



The Colonial Period: Its Impact on Indians in Malaya and Burma

Dr. Harkirat Singh

Associate Professor Public College, Samana (Patiala) Punjab

Corresponding Author- Dr. Harkirat Singh

Email- 73sidhu@gmail.com

Abstract

The history of migration in India is among the most diverse and complex in the world. South-East Asia is closely linked to the colonial history of the arrival, distribution and settlement of Indians. As a result of British colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent, Indians were able to move to Burma and Malaya. The majority arrived as labouring classes, while the minority came as workers and businessmen, and many Indian revolutionaries fled. The object of the present study is to explore the historical, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the Indians who moved to the Malaya and Burma countries during the colonial period. The Malaya and Burma region being the immediate neighboring area to us and being the area of the earliest migration, the study of the Indians in region obviously needs greater attention. Burma and Malaya received the maximum number of Indians. Mass migration of Indians started taking place from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Manpower was required by the colonial powers for the exploitation of natural resources that India could provide. Huge plantations were coming up where cash crops like rubber, tea, coconuts, tobacco, coffee, sugarcane and spices were grown. Plantations were the greatest legacies of colonialism. These plantations, especially in the British colonies, attracted cheap Indian labour. The indigenous people were indifferent towards working on the plantations as most of them were already involved in traditional farming. With the influx of the Indians, Southeast Asian societies became the examples of plural societies, "where it is said the various groups mix but do not combine."¹

The conditions of the Indians who came as labourers were pitiable. They were no better than slaves. The British were indifferent to their problems. The colonies were viewed by the British as glorified commercial undertakings. As a result the Indian immigrants were viewed from a totally selfish point of view i.e., as tools for the advancement of British commercial interests. There was no question of their having political rights; they were there to earn a living and then go back to where they came from. Neither did the Indians expect the British to be politically responsible towards them. They were loyal and industrious and gave no trouble as long as they were allowed to live as separate entities, maintaining their links with "Mother India". There was no intermixing with the other races.

Burma

Migration from India to Burma took place long before the advent of British rule. But their relations were made arbitrarily closer after the Third Burmese War (1886) when the British administered Burma as a minor province of India and remained so until 1927. It was developed fairly typically as an exploitation colony along lines considered advantageous to the metropolitan country. Indian immigrant flows to Burma greatly exceeded similar flow to Malaya.

Between 1910 and 1935, Indian inflows to Burma totaled 2,04,800.² Over 50 percent of Indian population was from North India. Tamil and Telugus to gather constituted less than 33 percent.³ The majority of Indians in Burma were immigrants to the country. As in other areas of the British Empire, in Burma, too, a demand for labour arose which resulted in attracting Indian immigrants. Indians found employment easily as they were willing to work for low wages unlike the Burmese.

The number of Indians who to Burma rose each year. In spite of the fact that most of them were birds of passage, there were many who stayed back in Burma and regarded it as their home. Many Indian men married Burmese women. Thus a steady settlement of Indians and their families took place and by 1941 over a million Indians were living in Burma, principally in the urban and commercial centers of the coastal and deltaic zones. Resentment towards Indians was building up. It was felt that they were not only taking away employment from the Burmese but also their women. The following statement by a Burmese member in the Legislature clearly shows the above mentioned apprehensions felt by the indigenous population. He stated:

"Besides taking our country and our property they take our sisters. The Burmese nation will become extinct. What use will Home Rule be to us... When the Burmese nation has become half-caste by gradual extinction?"⁴

As pointed out by Hugh Tinker, the Indians when willing to assimilate, faced the anger, as in Burma and where they kept apart, as in Kenya from Africans, the anger was again directed towards them. It is interesting to note that the marriages of Burmese ladies with British or Chinese men did not anger the Burmese society.

The Indians in Burma were mainly engaged in unskilled labour. In fact, most of them were engaged in menial work which the Burmese refused to do. The affluent among them were the Chettiyars who gave credit to the farmers. Whenever the farmer was unable to pay back the paddy money to Chettiyars, the latter would take possession of the land. With the result that by 1938, 25 per cent of the rice lands in the thirteen principal rice-growing districts had passed into the hands of the Chettiyars. In other countries of Southeast Asia it was the Chinese who supplemented the European in playing the role of capitalist, thereby ultimately incurring the hostility of the native people. In Burma it was the Indian who played the role of capitalist and whose unpopularity was one of the pillars of the nationalism which began to express itself after the First World War.

