

Study on the Labor Migrations to Kerala Plantations - An Era of Enticement and Exploitation

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ABSTRACT: In the plantations the labor was arranged strictly on a hierarchical line from white Managers at top to black *cheruman* and *pulaya* at the bottom. The work of plucking tea leaves was largely assigned to women at the same time hard and rigorous work like pruning, draining, forking etc were assigned to men. Strict discipline was maintained. In the early-stage migrant labor from neighboring states filled the gap of labor shortage but today bhais from North India prefer jobs in Kerala plantations. Low wage and limited facilities made the sector unattractive to *Malayalis*

KEYWORDS: *Plantation, Labor, Migrants, Sardari, Kangani, Arkati, Bhais*

Labor migration is a universal phenomenon which determines the nature of a nation's economy, Migration to foreign countries from India in 1990s solved country's economic crisis to a great extent. Kerala economy even today largely depends on the earnings from Gulf countries. An interesting character of our labor market is the availability of migrant labor from North Indian states to almost all the fourteen Districts of Kerala. Kozhikode, Palakkad, Alappuzha, Ernakulam are the major hubs of Migrant laborers. Mining and quarrying, plywood, building construction, plantations are the major economic sectors highly demanding migrant laborers. Assam, Jharkhnd, Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar are the major states supply an uninterrupted labor force to Kerala because of the high wage rate compared to the rest of India. Increasing opportunities and in discriminatory attitude towards the '*Bhais*' prompted them to settle down

with their families. Work experience in plantations and construction field made them experts in jobs needed arduous physical strain. Over population, poverty, low wages, and hard living conditions in North Indian States pushed them to comfort zones.

By the Charter Act of 1813, the E.I.Co lost the monopoly of trade with India.¹ Following the revision of the Charter Act of 1834, the Company's monopoly of trade between China and Britain had come to an end. Naturally Britain, through the E.I.Co decided to grow tea in India. From the earliest days company mooted the idea of tea growing in India. So in 1778, Sir Joseph Banks, the famous Botanist who had accompanied Captain Cook suggested that black tea might be grown in North India and even considered the possibility of recruiting Chinese growers and manufactures.²

Tea committee was formed in 1834 and Government experimental garden was founded in 1836. Waste lands were offered for 45 years lease but indigenous applicants were excluded from all concessional land grants. Later in 1854 lease was extended up to 99 years and an area assigned to each was raised to 500 acres of land.³ Imported Chinese laborers were highly paid with four or five times the wage of local Assamese. So after few years the foreign laborers were dispensed with in 1843 and the locals were paid Rupees 2.50 to 3.50 per month in 1840's but raised up to Rupees 4 by 1857. In the early stage *Kachari* tribes of Darrang District, Assam constituted the chief labor force

In the earlier stages, labor scarcity was a major hindrance to the expansion of Assam plantation industry. In course of time the number of tea plantation was steadily increasing and this created a constant demand for laborers. But the need could not be filled from the natives as they had gradually been showing reluctance to work in the tea plantations. As a result, different systems of labor recruitment were followed like the contractor system, *sardari* system etc. In the early phases of recruitment the contractors recruited the laborers on the basis of short term contract. The laborers were asked to serve in a plantation for a fixed period, after the completion they could return to their native place. Since there was no restriction upon the contractors, the system was known as 'free

contractor system'. Recruitment in tea Assam from 1841 was entirely in the hands of these contractors known as Calcutta contractors or *Arkati*.⁴ In order to get laborers easily, the contractors made false promises of high pay and light work and dispatched them to the district without food or any sanitary precautions, the journey lasted for many days, in course of time many died due to adverse climate and hazardous journey.

The *Sardari* system of recruitment began in 1870 by which the planters sent their own trusted man to different districts with money and he paid advance amount to poor who agreed to join the plantations after refunding their liabilities with this advance payment. The *sardar* was paid a commission over the persons recruited. They were permitted to recruit more than 20 persons subject to some rules applicable to other agencies. The contractors promised men under getting jobs in well paid plantations and also enticed girls under the promise that they would be provided with well- to- do husbands, jewellery etc. Thus from the very beginning itself the tea plantations faced the acute problem of labor shortage and depended on migrant laborers from outside villages.

