communities. Chettiar credit, land transactions and financial services can benefit plantation society but also perpetuate inequalities. As such, Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2017) shed light on the financial linkages between the economically powerful Indians and working-class communities. This led to internal stratification of the Indian population, which at the same time was economically interconnected.

2.6 From migration streams to an occupationally differentiated population: By 1914, Indian migration had formed in Malaya around several different sources of recruitment and institutions including indentured and

contract labour, kangani, government employment, clerical and professional migration, and commercial and financial migration. The different categories were not necessarily mutually exclusive as individuals could switch between different occupations and networks. They are useful in illustrating the manner in which different institutions linked migrants to particular aspects of the colonial economy.

Hellmann-Rajanayagam (2013) provides a vital contextualisation of South Asian migration by stating that Indians had already arrived in the peninsula prior to British colonisation, yet the colonial period increasingly framed them as a distinct ethnic group. Hellmann-Rajanayagam's argument also importantly interrogates the notion of "Indian" as a single, homogeneous group and questions established ethnic categorisation.

The evidence therefore highlights a key paradox. Colonialism meant that Indians were being sorted according to their occupation, geographical origin, language and class, but simultaneously incorporated into an overarching category of "Indian". Workers on the plantations, Sikh policemen, clerks and Chettiar financiers all occupied different places within the colonial economy but could be considered part of a wider Indian migrant category.

A key Implication of this for this study is that differing occupational recruitment sources meant that migrants occupied different social positions, levels of mobility, sites of settlement and community organisation. By 1914, different institutional recruitment sources, immigration administration, plantation workers, infrastructure workers, policemen and commercial networks had created the basis upon which future Indian communities would build their society. Although numerically the largest category, plantation workers were part of a wider set of migrants which formed the Indian diaspora in Malaya. It is therefore vital to further investigate the ways in which differing recruitment sources, regional origins, languages and social classes intersected with community organisation in order to examine how a distinct Indian migrant identity formed in colonial Malaya.

3. Beyond the Plantation: Labour, Recruitment and the Making of an Estate Workforce

The plantation labouring women and men were important to the presence of Indians in colonial Malaya, but the role of such workers was not limited to the Indians from South India. By the early twentieth century, it was an integrated social setting in which economic opportunities, family life, health, living and employment were all entangled. The question should then not be just of the "how" but also of the "what kind of social world" was it? Parmer (1960) traces the growing regulation of plantation labour in Malaya between approximately 1910 and 1941, highlighting the evolving role of colonial policy and administration in the rubber plantation industry. Colonial policy comprised recruitment and wages, labour supply, immigration, legislation and estate administration. Here, the plantation became more than merely a means of work; it was an administrative apparatus for controlling labour supply, movement and reproduction, with the objective of the colonial state being the overseer.

In addition to the formal process of hiring labourers, the organisation of this workforce relied on mechanisms. However, Behal (2013) notes that the kangani system maintained critical aspects of the previous indenture system, namely indebtedness and dependency among the recruiters and workers. Despite the alteration in the organisation of the contract, the capability of the kangani to exercise significant control over their work, through a process of recruitment, supervision and informal control within the estate, remained the case. This indicates that a shift from indentured to supposedly free labour on plantations did not necessarily abolish hierarchical relations and structures on the plantations. In their place, mechanisms of control were reworked with

the use of intermediary authority and worker economic dependence with respect to the job of the estate. The social relations of the plantation and the organisation of labour, which followed, were then influenced by the recruitment process.

Ramachandran (1994) builds on this linkage between labour control and the overall organisation of plantation society when he looks at plantation labour in colonial Malaya in the context of Malaya's political and economic landscape. His analysis brings into focus the interplay between plantation jobs, the development of labour organisations and the shifting roles of Indian workers in colonial society. The estate was not merely an engine of production where labour was hired for wages; it was an environment where the everyday lives of workers, their families and their relations were lived out. The relationship between a stable workforce and housing, employment, welfare systems and access to estate facilities came as a result. However, the creation of new jobs in plantations also offered a means of social incorporation that could at the same time foster dependence and security on the plantation. This accounts for much of the reason for studying the history of plantation labour outside the realm of recruitment data and wages because it also involves investigating the institutions and relations which informed the daily lives of migrants.

Plantation labour was hence generated through a combination of recruitment networks, the authority of intermediaries, colonial state regulation and estate-based social organisation. The institutional settings within the estate gave the workers access to certain migration routes and shaped their experiences once they reached Malaya. The plantation thus served as a place of labour production as well as a site of social interaction where work, family life, living and interaction within the community were mutually interwoven. To move beyond the description of Indians as a numerical labour force, it is crucial to grasp this process and then analyse how plantation employment has led to the creation of a more settled and socially stratified Indian population in colonial Malaya.

3.1 From recruited labour to an organised plantation workforce: Recruitment and subsequent employment represented distinct stages of migrant incorporation. As workers were recruited, they entered an internally differentiated estate hierarchy involving rubber tapping, field work and factory employment. Consequently, "Indian plantation labour" was not homogeneous: they differed in gender, age, skill, experience, and employment status. Such distinctions affected remuneration, working conditions and opportunities within the estate economy.