The British did nothing to assuage the anger of the Burmese people. In fact their short-sighted policies caused much hardship to the Indians there. To give one example, when, in 1930, the Indian dockers of Rangoon went on strike for higher wages Burmese workers were engaged instead of them. As soon as the matter was settled between the British employers and the striking Indians, the Burmese were discharged. Instead of directing their wrath towards those who had first employed and then discharged them, they attacked the Indians. Much damage was caused to Indian life and property. In June 1930, 33,000 Indians were estimated to have left for India.⁵ Indians were again attacked in July 1938 over a minor incident. Indian property was damaged by Burmese. About 11,000 Indians became destitute and had to be repatriated to their motherland. As if it was one big plot to get rid of Indians, riots again took place in April 1940. Many of them were sent back to India. All these were taking place in spite of assurances given by the British to Indians in Burma.

During the Japanese rule both the Burmese and the Indians suffered. After the war was over it became clear that neither the British nor the Burmese leaders wanted the immigration from India to continue. However, some of them were brought back to restore port facilities and public transport services. In June 1947, an Emergency Immigration Act imposed strict control on all persons seeking entry from any country. According to the Constitution of Independent Burma, those who had lived before Independence for eight out of ten years with Burma were eligible for citizenship. Out of 40,000 Indians who applied only 10,000 became citizens of Burma, leaving the Commonwealth the rest of the Indians became foreigners. These Indians were later ejected out of Burma, Even those who became the citizens did not have any share in the administration of their country of adoption.

The second cause of trouble between Indians and Burmese lies in the penetration of Indians into the money lending business and the resultant alienation of land from the Burmese peasant. The Indian moneylenders became a menace to rural Burma. The first trouble flared up during the financial crisis of

the 1920's. The crisis, together with strong nationalist feelings which emerged in Burma resulted in the Indo-Burmese riots of 1938. The disharmony between the Burmese and the Indians can be explained in a nutshell. It was due (i) to the presence of Indian landlords and moneylenders and (ii) to the competition faced the Burmese from the cheap labour.

Malaya

A large number of Indian immigrated to Malaya from India during the British period. 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 paramountcy in India and the consolidation of British power in Malaya. The number of Indians in Malaya spiraled to 268,269 by 1911 to 470,180 by 1921, and to 621,847 by 1931.⁶ Most of them came from Southern India. A large number went as labourers and others as petty traders and miscellaneous servicemen. During those days, no travel documents were required for travel between India and Malaya. This practice of travel without travel documents continued almost till the Republic of India started issuing national passports to her citizens in 1950.

The Indian labourers came to Malaya under the indenture system. They worked as slaves on the plantations. Their redemption lay in the fact that their bondage was not permanent. They could obtain freedom after five or ten years, depending on the terms of the contract.

These labourers being simple, illiterate and poor were tricked by professional recruiters into going overseas. Little did these people know under the conditions they were going to face in the alien lands. The emigration of Indians to distant lands was mainly the result of British imperial interests in the economic exploitation of the colonised countries. Therefore, in spite of the criticism by many in India and England, the colonial office continued with the system. Ultimately, due to agitation against the indenture system in India, it was abolished on 1st January 1920.⁷

In 1938, the Government of India put a ban on labour emigration. According to a writer who has studied the problems of Indians in Malaysia, the 1938 ban had a "powerful effect on the demographic strength and prospects of the Indian Community in Malaya." For if the ban had not taken place, the Indian would have been, numerically, a more powerful minority in Malaya.

In spite of the ban the immigration to Malaya did not completely cease. For now those that paid their passage. Most of these that come to Malaya were Tamils from Madras. Although a considerable number of these Indians employed labourers on rubber estates, many also worked the railways and public works department. Later, clerks, traders, doctors, teachers, lawyers other professional men came to Malaya. As mentioned already, it was the British rule in the Straits Settlements and Malaya States that had encouraged the immigration non-Malay communities into Malaya. As consequence Malaya, which at beginning of 19th century had mainly a Malay population, had become at the time of independence 1957, an ethnically mixed society.

The Malays were getting disturbed the unrestricted immigration of Chinese and Indian into Malaya. They felt suspicious of these aliens who came to find employment. The Malays therefore demanded total ban immigration. The British Government was agreeable, for there was now enough labour force to be used for advancement of their economic interests.

The Malay political system was, except for minor modification, more or less preserved during the British Administration. The Malay States were to act on the advice of the British officers. However, on matters relating to Malay religion and custom they were act independently. In comparison, the non-Malays did not enjoy any political rights. The British encouraged divisions. The general effect of the communal divisions under the British rule was the easy fall of Malaya to the Japanese. There was common national feeling which would unite the people against the Japan. The Japanese also encouraged the already existing divisions.

