

WORKING PAPER: VII

INDIAN LEADERS IN MALAYSIA

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1. Introduction

Even though Captain Francis Light is regarded as the founder of the British colony of Penang in 1786, he himself noted the presence of Indian traders and merchants at Penang. Francis Light “The second class of our inhabitants consists of the Chooliars [Chulias] or people from the several ports on the Coast of Coromandel [i.e. the east coast of Madras Presidency] they are all shopkeepers and Coolies, about one thousand are settled here, some with families, the vessels from the coast bring over annually 1,500 or 2,000 men, who by traffic and various kinds of labour obtain a few dollars with which they return to their homes and are succeeded by others.”¹ Malaysia was not terra incognita on the arrival of the British, but was firmly established as an important trading zone in the Indian Ocean network. Its location made it a crucial halting place for sailors travelling to and fro between China and India. The region flourished as a major transit point where “fresh supplies of goods and provisions for long-distance voyages and a point of collection of all goods from the archipelago, which were later distributed to traders from India and China.”² Ships from Bombay mostly arrived from July to September and from Bengal, from March to August.³

The Bay of Bengal region had trade contacts with the Straits and it held importance for the traders from the Coromandel coast who had established trading linkages with the region. The Indian traders, in particular the Chulia merchants carried out their

trading activities primarily from Kedah during the 18th century. The prime commodity involved in this trading network was Indian cloth from the Coromandel coast, Indian cloth “which was re-exported by Melaka to various Malay ports in the archipelago. In the earlier period, Indian cloth came from the Coromandel Coast and was mostly carried by Indian and Moor traders from India.”⁴ The volume of trade and items exchanged can be glimpsed from records about Syed Mohammad from Porto Novo. The traders involved in trade with Penang hailed mainly from Pulicat on the Coromandel coast, who traded primarily in Indian cloth. Ships tracing with Melaka hailed either from Pulicat or Surat- “three to four ships from Pulicat were regularly engaged in the trade with Melaka two ships from Surat that came to Melaka annually on their way to Siam who traded in silks and chintzes. In the second half of the 19th century the main Indian commodities imported into Melaka were Indian cloth, opium, tin and grains.”⁵ “In 1828–29, the main goods that Melaka imported were cloth valued at more than Singapore Dollars 202,009.95. Most of the cloth came from India, which constituted more than 22 per cent of all cloth brought into Melaka ...the next important imported item was rice and paddy – more than 16 per cent of all goods imported to Melaka. This was followed by opium and tin.”⁶ Of the total volume of Melaka exports in cloth, Indian cloth constituted more than 90 per cent in 1780–82 which was about 5,144 corgie of cloth.⁷

Syed Mohammad was a skipper from Porto Novo who sailed between Nagapatnam and Melaka in a 200-lasten and from Melaka he returned with mostly food and agricultural products. On his voyages to Melaka he brought with Indian cloth and salt and carried back goods from China and the archipelago to Nagapatnam which primarily constituted gambir, arak and sugar.⁸ Along with his partners, Mucktoon Saib, Boojoo Mohammed and Ismail Mohammed, arrived and settled in Georgetown in 1787 from where they carried out trading activities between Penang and Coromandel coast between 1787 to 1814. They also owned brick shops valued at Singapore Dollars 77,000.37.⁹ “The Chulias ties were with these independent Asian states and tended to be continuous and long-lasting. Their operations were across a broad spectrum, from powerful merchant-magnates to itinerant peddlers and vendors’.¹⁰

The Indian monopoly over the cloth trade came to a halt at Melaka due to Dutch policies and Indian traders traded directly with Malay ports such as Aceh, Ujong Salang, Kedah, Perak and Riau.¹¹ This brief interlude of loss of importance of the archipelago ended with new English policy of free trade and founding of Penang as an important trading centre¹² “As Penang was closer to the Indian subcontinent and had attracted, from its opening, a large number of Chulia traders and merchants to settle there, it was probable that the majority of Melaka-Keling and Moors had also chosen to base themselves on the island.”¹³ Even though with the Dutch impositions on trading of Indian textiles, traders from India shifted base from Melaka to Penang in the late 1820s, Melaka continued to be a part of the trading network as more than 33 per cent of Melaka’s imports came from Indian ports such as Madras, Calcutta and Bombay.¹⁴

