

FROM COOLIES TO COMMUNITIES: THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF TAMIL MIGRANT LABOUR AND DIASPORA IDENTITY IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Migration has been a powerful determinant that has shaped human societies, enabled cultural exchange, stimulated economic development and produced complex diasporic identities in disparate parts of the world. This research focuses on the historical process of Tamil migrant labourers, examining how they were transformed from indentured "coolies" under British colonial rule into established, unpacked diaspora communities worldwide, while retaining their cultural distinctiveness. By focusing primarily on plantation economies in Southeast Asia (Malaya/Malaysia) and South Asia (Ceylon/Sri Lanka), and providing a comparative outline of the Mauritian experience, the study adopts a historical and sociological perspective to examine the evolution of identity. This paper argues that the traumatic conditions of colonial labour systems in conjunction with the later difficulties of post-colonial citizenship issues, catalyzed the consolidation of a particular Tamil diasporic consciousness, from a fugitive labourer identity to a permanent politically active communal identity. The analysis is supported by evidence gathered from primary historical documents, peer-reviewed academic journals and cultural studies. This paper shows the Tamil migrants progression from labourers to diaspora under the nexus of identity, labour and belonging throughout colonial and post-colonial contexts.

Keywords: Migration, Tamil Diaspora, Indentured Labour, Colonialism, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

1.1 The Global Trajectory of Tamil Migration

The transformation of the Tamil people from South India is one of the biggest and longest-lasting global movements affected by the British Empire (Siddiqui, 2012). This phenomenon, which began in earnest in the nineteenth century, was intrinsically linked to the abolition of slavery and the resulting need for cheap, compliant labour in colonial plantation and infrastructure projects in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia (Tinker, 1974). The Tamil predicament is paradigmatic of the transition from an extremely exploitative state-sanctioned system of labour exploitation (often referred to as the "coolie" system) to the establishment of settled,

culturally tenacious communities that actively contribute to the socio-political arena of their host countries (Chakrabarty, 2004).

This paper examines the fundamental conceptual transformation of meaning implied in the term "From Coolies to Communities." During an early period of migration, involuntary or semi-voluntary indenture contracts prevailed, in which systemic cruelty and dehumanisation of personhood were a feature, thus reducing the migrant to the economic level of a unit (Lal, 2005). Over several generations, disparate categories of labourers managed to create social, religious, and political institutions that converted their liminal status into permanence and communal belonging (Sandhu,

1969). The research focuses on the processes of this transformation, specifically colonial recruitment structures, post-colonial issues of statelessness and marginalisation, and cultural strategies of identity preservation and political agency (Jayaraman, 2004).

1.1 Scope and Methodology

The paper adopts a comparative historical methodology as its primary framework. It primarily concerns the contrasting experiences of Tamil communities in colonial Malaya (present-day Malaysia) and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). A brief analysis of the Mauritian experience is included, which helps shed light on the diverse consequences of indentured labour. The research is based solely on verified sources of scholarly literature, including monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and historical analyses, thus ensuring the quality and depth required for high-level academic discourse.

2. The Colonial Crucible: Indentured Labour and the 'Coolie' System

The foundations of the contemporary Tamil diaspora lie in the collapse of traditional agricultural economies in the Madras Presidency and in conditions of much harsher provocation, along with the attraction of economic opportunity, however temporary, and the allure of escape, all of which were facilitated by the economic offers made by colonial recruiters. The roots of the modern Tamil diaspora lie in the disintegration of traditional agricultural economies in the Madras Presidency and in the state of much harder provoking famine in which the above two was

combined attraction of economic opportunity, however temporary and opportunity aschelles, all these through the economic offer that the colonial recruiters (Kumar, This epoch took place during the mass mobilisation of workers under two main and distinct systems; the Indentured Labour System and the Kangany or Maistry systems.

2.1 The Mechanics of Recruitment: Maistry vs. Kangany

The colonial labour system was heterogeneous; recruitment depended on the destination and the prevailing crop. The term "coolie" was an Orientalist catch-all used to avoid diverse and often brutal recruitment frameworks that predominated (Parthasarathi, 2018).