After the war ended, things were not same. The Malays had become vociferous and

demanded "Malaya for the Malays." However the British had other ideas. Mutual suspicion among the three races led to the formation of political organisations which were communal in structure. Each community looked to its communal organisation for the protection of its interests. Those organisations which were non communal could not succeed in a situation where each race had its separate approach. The Indian organisation was the Malayan Indian Congress. Though a replica the Indian National Congress as far as its name and constitution concerned, it could not, in any way, reach the height of the popularity the Indian National Congress.⁸

The Indian leaders greatly concerned about the condition of the Indians abroad. It was due to the struggle of the Indian leaders against the indenture system that it had to be abolished in January 1920. Many resolutions were passed during this period by the Indian National Congress to condemn indenture system. By doing so, they mobilised public opinion and brought pressure on the British rulers to away with system. The following is an extract from a resolution passed in 1915. It state:

This Congress re-affirms Resolution passed its last session against the system of indentured labour and urges its abolition as early possible, the system being form of slavery which socially politically debases the labourers and is seriously detrimental to the economic and moral interests in the country.⁹ However, it cannot be denied that, in spite of interests shown by the Indian leaders, the overseas Indians were left without proper leadership. The Indians who went abroad had largely reconciled themselves to a "subservient role" both politically and economically. Though they did worry about their future, they did not express their concern openly. They knew that if they openly aired their grievances, the natives would become suspicious and fearful of them. The main dividing force between the Indians and the indigenous communities, especially in Malaya, was their religious difference. Most of these Indians were Hindus. And they saw to it that they preserved their religious, cultural and ethnic background. They retained their Indianness and looked at "Mother India" for guidance. Unfortunately,

these Indians lacked dynamic leadership. The Malaysian Indian Congress in the past was not able to provide adequate leadership. It was mostly involved in feuds involving the party leaders. The role and influence of the Indian community, through MIC, in the body politic, the administrative structure and national economy has been negligible.

One must not forget that the people who immigrated during the colonial period belonged to the depressed and backward classes. They did not have political bargaining strength as they lacked the requisites for it. They were not united, for they had brought with them all the class and caste stratifications present in Indian society. Economically, they were at the lowest rung of the ladder. The position of Indians in Malaya or Burma was not enviable. The majority of them were plantation labourers or menial workers leading a life of hardship. In the government services their participation was negligible. Those Indians who were employed were mostly concentrated in the low productivity

The Indian Government has throughout maintained that overseas Indians must identify themselves with their country of domicile. India is itself facing intricate minority problems. We know how sensitive India is to any criticism from outsiders. It would, therefore, not like to interfere in the minority problems of others which would amount to meddling in the affairs of sovereign countries. It is absolutely clear that Indians abroad should not depend on India for support. They are no longer its responsibility. These Indians have to look for inspiration among themselves and see how best they may strengthen understanding and harmony among the divergent ethnic groups. Racial harmony is a prerequisite for successful nation-building. However, the Indian Government must maintain good relations with countries where Indians are settled. This would strengthen the position of overseas Indians. There is no doubt that Indian labour in the past had made a lasting contribution to Malaya and Burma countries. But, for the future, both the Indian leaders and followers in these countries have to improve themselves otherwise they will

always remain economically and politically backward.

Thus, we have noticed historic migration and settlement of the Indians in South-East Asia during the British period. Between 1800-1920 a large numbers of persons migrated to Malaya and Burma from India during the British period. Most of them came from Southern India. A large number went as labourers and others as petty traders and miscellaneous servicemen South-East Asia was a major destination of mass labour migration. In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries labour migration from India to the region was a defining feature of Asian globalization. The migration and settlement of the Indians into South-East Asia began on large scale with expansion of British rule in India. British colonial dominance of the Indian subcontinent facilitated the movement of Indians to Burma and Malaya.

References:

1. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into Poverty of Nations*, London, 1977, pp. 64-68.
2. James Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration*, Rangoon, 1941, p.77.
3. Census of India 1931, Volume II.
4. Hugh Tinker, *The Banyan Tree*, London, 1977, pp. 694.
5. *Ibid*, p. 141.
6. S Nanjundan, *Indian in Malaya Economy*, New Delhi, 1950, pp.11-12.
7. H M Vinacke, *A History of the Far East in Modern Times*, New York, 1976, 694.
8. Sinnapah Arasaratam, *Indians in Malaya and Singapore*, Bombay, 1970, p.16.
9. Harry Miller, *The Story of Malaysia*, London, 1966, p122.