Satyanarayana (2002) provides a valuable comparative perspective in examining south Indian manual and unskilled migration across south East Asia. Rather than treating migrants as a single immobile category, he highlights variations in labour mobility and migration patterns. Applied to Malaya implies plantation workers should be understood as migrants whose occupational positions could change. Some remained on estates for long periods, while others moved between plantations or sought alternative livelihoods. Plantation dependency was therefore substantial but not necessarily permanent.

3.2 Wages, rubber prices and economic vulnerability: Plantation workers' economic security was tied to international rubber markets. Thoburn (1977, p. 285) situates rubber within Malaya's wider export-oriented colonial economy, highlighting the role of primary commodities in economic development. During the rubber boom, competition for labour contributed to rising wages: average monthly estate wages increased from approximately M\$6.00 in 1910 to M\$13.90 in 1918, before falling to M\$12.40 in 1920. Housing and other benefits added approximately M\$2.00-2.50 to monthly employment value.

These increases did not necessarily imply sustained social mobility. Bauer (1948, pp. 225–226) demonstrates labour vulnerability in the face of the rubber downturn. Daily wages fell from around 40 cents in 1930 to approximately 25-30 cents by the end of 1931 and 20-25 cents during 1932. Thus, workers' capacity to save, consume, and maintain household security depended on an international commodity over which they had no control.

The scale of such dependence is evident in estate statistics. Indians comprised approximately 75.5% of the Federated Malay States' estate labour force in 1907, 74.3% in 1920 and 80.4% in 1938 (Parmer, 1960, p. 273, as cited in Kaur, 2006, p. 453). Although the absolute size of the Indian estate labour force fluctuated considerably over the period, Indians remained the predominant ethnic group within the estate labour force of the Federated Malay States. Plantation labour was therefore central to the formation and consolidation of Indian settlement, while simultaneously leaving workers vulnerable to wider economic fluctuations.

3.3 Labour discipline and contractual freedom: The plantation system also reveals the tension between wage employment and restrictions to labour mobility. Shlomowitz and Brennan (1992), examining mortality and labour conditions between 1877-1933, demonstrate the importance of institutional controls within the Indian labour migration process. Before penal contract provisions were removed, breaches of labour contracts could result in criminal punishment. In 1915, for example, 1,257 workers were convicted of contractual breach, 1,062 receiving prison sentences. The Malayan Labour Codes of 1921 and 1923, however, removed these penal provisions.

This transition is significant in that it changed workers' bargaining position. Indian workers could formally be wage earners while constrained in their ability to change employers. Plantation labour should therefore not be understood in terms of a "free" versus "unfree" binary, but through a set of changing combinations of contracts, recruitment controls, immigration restrictions, employer authority, and labour legislation.

3.4 Health, mortality and plantation life: Material conditions were equally important: plantation workers experienced diseases such as malaria and hookworm, making health inseparable from employment conditions (Shlomowitz & Brennan, 1992). Sastri's (1937) report on labour welfare drew attention to a range of issues including housing, medical care, education, and cooperative societies. Its significance lies in the fact that, by the 1930s, plantation labour had become a question of the wider social reproduction of the migrant workforce. As an official Indian investigation, however, the report should be read as a particular institutional intervention rather than a completely neutral account.

Liew Kai Khiun (2010) also demonstrates that plantation health was influenced by conflicts between plantation owners and the colonial state regarding responsibility for hospitals, doctors, sanitation and malaria control. The state of health was thus linked not only with workers' well-being, but also with the governance of the plantation economy. Manderson (1987) also demonstrates that the provision of medical services in British Malaya was linked to the development of agriculture and other export sectors. The involvement of public health measures in addressing conditions that posed risks to the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force grew. Consequently, health became another crucial aspect of plantation administration, involving the treatment of tensions between plantation workers and the economic goals of the colonists and broader plantation regulatory networks.

3.5 The plantation as a social space: Estates were also residential communities in which families developed social relationships and engaged in cultivation, livestock raising, religious practices and other activities. Perumal

and Sundara Raja (2020) show that estate garden allotments, particularly under the 1928 Labour Code, created opportunities to produce food, livestock and limited economic activity. Yet such practices also served employers in helping to maintain a stable labour force during economic difficulties. They therefore provided limited worker autonomy while maintaining labour dependence.

The Chuah Tamil settlement further illustrates this ambiguity: Perumal and Sundara Raja show that during the Great Depression, unemployed Tamil workers resisted repatriation, transforming the settlement from subsistence cultivation to small-scale agriculture. However, they simultaneously functioned as a British experiment to maintain a future labour pool. Settlement could therefore provide economic autonomy while remaining linked to colonial labour requirements.

3.6 Plantation labour and social inequality: Plantation society consequently produced significant inequalities within the Indian population itself, particularly between employers and workers, skilled and unskilled labourers, men and women, and estate-dependent workers and those able to cultivate land or pursue alternative livelihoods. At the local level, Krishnan et al. (2020), through their examination of Batu Gajah and Kellie's Castle, demonstrate how Indian plantation workers contributed significantly to estate development while also developing social relationships with estate owners. Such microhistorical analysis complements aggregate statistical evidence by revealing the everyday social relationships and interactions through which plantation society was constituted.