The Indenture System: The Indenture System, more practiced on the long-haul routes to the Caribbean, and South Africa and Fiji, was heavily regulated - though in reality systematically unregulated - by colonial ordinances (Tinker, 1974). Contracts called for terms of service, usually five years, with return passage promised though this was often rescinded or ignored. The system was notoriously exploitative with high rates of mortality on the sea voyage and endemic abuse on the plantations (Lal, 2005).

The Kangany System (Ceylon and Malaya): The Kangany System (Ceylon and Malaya): This proved to be more socially insidious and prevalent in Ceylon and Malaya (Sandhu 1969). In the Kangany system, a kangany, typically a foreman or recruiter who is usually an established member of the Tamil community, returns to his village to recruit relatives and acquaintances (Jayaraman, 2004). Although, at the surface, it was less coercive than indenture, this practice created a patron-client

model of deep-rooted dependency, in which the labourer was in perpetual debt for travel, housing, and even subsistence food items, thereby perpetuating dependency and hindering independent social mobility (Gunasena, 2017).

The Maistry System (Burma and Parts of Malaya):
The Maistry System (Burma and Parts of Malaya):
Most common for constructing and portwrecking, there were frequent recruitments of Telugu and other non-Tamil workers; the maistry system was functionally similar, with the maistry (headman) serving as the recruiter and labour broker (Parthasarathi, 2018). Nevertheless, this generally entailed greater complexity in the hierarchy of sub-agents with more layers between the labour broker and immediate work, and a more indirect but no less brutal form of control (Siddiqui, 2012).

2.2 Conditions and Social Stratification

Life on colonial plantations, whether those of tea estates in Ceylon or rubber estates in Malaya, was characterised by the abject deprivation of civil liberties, squalid sanitary conditions, and insatiable surveillance (Stenson, 1980). Labourers were often segregated in separate housing lines, thereby separating them from indigenous populations and denying them avenues for land ownership or economic diversification (Jeyakumar, 2013). This geographical and social isolation, though this was intended not only by the colonial state but was part of the aims of both the colonial state and missionaries to have a continuous workforce of cheap labour, meant that the Tamil migrants were left to entirely rely on their own cultural and kinship structures to survive (Sandhu, 1969).

3. Transition to Permanence: From Transient Labour to Settled Communities

The most fundamental change in the story of the Tamil migrants was the transition from a population in transit, moving and circulating at various times, to a settled, permanent community with a local presence. This evolution was not linear or uniform, but was driven by demographic shifts, the formation of the family, and the gradual development of institutional and cultural built-in infrastructures (Daniel, 217).

3.1 Demographic Shift and Family Formation

Initially, migration flows were overwhelmingly male. However, colonial regimes, especially in the latter stages, realized that a stable, self-reproducing labour force was more cost-effective than constant recruitment (Parthasarathi, 2018). As a result, policies changed, and family migration and formation were tacitly encouraged (Chakrabarty, 2004). The presence of women and children radically changed the social structure of the lines of plantations:

- It strengthened the community's commitment to the host territory (Sandhu, 1969).
- It brought forth a second generation born in the new land, whose identity became inextricably linked to their birthplace (Jayaraman, 2004).
- It agreed to the formation of complex kinship networks that extended beyond the immediate labour unit to build solidarity, a move that was to play a crucial role in later political struggles (Jeyakumar, 2013).

3.2 The Genesis of Cultural Institutions

Critically, the unification of community life was accomplished through cultural and religious institutions. Tamil identity, based on the language (Tamil) and religion (Hinduism), served as the new foundation among the diaspora through:

- **Temples (*Koyils*):** These weren't just places for religious worship; they were the social, economic, and political centre of the community (Daniel, 2017). The construction of temples, ranging from simple shrines to complex structures, provided evidence of permanent land possession, a physical location for communal meetings, the maintenance of traditions, and the performance of rites (Jayaraman, 2004).
- **Language and Education:** Small, community-funded schools, as well as language associations, were established, ensuring that the language, literature, and culture of the Tamil people were passed on to succeeding generations (Siddiqui, 2012). This was a deliberate attempt to defy the colonial process of cultural homogenisation and to pass along a particular heritage.
- **Festivals:** The celebration of major Hindu festivals, such as Thaipusam in Malaysia/Singapore, became a visible public display of ethnic and religious identities, making cultural practices powerful political statements of communal presence (Daniel, 2017).