Prior to the establishment of the English settlement, traders, sailors, merchants, coolie labour etc. from India settled for short periods of time and return back to India. The foundation of Penang as an English settlement in 1786 changed this migratory pattern and over time more and more Indians came to settle permanently in Penang. Statistics show a gradual increase in the number of Indian inhabitants

at Penang. In August 1788 the Chulia population numbered was 216 Chulias¹⁵ which increased to 5604 in 1810. (Chulias and Bengalis)¹⁶. In Melaka town there were 1475 free Chulias in 1826.¹⁷ “The majority of Chulias were shopkeepers, merchants or coolies. By the end of eighteenth century, about one thousand Chulias had settled in the town with their families. Besides this number, there were 1,500 to 2,000 Chulia immigrants from the Coromandel Coast who came to the town annually. However, most were sojourners who, after earning enough money, returned home.”¹⁸ The English encouraged the Chulias to settle permanently in Penang as it would not only increase the trade between India and Penang but would also help the English “secure the Chulia’s trading network, which covered the Bay of Bengal, Southern Thailand, the Straits and north Sumatra.”¹⁹

This migration and settlement pattern underwent a change post 1870’s due to the shift of economic activity in Malaya to a plantation based economy. “In the Straits Settlements, this rise in sugar and coffee consumption caused “a sudden impetus ... to the cultivation of sugar cane, which had hitherto been carried on at a great disadvantage”.²⁰ Malaya became a centre for production of sugar, coffee and minerals such as tin. These activities were labour intensive and largely depended on the continuous supply of a labouring force. It has been noted that sugarcane grew in Province Wellesley with an “uncommon luxuriance”²¹

During the 20th century an increasing demand for rubber led to decline in sugar and coffee plantations in Malaya. As this area was part of the British Empire, the planters turned to India as a source of cheap and continuous flow of labour employed at these estates through system of Indentured labour. The labour requirement was initially fulfilled by the convicts and slaves from India but the abolition of slavery in August 1833 led to a shortage of labourers. Initially the Government turned to employment of locals but realised they were not suitable for this job. S. Arasaratnam believed a “limited and irregular movement” of Indian indentured labourers to the Straits Settlements began about 1838.²² According to

C. Kondapi workers from south India were initially recruited for Malayan coffee and sugar plantations under a three year indenture period from 1833,²³ and in the opinion of K S Sandhu the Indian indentured labour migration from India to Malaya predates 1823.²⁴

Sinnappah Arasaratnam mentions that, “under the indenture system, a prospective employer of labour placed an order with a recruiting agent based in India for the supply of stipulated number of labourers. The recruiting agent thereupon sent his subordinate contact men into the villages, and picked the required number of men. These men, on signing a contract, were said to be under „indenture“ to the employer for a period of five years.”²⁵ “A ship owning merchant advances money to a head maistry who employs under him several subordinate maistries. These maistries have to go about the villages and persuade coolies (labourers) to emigrate. This they do by representing in bright colour prospects of enrichment and advances. The ignorant coolies (labourers) believe easily, and while some volunteer to go to try their fortune, many are persuaded. The maistries, get rupees 10 per head for every adult coolie they bring, all contingent expenses being paid. A less price is given for boys, who are not in such demand and a somewhat higher rate for young good looking women. The coolies thus obtained are kept in godowns (or depots) in Negapatam until a sufficient number is collected. They are then shipped on the ship owner vessel, and accompanied by the head maistry to the port of destination. There they are sold under contract to serve for certain periods. Each man fetches about five pounds, and all expenses of maintenance, passage money are discharged by the purchaser. The shipper and the head maistry divide the profits. The coolies, after their teams of service have expired, continue to work on their own account, and manage to save small sum of money, with which they return to India.”²⁶

From the last quarter of the 19th century, labour recruitment for Malaya was through as a kangani, The kangani received a commission for each of the labourers he brought and kept employed. The passage and other expenses in bringing the labourer

were treated as a loan which he had to settle within two years. Unlike the case of the indentured labourer, this was not a legally enforced loan and theoretically the labourer was free to do what he liked after setting his feet on the Malayan soil. But in practice, he had to work out to pay his loan to the employer who had brought him over because no other employer would employ him.

The area under rubber cultivation increased from 43,000 acres in 1914 to two million acres in 1941.²⁷ The increase in exports totalling to 50% of total rubber exports²⁸ invariably meant an increased demand of labour supply, which predominantly came from India. It was this kangani system of recruiting which became the main source of labour supply from India to Malaya until the end of 1938. These developments in Indian labour movements and employment on estates, and their consequent exploitation by the owners and managers of estates led to the creation of a number of trade unions under Indian leadership