Sundara Raja and Raymond (2018) further argue that the socioeconomic position of south Indian labourers was influenced by colonial racial policy and plantation employment. Their analysis highlights the way a British political order accommodating Malay and Chinese interests could leave south Indian workers vulnerable to socioeconomic and political marginalisation. Economic indispensability therefore did not necessarily produce equivalent social or political advancement.

The plantation worker should therefore be understood as a historical and changing occupational position rather than a fixed social identity. Recruitment, labour legislation, commodity prices, health conditions, household strategies, and settlement opportunities could change workers' circumstances. Although structural constraints remained considerable, estates became spaces where families, religious practices, settlements, and limited economic activity developed.

The wider significance lies in the fact that plantations did not simply reproduce a colonial labour force; they contributed to the transformation of migrants into a more settled Indian social population. In doing so, they laid the foundations for community institutions and identities extending beyond employment. Plantation labour was therefore fundamental to Indian settlement in Malaya, but it was one part of a much broader occupationally differentiated diaspora.

4. Occupational Diversity Beyond Plantations: Commerce, Administration, Policing and Professional Employment

The role of plantation labour in colonial Malaya does not overshadow the fact that Indians were involved in a range of occupations. By the early twentieth century, they were active in commerce, moneylending, transport, policing, railways, clerical work, education, and public administration as well as in professional occupations. Indians came to Malaya as entrepreneurs, as employees, and as unpaid assistants and tutors; they arrived by ship and by air, by their own choice and by coercion. They occupied different positions in the colonial economy and consequently differed in income, education, place of residence, and in their relationships with the colonial

government. The Indian population was thus differentiated internally while being increasingly framed by the colonial administration within the category of “Indian”.

4.1 The 1931 Census and the occupational heterogeneity of Indians: The 1931 Census demonstrates the occupational diversity of the Indian population in British Malaya. The occupational terminology used in the Census indicates that Indian employment extended beyond plantation labour into a range of economic and occupational activities. The distribution of these occupations is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Occupational Distribution of Indians in British Malaya, 1931

Occupational category	Number of Indians	Percentage
Agriculture	222,839	35.7%
Commerce	30,214	4.8%
Industry	19,415	3.1%
Miscellaneous occupations	145,743	23.4%
Non-productive occupations	205,798	33.0%
Total	624,009	100.0%

Source: Vlieland (1932, pp. 246-251).

The distribution demonstrates that Indian employment was not confined to plantation labour. Although agriculture constituted the largest single occupational category, the substantial presence of Indians in other forms of employment indicates a broader pattern of economic participation. This occupational diversity is important for understanding the socioeconomic differentiation of the Indian community and for moving beyond a narrowly plantation-centred interpretation of Indian migration and settlement in British Malaya.

The categories should, however, be taken with a pinch of salt. The categories in the colonial censuses were not sociological, and included subtle yet significant differences in “commerce” and “miscellaneous” classifications. However, they make an important empirical observation that Indians in colonial Malaya cannot be properly described as an ‘occupationally homogeneous plantation workforce’. The census thus offers a quantitative measure to explore the relationship between various occupations and their social statuses.

4.2 Clerical, technical and educated employment: Arasaratnam (1970) offers an important distinction between labour, commercial and professional occupations, along with others, to understand Indians working outside manual labour. His research finds that the colonial state’s expansion and the increased transfer of the system of commercial administration provided educational Indians the opportunity to pursue a career in clerical, technical or subordinate administrative services. This was a truly novel way of incorporation as opposed to plantation recruitment.

Place of origin and education, especially, were very much a part of the situation. The recruitment of Ceylonese Tamils, for instance, went some way into clerical and subordinate administrative jobs as colonial authorities knew the educational system of Ceylon and preferred migrants with knowledge of English and accounting. In the same way, portions of the Malayalee population from Malabar, Travancore and Cochin took up jobs in the clerical and technical sector and this was because of the educational facilities available in their places of origin. Education therefore was one of those places where migrant types moved in and out of the government departments, railway, postal and accounting offices, schools and private enterprises.

This does not indicate that Malayalees or Ceylonese Tamils were a homogeneous group in terms of occupations or that their ethnicity was the only criteria for job selection. Instead, opportunities were the result of a combination of region, language, and education in the colonies, and of occupational demand. Migration thus entailed the transfer of agricultural workers to an agriculture economy, and the transfer of educated personnel to the administration of colonial rule. A few were, therefore, seen by some Indians as workers, while others were seen as clerks, teachers, technicians or junior officials.

4.3 Railways, policing and the Sikh occupational trajectory: Another area of significant employment in India was for railways, public utilities and transport vehicles, which included both manual and skilled, technical and clerical work. Employment on the railroads thus provided an opportunity that was different from plantation work, but not that it removed the status quo of employment in the Indian population. Access to different positions were established using training, education and recruitment networks.

This is very evident with the Sikh experience. Kaur (2009) states that Sikh migrant settlement was related to the institutional development and geography of British policing in Malaya and the Straits Settlements, and that working in security services affected both the geography and institutional development of the migrant Sikh communities. The study of Gill (2003) on the Perak Armed Police, the First Battalion Perak Sikhs and the Malay States Guides further shows that significant contingents of early Sikh immigrants would go to Malaya as policemen, soldiers and watchmen.