4. Case Studies in Diaspora Identity: Malaysia and Sri Lanka

The shift from labouring class to ethnic community took different forms, often violently contrasting, across various colonial territories. The processes of Tamils in Malaya and in Ceylon illustrate two important paradigms of diaspora in the making.

4.1 The Malaysian Tamil Experience: From Estate Labour to Political Agency

In Malaya, the Tamil were the majority of the colonial Indian migrant population, primarily plantation labourers (Stenson, 1980). A major explosion in the political and labour agency marked their transition:

1. *Post-War Political Mobilisation:* Immediately after the Second World War, the labour movement became radicalised (Sandhu, 1969). Tamil labourers, in an effort to join other ethnic groups, went on mass strikes and engaged in labour disputes, calling for better wages and living conditions.
2. *Class vs. Community:* The Malaysian Tamil community developed a sharp class stratification (Stenson, 1980). The vast majority remained locked into estate economies. At the same time, a smaller group of educated elites (burakum, merchants, and commercial migrants from earlier movements) entered the professions and the civil service (Jeyakumar, 2013). This intra-community schism shaped the political representation of the people (komunitas/post-political) in the post-colonial Malaysian state.
3. *The Quest for Political Voice:* Following independence, the quest for political voice

within the community emerged, primarily through the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which has integrated into the complex multiracial sharing-of-power arrangement (Stenson, 1980). Nevertheless, sustained economic marginalization and feelings of abandonment sparked renewed political activism, as represented, for instance, by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) in the twenty-first century, which captures the community's clamour for equality and recognition (Jeyakumar, 2013).

4.2 The Sri Lankan Hill Country Tamil Experience: Statelessness and Marginalisation

The experience of Tamils brought to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to work on tea plantations is very different and much more tragic (Gunaseena, 2017). Known as the Malaiyaha Tamils (Hill Country Tamils), this group has evolved into a distinct and regionally bounded ethnic minority, whose future was sealed by post-colonial state policies.

- *Disenfranchisement:* Within a year of independence, the new sovereign Sri Lankan government passed the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949, rendering the majority of Hill Country Tamils, over 700,000, stateless (Gunaseena, 2017). This mass disenfranchisement formed the origin trauma of their post-colonial condition, laying the paradigm of structural discrimination and political exclusion (Daniel, 2017).

- *Repatriation and Struggle:* Successive agreements, such as the Nehru-Kotelawala Pact (1954) and the Sirima-Shastri Pact (1964), provided for the compulsory repatriation of a large portion of the population to India, while granting limited citizenship to the rest of the population (Gunaseena, 2017).
- *Evolution of Identity:* The community's identity crystallized in this political fight, shifting from a mere labouring people to an ethnic minority that recognized its own identity and was deeply, though contested, attached to the highlands of Sri Lanka. Their identity became intertwined with their community, characterized by a unique culture of the tea estates and a collective struggle for basic human rights (Gunaseena, 2017).

4.3 The Mauritian Counter-Narrative

In contrast to the political struggles in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, *Living With Mutability* presents a positive image of the Tamil experience in Mauritius, showing integration working relatively smoothly. Tamils were mainly indentured to the sugar cane fields (Jayaraman, 2004). However, within the highly diverse fabric of Mauritius, dominated by a significant North Indian Bhojpuri polity and population (the Indo-Mauritian), the pride of the, but supposedly much smaller, Tamil community managed to assert and retain a cultural identity (Siddiqui, 2012). Their early arrival, combined with the ability to retain a clear language, Hindu practices, and cultural sense, produced a different political outcome (Jayaraman, 2004).