2. Trade Unions and Indian Leaders

The rubber plantation economy had wide implications in the society and polity of Malaysian history. Unlike in the case of sugar and coffee plantations where flow of labour was migratory in nature, in the case of rubber plantations the Indian labourers settled permanently in different parts of Malaya. The initiative for the betterment of the Indian labourer was taken by Indian nationalist leaders as well as Indians settled in Malaya. The Indian Immigration Fund was formed by the government to help overcome labour shortages in Malaya and it marked the beginning of 31 years of “assisted migration” from India to Malaya. The Tamil Immigration Fund Ordinance was approved in 1907, which led to establishment of Indian Immigration Committee (IIC) later it known as the Tamil Immigration Fund²⁹. “The Committee brought together all the Departments of Indian Immigration in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States for discussion on all matters pertaining to labour issues and the welfare of Indian labourers. The IIC consisted of British administration officials and unofficial members such

as rubber plantation owners and community leaders. In 1907, the IIC established the Tamil Immigration Fund (TIF), sponsored by rubber plantation owners and the British government, to finance the cost of bringing Indian labourers to work on the estates in Malaya.³⁰ This invariably established a “state controlled structure for the mass recruitment of “free” South Indian labour. The fund provided free passage for Indian labourers intending to come in Malaya even though the recruiting of workers was carried out by licensed kangani with the approval of individual planters. All employers of Indian labour were charged a quarterly charge to cover the travel and related costs Indian labour immigrants to Malaya. The IIC was authorised to manage the movement of assisted labour migrants to Malaya by monitoring the number of recruiting licenses given to the kangani and also the recruiting allowance or subsidy to migrants. Crucially, this legislation resulted in Indian labour migration evolving into two distinct categories, namely recruited and non-recruited migrants.”³¹

As compared to the statistics of Indian population in Malaya, there was an increase of 76 % in 1921, as compared to 1911.³² In Malaya the voluntary system of recruiting was popular and labourers wishing to go to Malaya independently of the kangani, or recruiter, appear at the nearest emigrant depot. If they were bona fide labourers they were sent by the “Emigration Commissioner to Malaya at the cost of the Indian Immigration Fund. They are at liberty, on discharge at the port of destination, to go to any place of employment and they receive free railway tickets before they leave the immigration depot. The usual system is the kangani system, by which a few selected labourers are sent to India as kanganis by estate managers and other employers of labour who want labourers. Each kangani was allowed to recruit 20 adult labourers who were assisted to immigrate to Malaya from the Indian Immigration. As per the Labour Code, a labourer was not to work for more than 9 hours a day, and not beyond 6 hours continuously. Overtime is paid at the rate of one and a half times the usual rate.”³³ According to the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya, between the years 1910 and 1920 an

estimated 50,000 to 80,000 labourers arrived every year in Malaya. Efforts by Indian nationalist leaders to abolish the system of indenture and improve the condition of Indians in British colonies yielded some results in the form of legislation being passed by the British government.

Radica Mahase’s article traces the involvement of the Indian nationalists with the issue of indentured labour. According to her “In the first decade of the twentieth century one can see the topic of overseas Indians creeping into the nationalist discourse. The period 1900 to 1910 can be referred to as the “formative phase” for Indian emigration in the Indian nationalist discourse.”³⁴

On 25th February 1910, Gokhale said “My Lord, my own view of this system of indentured labour is that it should be abolished altogether. It is true that it is not actual slavery, but I fear in practice in a large number of cases it cannot be far removed from it. To take from this country helpless men and women to a distant land, to assign them there to employers in whose choice they have no voice and of whose language, customs, social usages and special civilisation they are entirely ignorant, and to make them work there under a law which they do not understand and which treats their simplest and most natural attempts to escape ill-treatment as criminal offences such a system, by whatever name it may be called, must really border on the servile. I strongly hold therefore that the system should be done away with altogether.”³⁵

“The years 1911 to 1915 can be referred to as the “definitive phase” of anti-emigration agitation as well as the inclusion of Indian emigration in the nationalist discourse. It was during this phase that Indian emigration and the Indian indentureship system was clearly defined in the Indian nationalist discourse”³⁶ and the years 1915 to 1917 are termed as “phase of consolidation”³⁷ and Indian emigration became one of the central themes of nationalist agenda. In 1916 a motion for the abolition of the system of Indian indentured labour was delivered by Madan Mohan Malaviya was accepted by Lord Hardinge.³⁸ In 1917 N.E. Majoribanks and Ahmad Tambi Marakkaya were delegated to Ceylon and

Malaya to “study the methods of recruiting and the conditions of Indians there.”³⁹ Gokhale’s resolution for the prohibition of recruitment of indentured labour from British India was passed, and acted upon by the British.