This was a somewhat different path followed by the Tamil plantation-migrant. Sikh migrants might join the colonial economy through employment in colonial army or police, thus establishing direct relationship with coercive and administrative system of colonial domination. Employment thus had an impact not only on livelihood, but on social recognition and geographical concentration as well. Kaur's work on Sikh gurdwaras also shows that the posting of a Sikh police officer can help to support religious institutions and community settlements. Police barracks and railway centres and administrative stations in turn were potential points of social organisation.

Gera Roy's concept of "immobile mobilities" further enriches this understanding of colonial mobility by drawing attention to forms of movement that were simultaneously enabled and constrained under colonial rule. These included mobility through military, police and railway services, alongside the regulation and restriction of Asian mobility through immigration controls and exclusionary laws. The opportunities and constraints of imperial governance, were therefore shaping occupational migration.

4.4 Commerce, moneylending and Indian capital: The institutions for Indian commercial migration were different. The Nattukottai Chettiers represent the most obvious case of a community whose livelihood was not based on plantation recruitment, but on economic activities involving capital, kinship, and commercial networks. Because Chettiar business lending was backed by family, temple institutions, ethnic solidarity and property accumulation, it facilitated the growth of business and accumulation of property in South India and throughout Southeast Asia, as shown by Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2013).

Chettiar finance was also not confined to an Indian economic sphere as Singh's (2017) research indicates, but was part of a larger colonial economy. Approximately in between the mid-1870s and early 1890s, the Chettiar financier established links with Chinese entrepreneurs, colonial officials, lawyers, Malay rulers, penghulus, ship captains, shopkeepers and farmers. The activities they engaged in were mortgage loans, pawnshop loans, insurance bonds and financial arrangements related to salaries and pensions. Indian commercial capital, in turn, linked various ethnic and occupational groups in the colonial economy.

In a larger study of Indian merchant networks, Markovits (2000) points to the role of circulation, information, kinship and flexible business organisation in the maintenance of commercial activity across geographical borders. His research on the networks of businessmen in India offers a comparative perspective on the means of commerce and social networks through which traders could conduct business across borders. But

the business path crossed with working class society. Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2017) demonstrate that the financial activity of the Chettiar was linked with labouring Indians via credit and economic transactions, establishing interdependent relationships that could reinforce inequality at the same time. Commercial migration thus helped in economic integration and stratification within the population of India.

4.5 Occupational mobility, small-scale commerce and education: There were some flexible working outlines for occupations. When looking at South Indian Muslim economic networks in Southeast Asia, Tschacher (2018) disputes a neat distinction between the merchant community and the labourers of poverty. He attests to the blurring of wage-labour-business, and how formal and informal relations to business reproduction with family and non-family members and in small business sectors was accomplished in British Malaya and the Straits Settlements. This implies the potential for shift in occupational identity throughout an Individual's life-cycle and for mobility to take place via petty trade, hawking, shopkeeping and family businesses rather than from plantation work to professional employment.

This, however, was not the same across all areas of the country. To diversify economically, access to capital, kinship networks, education and urban markets influenced. Social mobility must then be thought in terms of a range of possibilities, not as a *fait accompli* of migration.

Typically, it was education that continued these trends over generations. Thiagarajah and Ramasamy (2025) show that the provision of education in the Tamil-language in colonial Malaya grew from missionary schools, committee schools, government, and estate schools, but not uniformly. Many plantation communities have limited education, as indicated by their analysis. The findings of research by Maniam et al. (2024) also confirm that Tamil schools were established in the colonial labour system and that basic education was offered in the schools but teacher education and the quality of education were unbalanced. Schooling development was therefore linked to occupation structures because children in varying domains of residence, economy and context gained differential kinds of schooling capital that might effect occupational opportunities.

4.6 Occupational differentiation and the formation of the Indian diaspora: The evidence shows that occupational diversity was not just an economic phenomenon, but also a way to produce social differentiation among the population of India. Plantation workers, clerks, technocrats, Sikh policemen, railway workers, Chettiar capitalists, merchants and professionals arrived in Malaya through various institutional channels and had access to different types of education, capital, urban space and state institutions.

Occupational status was thus closely linked with migration channel, geography and social resources. The placement of plantation labour was linked with recruitment systems and estate settlements; policing and railway work with a number of groups and towns, barracks and administrative centres; commerce and moneylending with kinship networks, caste networks and networks of capital; and clerical and professional work with education and English language skills. These differences had an impact on social standing and opportunities for mobility.

Meanwhile, there was no full isolation due to occupational differentiation. Economic exchanges, religious communities, schools, places of work and larger colonial policies established places of contact. The designation "Indian" thus gathered together populations whose languages, religions, geographic areas, professions and social statuses could vary greatly. Colonialism drew lines of distinction between Indians on an economic basis and bound them together into a larger ethnic group, on an administrative and social basis.

The main idea being suggested is that the location of occupation influenced the form of the Indian incorporation into colonial Malaya. Labour intensive production was the major channel for plantation workers, while commercial and financial channels were the main mechanism for recruitment of merchants, Chettiars and policing and security institutions for Sikhs and educational and administrative institutions for clerical and professional Indians. These modes of incorporation affected patterns of residence, institutional engagement and opportunities to access social mobility, and established connections between occupations.