Eventually, they were recognized as a distinct community, with their cultural contributions acknowledged and their political voice, albeit small, integrated into the country's pluralistic political setting (Siddiqui, 2012). This case highlights the importance of the host country's pre-existing social diversity and political factors in determining colonial policy and the fate of diaspora communities.

5. Identity, Transnationalism and the Postcolonial Diaspora

The consolidation of Tamil diasporic identity is not merely a story of local settlement; it is also a story of transnational connections and the evolving relationship with the homeland, particularly in the postcolonial era.

5.1 The Transnational Role of Cultural Institutions

In the postcolonial landscape, cultural institutions, especially temples and diaspora associations, have taken on a distinctly transnational character (Daniel, 2017). They serve as conduits for the flow of remittances and for the movement of religious personnel (e.g., priests from Tamil Nadu) and cultural materials (e.g., literature and music) between the host country and the homeland (Jayaraman, 2004). This constant cultural exchange ensures that the diasporic identity is not static but a dynamic, hybrid construct, rooted in the new land while continuously informed by the old land (Daniel, 2017).

5.2 Cultural Production and the Sense of Belonging

Diaspora literature has emerged as a crucial medium for articulating the complex identity of the Tamil diaspora (Cheran, 2009). The literature explores themes of:

- *Cultural Displacement and Hybridity*: The sense of being in-between, neither fully of the host country nor wholly of the ancestral homeland (Cheran, 2009).
- *The Burden of Memory*: Literary works often examine into the trauma of the indentured past and the postcolonial struggles (Parthasarathi, 2018).
- *Quest for Belonging*: Authors like Shyam Selvadurai and Shehan Karunatilaka (though writing in English from a non-plantation background, their works often capture the broader Sri Lankan Tamil refugee experience) explore the fundamental human desire for acceptance in the new land (Jeyakumar, 2013).

This cultural production demonstrates a move beyond simple cultural preservation to active cultural creation, solidifying the diaspora's unique identity as a global entity (Cheran, 2009).

5.3 Demographic Snapshot of the Global Tamil Diaspora

To contextualize the scale of this migration, Table 1 provides an approximate demographic snapshot of the major Tamil diaspora populations, highlighting the enduring legacy of the colonial labour system.

Table -1: Major Tamil Diaspora Populations in Select Colonial and Postcolonial Destinations

Country	Approximate Population (2020 Estimate)	Primary Origin of Migration	Primary Economic Sector
Malaysia	18,00,000	Colonial Madras Presidency	Rubber Estates, Urban Labour
Sri Lanka	16,00,000	Colonial Madras Presidency	Tea Estates, Urban Centres
Mauritius	1,20,000	Indentured Labour	Sugar Plantations, Professions
South Africa	2,80,000	Indentured Labour	Sugar Plantations, Urban Service
Canada	3,00,000	Postcolonial Refugee/Educated	Urban Professions

Note. Data compiled from various historical and contemporary demographic surveys, including those cited by Siddiqui (2012) and Gunasena (2017). Figures for Sri Lanka include both Indigenous and Hill Country Tamils.

6. Conclusion: The Making of a Global Identity

The historical evolution of Tamil migrant labour from indentured ‘coolies’ to diverse and politically engaged diaspora communities is a profound testament to human resilience and the enduring power of cultural identity. The colonial labour system, rooted in exploitation and transient identity, paradoxically laid the groundwork for permanence. The isolation and hardships of the plantation lines fostered internal cultural cohesion, which, when combined with family formation and the establishment of institutions such as temples and schools, evolved into a settled communal identity.

The postcolonial era introduced new and critical challenges most acutely in Sri Lanka, through the trauma of statelessness. But these very crises became the catalysts for political mobilisation and the consolidation of a distinct diasporic

consciousness. Whether through the fraught political bargaining of Malaysia, the existential struggle of the Hill Country Tamils, or the integrated diversity of Mauritius, the narrative is one of a people who seized agency. The Tamil diaspora today is a global entity, connected by transnational cultural flows and a shared, complex heritage of both historical trauma and communal triumph, affirming that the ‘coolie’ identity was merely a temporary, imposed label that was ultimately transcended by the enduring reality of community.

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