The Indian Labourers in Malaya became one of the issues that the Government of India took a keen interest in. The Labour Department was formed in 1911 out of the earlier Indian immigration. Initially it had jurisdiction over the Straits Settlements and the F.M.S. but later became a pan-Malayan department in 1925 when the Unfederated Malay States came under its jurisdiction. The Labour Department was primarily concerned with the supervision of Indian immigration and conditions of Indian labour, although the smaller number of Javanese and Malay labourers also came under its jurisdiction. The Indian Immigration Committee was responsible for the affairs of Indian immigration. Officials of the Labour Department conducted regular visits and inspection of rubber estates to see whether housing, water supply, medical and sanitary arrangements complied with the requirements of the labour code. Comments and suggestions were made with the aim of removing serious abuses by the estate managers. The officials would also listen to the complaints⁴⁰ of the labourers and settle disputes industrial or personal. Under the provisions of the Labour Code of 1923, the Agent of the Government of India was given the same right of entry and inspection of places of employment. The Indian Government’s ability to exert influence is apparent by formulation of standard rates of wages by the Malayan Governments in several key districts from 1924 for male and female Indian labourers in Kuala Kangsar, which were 35 cents and 27 cents in 1924 and 50 cents and 40 cents respectively in 1928.⁴¹

The Labour Code required the employer to provide house accommodation, sufficient water supply, sanitary arrangements, hospital, medical attendance and treatment in estates. Treatment for an estate labourer and his dependants who remained in the hospital was free of charge within a period of thirty days.⁴²

The Indian Emigration Act of 1922 brought organized emigration of unskilled labour under the control of the legislature. A standing emigration committee, composed of 12 members of the Indian Legislature, 8 of whom are members of the Legislative Assembly and four of the Council of State, advises the Government of India on all major emigration questions. The fact that the consent of the elected legislature is necessary to the existence of Indian emigration has exercised a liberalizing influence upon colonies which require Indian labor (p.599) Some of the provisions included were –

Section 6 provided for the appointment of Medical Inspectors at any port from where emigration was permissible; Section 7 provided for the appointment of agents at places outside India to protect the interests of Indian emigrants; Section 8 provided for the Constitution of an Advisory Committee to assist the Protector of Emigrants; Section 9 provided for the ban on emigration of unskilled workers from any port except Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Negapatam, Tuticorin and Dhanushkodi, and any other port, which the Central Government may, by notification, permit; Section 17 dealt with the manner in which applications for emigration in respect of skilled workmen are to be dealt with; Section 18 stipulated that before a person departs from India on the basis of the permission granted in terms of Section 17, the employer or his authorized representative shall appear before the Protector of Emigrants along with the workman concerned; Section 26 notes that it is necessary to reproduce the same for ready reference and better understanding: Fraudulently inducing to emigrate: - Whoever, by means of intoxication coercion or fraud causes or induces or attempts to cause or induce any person to emigrate, or enter into any agreement to emigrate, or leave any place with a view to emigrating, shall be punishable [with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine: Provided that in the absence of special and adequate reasons to the contrary to be mentioned in the judgement of the Court, such imprisonment shall not be less than six months and such fine shall not be less than one thousand rupees]⁴³

The next phase of political developments related to Indian labourers in Malaya is dated to the post-Depression period. "A change in Indian consciousness began to show in the late 1930s. Indians understood the crucial role they played in the plantation capitalist structure as cheap labour, and wanted to change this dynamics of exploitation. This was evident through intermittent strikes prior to the war demanding increases in wages and other benefits."⁴⁴ "Despite the racial plurality of the population, labour became better organised and more militant, especially after the 1930's when free wage labour had emerged, economic conditions were fluctuating and anti-colonial sentiments were rising."⁴⁵

In years of the Great Depression the price of rubber in 1932 fell to one fortieth as compared to that of 1925, the total number of Indians employed in 1932 was half of that in 1929, and payrolls fell to 80% in the same period. In 1934 the rubber industry had recovered from the effects of the Great Depression, but the wages did not see a corresponding increase⁴⁶. "The Planters' Association restored wage rates and conditions to their 1928 level. It did, briefly, but then threatened to reduce them again."⁴⁷ In the Depression years of 1930 – 1933 "labour surplus was shipped back to India under the aegis of the Tamil Immigration Fund," thus avoiding labour unrest and reducing planters overheads."⁴⁸ Indian nationalist opinions were resentful of the way Indian labourers were imported only to be thrown back to India like 'sucked oranges' during slump⁴⁹ "After the 1920's assisted immigration including kangani recruitment labour practically ceased with the onset of rubber slump. When assisted immigration was revived in 1934 kangani recruitment continued to account only for a small fraction of Tamil labourers coming to Malaysia."⁵⁰

"The first wave of industrial unrest after the Great Depression "began in 1934, the year of economic recovery. The Great Depression had thrown labour into the depth of economic degradation: wages had been reduced to a pittance, working conditions had deteriorated, and large numbers of labourers had been laid off or put on short time. When they

finally emerged from the depression, still a little dazzled, they found themselves in conditions even worse in some aspects than what their forbears had experienced. The fundamental problem confronting them was first of all to pull themselves up from the depression conditions and in the long run to remove the basic causes of their discontent. To achieve this end, they had no alternative but to combine and assert themselves. The economic recovery afforded them the first opportunity to fight for higher wages and better working conditions."⁵¹