Occupational diversity thus serves as a crucial link between migration history and diaspora formation. It was not a coherent community that existed before migration, and it wasn't just a result of plantation recruitment. The Indian diaspora was not a pre-existing homogeneous community, and it was not a simple by-product of plantation recruitment. It was formed by the intermingling of several migration flows, and by the unequal distribution of occupation. These differences must be understood to account for the fact that a population split by occupation, region, language, religion and class could also have evolved institutions, relationships, and ways of identifying that bind it together as a larger Indian diasporic community.

5. Occupational Differentiation, Social Mobility and Internal Boundaries within the Indian Diaspora

Colonial Malaysia was a diverse set of occupations, which granted a range of social and economic mobility which was not equal. Capital access, educational opportunities, institutional power, and social standing of plantation workers, clerks, teachers, policemen, merchants, moneylenders, technicians and professionals were unequal. However, within the larger Indian population, occupational position was also a key plank in the production of hierarchy. Occupational transition, investment, education, small-scale trade, cultivation and associational involvement were key factors in facilitating mobility, and caste, language, religion, region and class were additional constraints and opportunities. As a consequence, there has been a constant struggle of internal differentiation and collective belonging.

5.1 Occupational position, class and the emergence of social hierarchy: The distinct nature of Indian occupations led to vastly different relationships between Indians and capital, education, colonial authority and urban institutions. Stenson's *Class, Race, and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case* is truly special since it addresses Indians in terms of their class, race and colonialism as opposed to them as a single ethnic group. It is possible that an English-educated clerk, a plantation labourer and a commercial financier might all be termed 'Indian' and have vastly different incomes, residences, levels of education, and access to institutions. Establishment of an educated and professional minority thus brought about an important social polarity, but in a non-orthogonal sense, between "elite" and "labour". Intermediately ranked were skilled workers, teachers, clerks, small traders and cultivators/lower-level officials. By exploiting their diversity, the market established a ladder of social roles which had an impact on mobility resources.

In the case of South Indians living on plantations, Jain (1970) has also shown how the position of occupations is closely related to social status and to the availability of economic and institutional resources. In his examination of a rubber plantation in Malaya, he explains that a differentiated social system developed here, with unequal access to power having an impact on social authority, economic organisation, and daily life. Similarly, Trimmer (2014) reveals that colonial Malaya evolved an imperial labour hierarchy, whereby migrant groups were given different economic and occupational statuses. Working as plantation workers was not the only alternative for the Indians; other work positions were available in the colonial economy, such as clerical, railway, commercial, etc. jobs. This occupational differentiation thus helped to create social differentiation within the overall Indian population.

5.2 Capital, credit and economic mobility: The availability of credit was an important factor in economic mobility. This is very apparent in the case of the Nattukottai Chettiars. The financial networks were not equal, and they did not always benefit workers but were established by Chettiar financiers to link the two classes, as demonstrated by Suppiah and Sundara Raja (2017). Debt might enable people to acquire land or establish businesses, while at the same time limiting their potential to earn their own wealth. Singh also shows that Chettiar capital was not an exclusively Indian economy, but was intertwined with the larger economy of the colony in which the merchants participated in other ways, such as mortgage lending, pawnshops, financial bonds and other agreements with Chinese entrepreneurs, colonial officials, lawyers, Malay authorities, shopkeepers and farmers (Singh, 2017). In India kinship, informational networks, capital, and mobility are also crucial to transregional commerce, as demonstrated by Markovits' analysis of merchant networks

(Markovits, 2000). Economic mobility thus was tied to access to networks and capital which were in turn unevenly distributed.

5.3 Education, geography and unequal occupational opportunity: Education constituted another major mechanism of differentiation. Some Indians were able to pursue clerical, teaching, administrative and professional careers and to comprehend and articulate themselves better to colonial authorities due to their English-language competency and literacy. Indian social organisation features prominently in terms of education, language, caste, economic position and the urban-rural divide that, according to Hassan and Weiss (2003), helped to produce a professional minority class of western-educated Indians. Inequalities were reinforced by geography. A plantation worker would have more association with plantation-based institutions and work, while an urban Indian would have access to this network through institutions but not to government offices or markets, which would have a more limited reach.

Plantation workers' networks tended to be tied to plantation-related work and institutions, while those of urban Indians were linked more to networks of institutions than to government offices or markets, which were more limitedly spread. This inequality is one that is evident in the case of an estate school in Tamil education; although there was an important role for these educational institutions, they typically had fewer opportunities than an urban institution. Thus, a clear cross-generational connection was found: occupational position and industry influenced residential location, which in turn affected educational opportunities and subsequently shaped future occupational possibilities. These conditions do not determine individual events, nor do they imply that specific groups of work persons started on equal footing, but they did set the stage for some groups to have a worse starting position than others.

5.4 Caste, language, region and the negotiation of status: There was no caste system replaced by an economic classification. Lee and Rajoo's analysis of Sanskritisation highlights the extent to which some groups found more recognition within society through adopting practices of higher status castes and that mobility is not necessarily limited to occupational shifts, but also one of cultural and status change (Lee & Rajoo, 1987). Among her other suggestions, ritual, religious reform, marital arrangements, clubs and associations, and claims of respectability might then turn out to be implements of status negotiation. However, while caste was involved it did not fully dictate social relationships in the context of region, language, religion, occupation and education.