In 1864 tea was tried as an experimental measure in Government gardens at Peermade along with coffee and cinchona. But curing the tea leaf was difficult and lacked experience in the cultivation. But the European planters like J.D Munro, F.G Richardson proved success in coffee cultivation an established Hope Estate and Twyford Estate respectively. Peermade hills were originally belonged to Raja of Punjar⁵ from whom the Travancore Government took over the whole district in exchange for a certain amount of paddy lands near Kottayam. But the coffee cultivators suffered heavy loss due to leaf disease and many planters turned towards tea cultivation. By 31 December 1904, there were three main planting districts including Kannan Devan Hills in north Travancore, Peermade, Meenachil and Changanachery in Central Travancore and South Travancore including Shencotta, Ponmudi and Ashanboo with an area of 24711.57 acres.⁶

In Travancore the Planters included Missionaries and Company officials faced the difficulty of sufficient supply of labor to the newly started enterprises. As a part of the *Jenmi* system the low caste men are attached

to land as agrestic slaves. They had no freedom of travel from one area to another in search of opportunities. The *Jenmam* land and also the slaves attached to land were non transferable. In order to get free supply of land the *Pandarappattom* Proclamation was made in 1865 made the land a transferable property. In 1864 Travancore Government abolished the *Sirkar* rights over lands in Peermade.⁷

The social structure existed in Travancore was an obstacle to the free movement of labor force. The low caste men were assigned *Uzhiyam* services to Government at free of cost. In 1816 a Royal proclamation exempted Syrian Christians and other converts from *Uzhiyam* service.⁸ But in 1893 the evil practice was abolished was a great blessing to lower castes.⁹ On *Viruthi* land holders a number of unnecessary taxes were imposed, if they failed to pay, were expelled from the possession of the particular rights over land. The system was abolished in 1909. Slavery was also abolished and many low caste men converted to Christianity, educated men entered services in plantations as Clerks, Overseers or Managers.

But the major obstacle in Plantation development was getting labor force. Through the progressive reforms agrestic slaves become free men and moved to plantations with a promise to return at the time of rice cultivation. In certain cases the landlords did not allow the wives to accompany their husbands when going to estate as they might have feared that if the wives went along, the man would never return.¹⁰ Planter's agents sometimes punished low caste or kidnapped in order to avoid any chance of identification, the *pulaya* slaves were removed of their *kuduma* or such other identification marks of their respective castes.¹¹ In the early stages the *kanikkar* and *muthuvan* tribes formed the major share of labor force. Once they signed the contract and began work on estates the coolies was still guarded. Planters regarded them as a commodity they had bought, and took precautions to prevent them from going to another estate or fleeing altogether before their contract had expired. Houses were ringed with high fences and compounds were guarded by numerous watchmen. Some estates used tracker dogs. If they tried to escape, they were captured back to estate, usually tied up and flogged. Many died from these floggings.

In the second half of 19 century there were a number of famines in South India. The Madras famine of 1865-1866 was much more severe and encouraged the migrations to Ceylon benefited the coffee plantations. Each famine resulted devastating consequence and took many years for the people to recover. Many moved to Ceylon plantations with the family, after a long term work they returned to their native places and joined in plantations, the experienced coolies were paid well and were acclimatized to the hills. Thirunelveli, Madurai, Salem district supplied major share of laborers at that time. According to T.F Bourdillon, the Chief Forest Conservator of Travancore, “the *malayalis* as a rule not deforest the hills and do not thrive there, but a few *pulayas* are employed and some hundreds of *shanars* and native Christians from neighboring hood of Nagarcoil”.¹² When the coolies are affected with severe diseases like Cholera, Bubonic Plague and Small Pox they are allowed to return to their native places, but on the way many died on roadsides. When the local residents of Kanjirappalli complained about the matter, Government entrusted the planters to build rent homes for the sick and disabled. The planters replied it was the duty of the Government to ensure road and police facilities.¹³

Malaria and its more severe form known as ‘jungle fever’ severely affected the planters as well as the native coolies. Many of the British in India thought that alcoholic drinks had medicinal value. When the coolies complained about their ill-health the planters themselves supplied alcohol as a medicine. But gradually drinking alcohol become a habit and were addicted to it and in a letter to the *Diwan* of Travancore, Kannan Devan Planters Association, Devikulam writes that license for opening of liquors shops in different parts of the district, the Associations wants to withdraw the license. The petition write, roads are filled with drunken coolies, who stolen the coffee and the owners of arrack shops became the receivers of stolen coffee; they were also the owners of small coffee estates. Therefore they requested to cancel the license as early as possible.¹⁴ The *Sirkar* was given special preference to coffee cultivation; in 1838 a special officer was appointed to manage coffee cultivation.¹⁵