In the period of economic recovery the areas and estates that were closed were once again brought under cultivation. There was a demand for labour but as many had been sent back to India, Malaya faced a paucity of work force. "Negotiations were undertaken by the Malayan Governments with the Indian Government towards the end of 1933 for the reopening of assisted Indian immigration, which had been suspended since 1931 and as a result it was resumed on May, 1934 on a quota basis. In spite of low wages in Malaya, large crowds presented themselves at the depots in Negapattinam and Madras under the pressure of rural poverty and draught in South India, and many of the applicants had to be turned down"⁵² In 1934 and 1935 there were altogether 155,000 Indian arrivals, of which 66,000 were assisted immigrants. Even though assisted immigration resumed, yet there was a change noticeable. "After the Great Depression, the kangani-recruited immigrants dwindled to an insignificant proportion, and the bulk of the immigrants consisted of non-recruited assisted labourers and non-assisted immigrants. The rubber planters issued thitti surat, a certificate of identity, for Indians who had worked in their estates before to come back; another kind of letter, puthal surat was sent to friends and relatives of labourers already on the estates, offering them employment in Malaya."⁵³

The initial at increasing the wages of the Indian labourers was made by the Government of India. In 1933 when a Malayan deputation travelled to India to press for resumption of Indian emigration, the Government of India insisted wage cuts be restored before the resumption of emigration⁵⁴ and

in October 1935 a despatch was sent to the Malayan Governments, demanding the restoration of half the amount of wage cut in 1930.⁵⁵

“Criticisms of the mode of recruitment and employment of Indians in Malaya began at the turn of the century, and had continued unabated ever since. The plight of the Indians overseas had been a constant theme of Indian nationalist agitation, and the fight on their behalf was part of the Indian nationalist movement. As a result Srinivasa Satri was sent to Malaya to report on the conditions of the Indian estate labourers, for which he visited nearly 30 estates which were mostly owned by Europeans.”⁵⁶

Srinivasa Sastri's report on the conditions of Indian labour in Malaya turned out to be a disappointment as he reported that the condition of the Indian labourers in Malaya was not deplorable. He reported that “new places of accommodation were under construction” medical attention was satisfactory on the larger estates, but the dressers employed, particularly on the smaller and remote estates, were not always sufficiently qualified; the accommodation provided by estate schools and the teachers employed were susceptible of considerable improvement.” In the case of wages he recommended that it be reverted to 1928 rates, he also suggested the abolition of *kanagany* and appointment of two more Indian members on Indian Immigration Committee.⁵⁷

The report was interpreted by Indian Nationalists for purposes of taking initiatives and prompting Indian labourers to organise themselves and demand for better wages and working conditions “The CIAM, particularly following Nehru's visit to Malaya in May-June 1937, began showing strong pro-Congress nationalist leanings. Its fervent emphasis on labour and citizenship rights is reflected by the fact that the President, A. M. Soosay, had written the foreword for a book which described Indian labourers as ‘sucked oranges’ for whom Malaya had no more use.”⁵⁸ The nationalist agenda and opinions against assisted Indian emigration succeeded when a ban was put on all assisted Indian emigration to Malaya with effect from June 15, 1938 by the Indian Government.⁵⁹

“The formation of Central Indian Association of Malaya, a political organization, in September 1936, paved the way for Indian labourers to become more organized themselves. CIAM, knowing fully well the colonial government's stand on trade unions, instead encouraged the formation of associations among the Indian labourers. Consequently, between the years 1939 to 1941, the Klang District Association, United Kuala Langat Indian Association, Batu Arang Labour Association, and Johore Indian Labourer's Association among others, sprouted up in districts and towns where European-owned estates were located.”⁶⁰

On March 29, 1938, the C.I.A.M. sent an urgent telegram to the Government of India. The telegram reads: “Reduction of wages of Indian labour is imminent. If wages are now reduced the action will finally render infructuous the main labour of the Sastri delegation. The present labour situation is definitely detrimental to the economic interests of Indian labour. It is suggested that assisted emigration be stopped pending settlement of issues between the two countries. We respectfully urge Government of India to take up a determined and firm stand and safeguard Indian rights.”⁶¹

All diplomatic attempts by the leaders of the C.I.A.M. having failed, “It dawned on more Indians that they had to look to their own resources to fight for their rights. The message that Indian labourers must organize and rely on themselves took on a new urgency.”⁶² The labour unrest witnessed in Malaya in 1940-41 was caused primarily due to question of wages and working hours. With the outbreak of Second World War on September 3, 1939 soaring prices of daily necessities soared high and there was an overall increase in the cost of living. This, along with the factor of reduced wages among a broad section of labourers in the 1938-39 during the recession proved to be the turning point in labour unrest in Malaya.