The same is true in the case of Rajoo's interpretations of the phenomenon of Indian identity and belonging in Malaya, as it was also transferred rather than recreated from India in the new setting. There were differences in language identification within India (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi etc.) by providing separate schools, associations and cultural institutions, but at the same time differences were not an impediment, as languages brought people together within occupations. Similarly, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim and Christian institutions established different religious codes of affiliation under the general term of "Indian". Therefore, diasporic identity was defined as multiple and not single identities.

5.5 Kinship, associations and labour-based solidarity: Social support and reproduction of communities were facilitated by kinship and voluntary associations. Rajoo's research work on an Indian lower-class settlement that is being urbanised illustrates the significance of kinship in helping to provide housing, jobs, marriage and social relationships. Hassan and Weiss (2003) have pointed out that the place of collective activities is important and includes spaces such as caste, religious, youth and social and occupational organisations. These could foster social capital in various ways, such as providing information about employment, welfare, housing, etc., leadership positions, networks and social capital, but at the same time it may reinforce social exclusion by favouring specific castes, languages or religions. A new concept of solidarity was added to trade unionism.

The plantation situation involves shared conditions in the work space and similar conditions of plantation workers, which could bring about class-based organisations among plantation workers as shown by Ramasamy's study on plantation labour, capital, unions and the state (Ramasamy, 1994). Labour solidarity, then, may indeed transcend the boundaries of

caste, region and language without destroying them. Occupations, therefore, sometimes served as sources of differentiation, but also as bases for collective action.

5.6 Representation, leadership and the formation of collective belonging: Additionally, who was allowed to represent the general population of Indians also was determined by occupational differentiation. Western-educated professionals and clerks and public leaders had more forms of communication and institutional resources with western institutions and authorities. The research findings of Mahajani (1960) reflect the splintered nature of associational life in India where organisations represent groups, which have different occupational, regional, religious and social interests. The Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM), founded in 1936, aimed to provide a wider organisational framework, and there was still a conflict between educated, professional and plantation workers. Representation to Indians was not representation of all Indians. Collective aspirations and internal inequalities all interacted with each other in shaping a nascent public sphere. This gave rise to a need for a construction of the larger Indian identity in terms of occupation and class, caste, language, region and religion. Thus, occupational diversity played an important role in the process of diaspora formation. It produced differentiated levels of social status, gave rise to distinct forms of incorporation, and provided institutions and collective organisations with avenues for engaging with a broader sense of Indian identity.

6. From Multiple Communities to a Diasporic Community: Institutions, Networks and Indian Identity

Despite the differences in occupation found above, the same situation was not true of Indian communities in colonial Malaya, who were able to establish forums in which cultural practices, community interests and political demands could be voiced. But these institutions did not just form a single Indian community. Some of the institutions, such as temples, schools, newspapers, voluntary associations, labour organisations and political parties, represented specific linguistic and regional, religious and class interests. Indian belonging was thus a negotiated historical process. Hellmann-Rajanaykam suggests that while Indians had been around in the Malay Peninsula for a while, British rule progressively regarded them as a separate ethnic group and “Indian” was not a natural unity. Indian identity emerged with Tamil, Punjabi, Malayali, Telugu, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu identity and occupational identity.

6.1 Religious institutions and the local foundations of community: Among the most enduring institutions of Indian settlement were religious institutions. Temples, mosques and gurdwaras offered places to worship, but also to celebrate festivals, give donations, meet neighbours, settle conflicts and pass on culture. Belle’s research in Malaysia shows that Malaysian Hinduism was not a veritable wholesale importation of the beliefs of South India. Estate workers recreated remembered practices, which were shaped by new regional, caste, class and ethnic circumstances, resulting in a highly complex and dynamic Hindu formation (Belle, 2017). Religious organisations thus maintained identities which were handed down and modified them to suit Malayan conditions. The same was true of the Sikh gurdwaras, which also grew in the vicinity of military and police settlements. Thus, religion, at the same time, celebrated difference and created locally organised communities of dispersed migrants.

Migration, religious practice and the social environment provide the basis for the relationship between collective identity and its material expressions through Hindu temples in Malaysia, as shown in the research by Prorok (2013). Her study also reveals that the organisation of communities and the mobilisation of social and material resources were crucial to the founding and management of temples. In another study on the status and contribution of the Maran Sri Marathandavar Temple in plantation areas, Kandasamy and Sathasivam (2018) confirm that plantation temples constituted a strong religious and cultural symbol of identity for South Indians. Religious institutions were thus able to offer familiar cultural environments for migrants, as well as local institutions of community organisation within the evolving social context of colonial Malaya.

6.2 Schools, language and unequal access to community life: Education re-created and re-constructed identity; it conveyed language, cultural values and expectations, and it gave access to colonial institutions. It can be seen that the Indian education has grown over a differentiated structure such as English-medium schools, which were oriented towards the urban and professional and Tamil vernacular and estate schools, which served significant plantation populations (Arasaratnam, 1970). This created a contradiction in the middle. Vernacular schools maintained linguistic and cultural identity, and inequitable access to English language instruction had an impact on opportunities for accessing administrative and professional jobs and on opportunities to participate in public representation. It was therefore thought that the issue of cultural reproduction had linkage with intergenerational mobility in schools. Educational differentiation also resulted in differential capacities of various parts of the Indian population to be involved in the broader community institutions. Education as a result then became a vehicle to preserve identity and also a cause of internal inequality.

