

The Forgotten Travails of Indentured Indian Women in Malaya

Saturday 17 April 2021, by [BALAKRISHNAN Preveena](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2021).

The migration of indentured labourers from India to Malaya - via the kangani or independent hiring systems - was to satisfy British need for cheap labour. These coolies were “milked” for labour and the derogatory term, kalutai or donkey, was used by the kangani to refer to them.

Contents

- [The Arrival of Women Coolies](#)
- [Joint Resistance](#)

These coolie immigrants settled for very little and was easily exploited. Wages were meagre and facilities like land for housing, education and medical were wanting. Demands for higher wages and better working conditions were met with antagonism and eventually, draconian military suppression.

In *The Devil's Milk: A Social History of Rubber*, John Tully describes the prevalence of India's caste system even in Malaya. Labourers were expected, as a show of respect, to dismount from their bicycles in front of British managers and Sri Lankan administrators; and in some estates, the coolies were prohibited from wearing shoes to avoid unnecessary expenditure. In the past, canvas shoes would cost around 30-40 cents and wearing them was regarded a symbol of superiority over European managers.

The Arrival of Women Coolies

For economic reasons, few Indian women emigrated to the Straits. The low wages paid to male coolies made it difficult for them to bring wives and families over, while single women who came to Malaya alone were also involved in prostitution.

To ensure the labour supply from India, planters pushed to establish a locally settled pool of labourers by encouraging the immigration of coolie women and families, and with the passing of the Indian Emigration Act 1922 and the Indian Emigration Rules 1923, the kangani was to hire one woman coolie for every one to five male coolies. This was to encourage families to emigrate and to create social stability in the estates. This was difficult to achieve however; women coolies were hard to recruit.

The Kangani System was soon put in place and that did away with the gender ratio. Family migrations were encouraged through a reduction in the levies paid for women coolies. A high commission of 8.2 shillings was paid for the recruitment of women and families, compared to 7 shillings for men. The year 1935 saw a great influx of labourers to Malaya. These coolies were provided with an identification certification known as thitti-surats, granting them permission to migrate with their wives and families. Women became status markers in estate societies, since they

were the only possessions the labourers could own.

Women coolies worked alongside the men and were paid \$2.40 or about Rs5-8 ans a month, while the men earned \$3.60 or about Rs8-2 ans. Additionally, unless they were seen as vectors of sexually transmitted diseases, women coolies were largely denied medical attention and admission to colonial hospitals. Only European officers were granted access to quality healthcare.

The story of Tylamah illustrates this point well. She had been ill from exhaustion for four months and was just skin and bones when she was finally sent to the hospital. Two other women coolies reported to have been admitted to the hospital had flogging marks on their backs, with the toe of one woman sloughed off. They had to recuperate in filthy conditions, however - on mat-less raised platforms made of split bamboo, and the sparsest fabric for blankets. These women coolies were also subject to sexual advances from colonial intermediaries and administrators who believed that women willing enough to work in foreign lands were either sexually available or vulnerable.

Joint Resistance

Notwithstanding the gendered nature of migration and wage disparity, men and women coolies often joined forces to protest estate labour politics.

On February 17, 1947 at Bukit Sembilan, Kedah, they mounted an insurgency to demand fair wages and better living conditions for their families. The management had ordered the coolies to seek out their own water supply. This could only come from the ravines and was shared with the cattle, while fresh water was delivered to the manager's bungalow in lorries. With diseases on the rise, one estate dresser, Baliah, seized a lorry carrying fresh water to the manager's bungalow. A warrant went out for his arrest, but the police who entered the estate were faced with orchestrated resistance from the labourers.

“Women became status markers in estate societies, since they were the only possessions the labourers could own.”

Women coolies were reportedly at the forefront armed with pepper and with boiling water kept ready. The men equipped themselves with sticks, stones and bottles full of sand. Sixty-six people, including several women, were arrested, and jailed after only a day of trial. Two of the women were allegedly raped while in custody. But the real source of anger was the summary dismissal of workers: “Managers feel that because we reside on the estate we are as much their property as rubber trees.”

Preveena Balakrishnan

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Penang Monthly

<https://penangmonthly.com/article.aspx?pageid=20136>