Severe disease washed the lives of hill tribes also. Small pox was fatal

chiefly among the hill men, once the epidemics appears, is often sweeps among the whole village, as they do not know how to treat it, they usually abandon the sick to their fate, leaves their huts and go into camp in the jungle till all danger of infection is over. In order to overcome the crisis the Travancore Government decided to vaccinate hill tribes and appointed *pulayas* as vaccinators.¹⁶

Many migrated to the Plantations to find a better living condition as their native lands were affected with famine or drought. But when reached Promised Land they were driven them from pillar to post. Severe diseases, extreme climate, persecution of planters and *kanganis* many died and the survived led their life as bonded slaves. Their descendents continued in plantations even today. Four or five generations sacrificed their life with meager income and with limited facilities in labor lines. Kannan Devan Plantations at Munnar constructed labor lines in 1921 with a single room, a small veranda and a very small kitchen. New generation expect more facilities and are reluctant to work in plantations. They are educated and wish to work in Government or private institutions. In order to overcome the labor shortage migrants from West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Chathisgad and Jharkhand are employed as casual workers. As many plantations in Assam and Bengal closed down, they migrated to other states; many are experts in plantation work and get high wages. Kerala became a paradise for the migrant workers; get high wages than in any other states and a peaceful life.

There are 56 estates including tea, coffee and Rubber at Peermade Taluk extending an area from 5 hectors to 1129. Each estate is managed by Limited Company or single owner responsible for providing basic amenities to workers including quarters, drinking water, primary schools, crèche and dispensaries. Plantation Labor Act strictly ensured these but today almost all estates closed down their dispensaries and primary schools. Arnakal estate has an LP School at Arnakal or a few maintain dispensaries. All the fringe benefits including sick leave, wage to bye standers allowance and even the post of Welfare Officers on account of uneconomic category. KDHP at Munnar have a well-functioning Garden Hospital and an English Medium School and a Special school for Disabled children.

Low wages and lack of basic amenities are the basic factor for the diminishing demand on plantation work by the local population. The wage pattern is the lowest compared to other sectors. More over the Managements cut down the fringe benefits on account of the report of profit loss due to price fluctuations in international markets. *Malayalis* prefer white collar jobs than arduous work in plantations. *Bhais* from North India fill the gap in labor chain where *malayalis* hesitated to work.

At most all the plantations in Kerala employ hired labor and the new trend is in an increasing scale. In Idukki district, Pullikkanam estate owned 376.86 hector tea employed 212 migrant workers from Northern India. Even Pattumudi had comparatively smaller area of 70 hectares but employed 10 workers from North India. TATA Tea estate Munnar faces the crucial problem of *labor* shortage. As a result casual workers from Odisha, Jharkhand and Assam settled with their family. During extreme cold and snow fall and minus degree temperature they returned to their native place.

One family stayed at Munnar from Assam had four members, husband Shujbu, around an age 40 and wife Musana 35, and work as casual members. Two children- boy work in a cotton mill at Coimbatore and the girl around 15 years of age is a drop out from school. Before they came to Munnar they settled at Coimbatore and the children studied Tamil medium school. They are fluent in Tamil and communicate with the natives. They had workmen quarters, medical facilities like any other casual worker in Plantations.

Labor migration was the serious problem faced by the Plantation sector from its very inception itself. In the early stage the labor shortage was filled with Tamil migrants from Madurai, Salem and Tirunelveli. These migrants absorbed to our culture. They became the part and parcel of our society for four or five generations. Now the younger generation is not ready to work in the sector due to the arduous nature of the work itself. Such a sector needed salary and other benefits sufficient led a descent life. Hard work and dangerous nature of the work along with low income forced several workers to leave the field. Inflation is at its peak, prices of food materials and medical expenses reached new heights, as per GST

estimate of 2020 Kerala spent three cores of rupees for the import of rice where seven thousand two hundred and thirty seven cores for medicines.

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