6.3 Newspapers, reform and the emergence of a diasporic public sphere: Print culture brought geographically distant Indians together in common debates, grievances and cultural discussions. The Tamil language newspapers were able to reach plantation workers and urban Tamils, and the English language newspapers linked educated Indians to the larger political debate. Alagirisamy (2016) shows how the political consciousness of the Tamils in Malaya emerged through transnational influences, especially after the visits of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy from 1929 onwards. Then, reformist concepts on caste, religion and social equality were not just simply imported but were adapted to Malayan Tamil society. Print culture then, therefore, produced a diasporic public sphere where migrants discussed what they were, in the context of colonialism. The Tamil and religious/reformist awareness could thus be shared with, or critiqued or redefined by, Indian consciousness.

How the development of Indian mass media in Malaya was linked to the political and social mobilisation of Indians is demonstrated by Lent (1974). Questions of immigration, working conditions, political rights and social reform were increasingly taken up by Tamil newspapers, and thus immigrant and working communities were not the only groups involved in public discussion. In a study of Tamil journalism from 1920 to 1941, Ampalavanar (1970) also emphasises the editorial voice of the Tamil press, which presented the problems of the Indian community and introduced reformist ideas. Newspapers thus became vital 'spaces' in which migrants were brought into contact with political affairs, or affected by them; in which social issues were discussed; and in which negotiations and the contours of a sense of collective identity were worked out in the shifting circumstances of colonial Malaya.

6.4 Voluntary associations, CIAM and the problem of representation: The spaces for welfare, education, culture, sport and political advocacy were provided by voluntary associations, although these associations were also numerous, making it hard to build a unified representation. Writings by Arasaratnam reveal that associations had an incomplete organisational continuity in India and they were susceptible to factionalism, apathy or concentration among educated persons (Arasaratnam, 1970). Often associations were formed on a linguistic, ethnic or religious basis, around a profession or by geographic location. In 1936, the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) was formed, which was an attempt to unite the existing associations and chambers. But Kailasam believes that Indian identity was not fully formed and even the middle class educated in English did not have a fully integrated ethnic consciousness prior to the post-war era. The establishment of a central body did not necessarily equate with equal representation. There were significant and large differences in education, occupation, class, social status that needed to be negotiated in the process of institutional development (Kailasam, 2015).

Perianayagam (2025) also shows how the progress of Indian political representation in Malaya was inextricably linked to the plantation labour situation. The Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) was one of the key organisations which tried to address the problems of Indian plantation workers, such as job security and fair wages. This meant that it was a product of broader efforts towards the organisation of Indian interests within the political and economic systems of the colonial era. However, plantation labour conditions also reveal the persisting social and occupational divisions among the Indian people. The institutions of representation that

were created gave rise to new institutional spaces for the articulation of Indian interests, but the different groupings within the community continued to influence both the scope of representation possible and its nature.

6.5 Labour organisations and class-based solidarity: Labour organisation brought in a new ground for collective identity. Religious and linguistic associations tended to represent specific communities, but trade unions were able to unite workers in response to wages, working conditions, and associations with employers. In his analysis, Ramasamy has introduced and developed the idea of plantation labour, unions, capital and the state into the political economy of plantation capitalism, and demonstrated how the common condition of plantation labour can lead to collective organisation. Ramasamy's analysis incorporates and utilises the notion of plantation labour, plantation unions, capital, and the state in the political economy of plantation capitalism, and illustrates how the condition of plantation labour can facilitate the formation of collective organisation.

Occupational identity was a complement to Tamil, caste and religious identities; class-based solidarity was not supplanted by these identities. The 1930s, a time of economic hardship, were especially notable for the inadequacies of traditional means of representation as wages declined, jobs were lost, and repatriation and labour unrest prevailed. Labour organisation might thus link groups that were distinguished by pre-existing social divisions, establishing a potential basis for solidarity and cohesiveness as well as for differentiation.

6.6 Transnational networks and the negotiation of Indian belonging: Transnational linkages to India also helped to define Indian identity in colonial Malaya. Alagirisamy shows how reform movements and his involvement in Malaya contributed to political and cultural discourses in which the concepts of caste, religion, education, and social dignity were reimagined within the Malayan context (Alagirisamy, 2016). This means that the diaspora was not a copy of Indian society simply taken overseas, but migrants made use of transnational concepts in their own social contexts. Likewise, the wider political and nationalist discourse in India met with local concerns about labour welfare, education and representation. Indian identity thus received a transnational and local definition.

The institutional landscape had become increasingly complex by the late colonial period, with the establishment of temples, schools, newspapers, associations, labour organisations and political organisations establishing an interconnected array of institutions, without forming a single homogeneous community. An individual could simultaneously be Tamil, Hindu, a plantation worker and "Indian", with different identities becoming prominent in different institutional settings. The Indian diaspora, therefore, was created through the articulation of difference. While some occupational, linguistic, religious and regional differences remained, institutions put in place mechanisms for their negotiation. Diasporic community formation, however, was not a natural outgrowth of migration or merely a consequence of colonial classification, but a result of combinations of institutionalisation, social mobility and transnational networks and collective action.