R.H. Nathan, a member of the editorial board of the *Tamil Nesan*, a leading Tamil newspaper in Malaya in 1941: “A lot of coolies now understand what is the difference between labourers and capitalists. Co-operation is our watchword. The

estate proprietors and agents will try to break this co-operation. But we cannot allow this to interfere with our work. Unity is strength.”⁶³

“The wave of strikes by Indian estate labourers in 1941 shattered the stereotype of “the mild Hindoo.”⁶⁴ The focus of the strikes was the Klang district of Selangor Province, and at Port Swettenham on the Straits of Klang to the west of Kuala Lumpur. The strike began on Demansara Estate, on March 17, 1941 when four labourers were arrested for allegedly intimidating the others into ceasing work. The demands of the strikers included: 1. Parity of pay for Indian and Chinese labourers. 2. The removal of estate staff who were brutal and their replacement with Tamil-speaking staff. 3. The provision of ‘proper’ education for children. 4. An end to the molesting of labourers’ womenfolk by Europeans and ‘black’ Europeans. 5. The provision of proper medical facilities. 6. The closing of toddy shops.”⁶⁵

In 1939 two young Indian nationalists, R.H. Nathan, sub-editor of the *Tamil Nesan*, and Y.K. Menon, an estate clerk, who reactivated the Port Swettenham Indian Union and formed the Klang Kuala Langat and Kajang Indian Associations. These associations were more on the lines of the Indian sangams (societies) in their objectives, focussing on reform and enlightenment of the Indian community, and their membership included labourers, clerks, teachers, and kanganies. R.H. Nathan had contact with the Klang Rubber Manufacture Workers’ Association⁶⁶ “The strikes by Indian estate workers in the Klang area (Selangor) in early 1941 under the leadership of the Klang District Indian Unions are of particular significance. The strikes later spread to many other estates in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan prompting the British to send in troop reinforcements and declare a state of Emergency in Selangor on 16 May to crush them.”⁶⁷ On March 7, 1941 about 300 labourers marched to Kuala Lumpur to stage a demonstration in front of the office of the Controller of Labour. The Indian labourers employed by the Klang Public Works Department and Sanitation Board also joined in the protest strikes. “The number of strikers rose from 4,000 in early May to 15,000 on May 15, affecting rubber estates in Kuala Lumpur,

Klang, Port Swettenham area and the coast districts. The strike began to infect Negeri Sembilan, where ‘intimidators’”⁶⁸

“High Commissioner Sir Shenton Thomas ordered the arrest of Nathan and Thangaiah, whom he blamed for leading the Tamils astray. The labourers, however, were incensed by the arrests, and this reignited the movement. The strikes involved over 20,000 labourers from close to one hundred estates and young militants fanned out on bicycles to spread the message of revolt over the 1,500 square miles affected.”⁶⁹ These strikes in the second phase were mostly spontaneous. Pickets were deployed on the estates, transport of rubber was obstructed, telephone wires were cut in many places, some toddy shops were destroyed, and police raids were met with violent resistance. “The coolies armed themselves with sticks, batons, stones, and “anything they could find,” complained Thomas.⁷⁰ They cut down telephone wires and on 12 May surrounded the Klang police station. The assistant barricaded himself in his house on a Klang rubber estate on 15 May. In order to quell the unrest caused, Commissioner Shenton Thomas took military aid opened fire causing death of five strikers and another sixty were wounded.⁷¹ A state of emergency was declared in Selangor on 16 May ⁷²and the strikes were undoubtedly a direct challenge posed by the Indian labourer to the Malayan authorities. According to the Colonial Office, “[t]he underlying cause of the strikes was probably the fact that the earlier strikes had given the labourers an idea of their power and their victory had gone to their head.” The workers demanded the right to wear “Gandhi hats” and fly Congress flags in their compounds, and wanted the abolition of the custom of coolies having to dismount from their bicycles if they met a planter’s car on the roads. Such “insolence” outraged the High Commissioner, Sir Shenton Thomas, who told CIAM leaders, “the strike was a disgrace to the Indian community” and a “politically inspired . . . challenge to authority.”⁷³

Indians active in the formation of plantation unions were P. P. Narayanan (Plantation Workers Union of Malaya), Govindan Nair (Johor State Plantation Workers Union),