7. Conclusion

Beyond the plantation focus of research on colonial migration to Malaya, this paper has discussed how the Indian community developed, beginning with the period around 1870 through to 1941. It has as its main thrust the idea that the Indians migrated in several groups with different occupational profiles and that a person's occupation indicates his access to capital, education and institutions, social status and mobility. But differentiation had not resulted in true fragmentation. Religious organisations, schools, newspapers, associations, labour organisations, and transnational links started to form networks and allow groups separated by region, language, religion, caste, and class to coalesce and communicate a sense of group belonging. In terms of the Indian diaspora, this led to its simultaneous differentiation and interconnectivity.

The first research question had to do with the principal channels of migration and occupation into Malaya by the Indians. The evidence shows that migration was organised along various needs of the colonial economy and state. Labour shortages were filled by plantation companies that brought in large numbers of South Indian labourers via the indenture and kangani systems, and there were other employment channels too, such as policing, military service, railways and public works. Commerce, finance and shopkeeping drew in merchants, shopkeepers and bankers, education and administration opportunities for clerks, teachers and professionals. Migration was by no means a single mass movement of “Indians”, but rather entangled and dispersed, giving rise to a variety of dynamics that ranged from conflicts with colonial power, capital, and urban space.

Second, the region, language, religion, caste and class were investigated with respect to occupation.

These identities were not lost by individuals moving away; they were related to the position of an individual in the job. The different economic and institutional positions were held by Tamil plantation workers, Sikh policemen, Ceylonese and Malayali educated groups, clerks and professionals, as well as South Indian Muslim traders and Chettiar financiers. This is because Stenson’s focus on class, race/colonialism is notable for not considering Indians as a singular homogeneous ethnic group, an analysis that places them in the broader context of colonial society’s class system (Stenson, 1980). Likewise, Hellmann-Rajanayagam warns against the use of the term Indian as an unproblematic, monolithic term, for colonial constructs were increasingly lumping together people who are South Asian. Tamil, Punjabi, Malayali, religious, caste/occupational identities thus co-existed alongside Indian identity as an umbrella identity.

The third research question was concerned with the effect of occupational differentiation on institutions and community organisation. There was a strong correlation between employment areas and institutional geography. Temples were established in plantation settlements, while settlement networks emerged around gurdwaras and through Sikh policing and military employment. Financial and commercial relationships extended beyond the boundaries of the Indian population, while language and cultural knowledge were reproduced through education, and communication and the making of collective claims were facilitated through newspapers and voluntary associations. Belle shows that Malaysian Hinduism, far from being a simple transplant of South Indian practice, is a dynamic formation moulded by Malayan social circumstances. Alagirisamy also illustrates the transnational influences on the making of the Tamil political sense with reference to the Self-Respect Movement and the efforts of Periyar to reach Malaya (Alagirisamy, 2016). Institutions were thus able to maintain particular identities while generating broader arenas of interaction.

The fourth research question related to social and economic mobility. The evidence suggests that mobility was in evidence, but that it was irregular, and was not simply mobility from manual work to professional work. The skilled and the clerical were both open to the possibility of occupational change, as were the teachers, petty traders and cultivators, while employment and economic mobility were connected to savings, livestock, land, and business and credit. The opportunity for learning English and administrative employment was linked to education, while religious reform, association and claims of respectability would lead to status mobility. However, as Chettiar and Sundara Raja have argued, Chettiar credit linked the agents of the working class with the agents of the civil servant class via ‘fundamentally unequal economic relationships’ (Suppiah & Sundara Raja, 2017). Singh shows a broad scope of the involvement of Chettiar finance in the colonial economy, and Markovits points to kinship, information, capital, and mobility among Indian merchant networks (Singh, 2017; Markovits, 2000). Therefore, mobility was organised based on unequal access to resources, not purely on effort.

This ‘preparation’ phase should therefore be read as a formative one from 1870 to 1941. By 1941, Indian society had developed a good institutional framework but was fictionalised according to occupation, class, language, religion, region and political attitudes. The importance of the diversity of occupations therefore does not lie simply in the idea that Indians worked in jobs other than plantation work. It addresses the processes through which distinct patterns of occupation had a distinct impact on areas of residence, institutional access, authority, social networks, mobility and involvement in collective life. So too was occupational diversity one of the processes in the production of an internal structure of the diaspora.

Finally, the Indian community in Colonial Malaya was neither an Indian society brought out in the same form as it existed in India, nor simply a colonial classification of Indians. It was a historically constructed formation in which occupational position crossed over with class, caste, territory, language and religion, and institutions manifested difference as social connection. With labour in the plantation, a supporting demographic and economic infrastructure was being established, but other workers, including merchants, money-lenders, clerks, teachers, policemen, railway workers, and small traders, helped with the overall institutionalisation of Indian society.

The diaspora therefore arose from a dynamic around the poles of ‘difference and connection’, ‘inequality and mobility’, ‘localisation and transnationalism’. A focus on the plantation beyond the borders, however, suggests that the Indian diaspora does not exist as if it were an unmixed mass, but rather as a result of the manner in which difference was intermingled, contested, attracted, and lived together in the process of making a nation, especially “shared” nation.

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