Subbiah (Malacca Estate Workers Union). The Pan Malayan Rubber Workers' Union (PMRWU) was formed, with an aim to resist the employers, and leaders of the Negri Sembilan Indian Labour Union, the Perak Estate Employees' Union (PEEU), the Alor Gajah Labour Union, the Malacca Estate Employees' Union and the Johore State Plantation Workers' Union came together to form the PMRWU.⁷⁴

Initially the PMRWU was not successful and, in September 1954, the formation of National Union of Plantation Workers signalled the presence of a union that worked for the benefit of the plantation workers in Malaya. "Since its inception under the colonial regime, and since the establishment of an independent Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the NUPW has been the main organiser of plantation workers in the country and the plantation workers, as the union's leaders, have been predominantly ethnic Indian".⁷⁵

The NUPW extended support for school education of children of estate workers as well as university education in 1963 and also provided student hostel accommodation in Kuala Lumpur and provincial capitals⁷⁶. The wide ranging projects undertaken by NUPW include provision of adult education, eradication of alcoholism and succession in the union's governance.⁷⁷

3. Indian Political Leaders in Malaya

A number of Indian leaders travelled to Malaysia in the first half of the 20th century and left a deep impact on the political developments of the country. While Nehru went on tours, John A Thivy and S.A.Ganapathy continued their political struggle from Malaysian soil. These leaders had witnessed the freedom for struggle against colonial rule in India and were inspired to fight for the cause of Indians in Malaysia who were reeling under the effects of British colonial rule as well. Most importantly they perceived Indians in Malaysia as a part of the Malaysian society and often joined hands with other political parties to hit at British imperialism.

John A Thivy was instrumental in the formation of Malaya Indian Congress. Thivy met Gandhi in London and this meeting fuelled his determination

to fight for India's independence. On his return from London to Malaya in 1932 he became actively involved in the nationalist movements. Inspired by a speech of Subhas Chandra Bose, Thivy joined the Indian National Army in 1943 and was a part of INA's campaigns in Burma and also a former Minister in Subhas Chandra Bose's Provincial Government. After the surrender by Japanese forces, Thivy was imprisoned in Changi Prison on charges of anti-colonial activities but was released from jail on Nehru's request.⁷⁸ Thivy was asked by Nehru to become secretary of the Indian Relief Committee and to lead an organisation of overseas Indians in Malaysia.⁷⁹ After his release from jail, Thivy resided in the Sri Mariamman temple in Kuala Lumpur and worked towards organising a communal nationalist movement.⁸⁰ A three day conference of Indian organisations was held at Kuala Lumpur from 3–5 August 1946, resulting in the formation of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) with John A. Thivy, as its first President.⁸¹ "It was the culmination of a collective effort by several leaders to rally the Indians behind a national organisation that could safeguard the rights and interests of the minority community in the changing political environment in Malaya."⁸² Thivy noted that Indians in Malaya had a double task- to work for the self determination of Malaya in co-operation with communities; and to work for independence, honour and dignity of the mother country⁸³. One of the major concerns of the MIC was to gather support amongst the Indians in Malaysia. The most pertinent and important issue that the MIC had to deal was the question of citizenship. The MIC noted: "Malayans were, in effect, British subjects, a term which was a reminder of the subjugation of India and Malaya by the British" (Draft proposal of All-Malayan Indian Organisation, 3 August 1946). The MIC had differentiated between those who received citizenship of Malaya and those who did not and firmly believed that creating such a distinction would fragment the unity among the Indians in Malaya.⁸⁴ The MIC as party represented Indians in Malaya as a whole, and in its first Assembly in June 1947 noted: "Indian settlers who want to retain their own nationality should have equality before the law, without having civic rights, should

enjoy safety of person and property and should be treated in a generous and humane spirit” (Annual Report of the MIC General Assembly, 1947/1948; and Indian Daily Mail, 10 June 1947). The MIC urged the government to grant citizenship to those who lived in Malaya and simultaneously asked the people to obey the laws of the country and to give their undivided loyalty (Indian Daily Mail, 9 June 1947).⁸⁵ In Thivy’s opinion Indians were not only to safeguard their interests and guide the government in various problems, but also to help Malay towards its democratic goal.⁸⁶

Thivy was appointed the Government of India Representative in Malaya in 1947 and he spoke on issues facing the Indian community. Thivy was aware that the constitutional changes that would take place in Malaya would create a situation where only those who qualified would be granted citizenship. Thus, there would emerge a distinction between the duties and obligations of citizens and non-citizens. Thivy assured the Indian community born in Malaya that they would receive the support of the Indian government.⁸⁷

Thivy not only ensured celebration of Azad Hind Day and Bose’s birthday on 23 January 1947 but also proposed the construction of a memorial to Subhas Chandra Bose⁸⁸ and the Netaji-MIC building would serve as a “living” replacement for the destroyed INA memorial. In its first meeting in June 1947, the MIC decided to a “Netaji Memorial” at the cost of half a million dollars. Further, the main room of the MIC building in Kuala Lumpur was named Netaji Hall.⁸⁹

S A Ganapathy was born in 1917 in Madras District Tamil Nadu. In 1929, he came to Singapore in 1929, and later in 1939 he joined the Malayan Communist Party. In the period of Japanese occupation from 1943 to 1945 he was an instructor in the Indian National Army and after the defeat of Japanese forces he worked towards organising the Indian Section of the General Labour Union of which he was appointed Secretary in 1945.⁹⁰

He was reported to be a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Malayan Communist Party. Ganapathy was elected as President of PMFTU on 7th February 1947 which controlled 60 % of the

work force and had 40,000 members.. He attended the Asian Relationship Conference held from 25th March to 2nd April 1947 in Delhi as a representative of Malaya.⁹¹ .

In the opinion of Ganapathy pointed a democratic constitution was most vital to the promotion of the standard of living of the workers⁹². He said, “If the economic and the finance of the country is to be improved so as to place industries in a position to pay higher wages, if we are to have better social services, if there is to be equitable distribution of income and resources, these can only be secured by influencing the legislation of the country”.⁹³ In his opinion, “If the economy of Malaya is balanced, if the civil liberties are guaranteed and if there is democratic constitution through which the will of the people could influence Legislation it would be much easier to promote the standard of living of the workers and alleviated his sufferings”.⁹⁴ Ganapathy also wanted the Malayan government to fix wages of workers “Today when real wages have shrunk to an alarmingly low level at a time when the working class is awakening in realize their rights the fixing of a minimum wage is now vital for the quick rehabilitation of the country. I stress most strongly the needs for fixing a minimum wage because it is vital for the preservation of law and order in Malaya”.⁹⁵

He joined hands with AMCJA-PUTERA and Malaya saw a nationwide hartal on 20 October 1947. In Batu Arang 2000 workers in collieries refused to turn up for work and the port of Swettenham came to a standstill with 200 stevedores and 700 shore workmen refused to offload cargo of five ships. The hartal was supported by the Selangor Indian Chamber of Commerce who decided to shut shops.⁹⁶ All labourers in various estates of Selangor went on strike as well. Ganapathy’s role is evident in his visits to Batu Arang and meetings with the leaders of the Colliery Workers Union (CWU). The impact of the strike is seen in the sheer number of workers that went on strike the second time on March 24, 1937, which was between 5,000 to 7,000 went on strike . They captured the colliery and the town and proclaimed their own “Soviet government”. Thus

was founded “the first communist Soviet in modern Malaysian and Singapore history” and for seven days, the workers’ “Soviet” had ruled Batu Arang. It required 250 policemen and 200 Malay Regiment soldiers to put an end to the revolt.”⁹⁷

S A Ganapathy went into hiding but was found and arrested at Waterfall Estate near Rwang on 1st March 1949. He was accused of possessing arms and on 15th March 1949, the Kuala Lumpur High Court sentenced him to be hung to death. The Indian Daily Mail of 6th May 1949 reported anger and protest in India and the British parliament on the decision to hang Ganapathy.⁹⁸ Kamraja, President of the Indian national Congress in Tamil Nadu stated, “British Government in Malaya have done a great injustice to India by ordering the execution of one of her sons in total disgraced of protest by the Indian authorities in Malaya.” The news also covered the under Secretary Davis Rees Williams being questioned in the House of Commons by Philip Piratin on Ganapathy’s hanging.⁹⁹

Jawaharlal Nehru: In 1937 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the National Indian Congress Party, visited Malaya and saw unjust conditions of Indian labourers as compared with their Chinese counterparts. He suggested that a trade union for Indian labourers be established to maintain their welfare. He addressed a huge gathering at Johor Bahru on 27 May 1937 where he spoke in Hindustani and English. He expressed his desire for Indians in Malaya to assist the Malays and not come in their way as Indians and Malays were like cousins. He concluded by saying, “When I go back I shall carry with me your message and good will to the people of India who are struggling for freedom.”¹⁰⁰ Consequently, in 1938, under pressure from the Central Indian Association of Malaya, the House of Representatives of India succeeded in stopping the migration of Indian labourers to Malaya. However, this was not sufficient to remedy the problems faced by the Indian labourers, as their situation remained unchanged. Nehru went to Malaya again on 17th March 1946 and gave the assurance that, as soon as India achieved independence, the Indian government would focus their attention on the welfare of Indians

outside India. On 26th March 1946, Nehru formed the Indian Relief Committee to handle matters relating to Indians in Malaya.

The INA and IIL relief committee was set up in November 1945 and functioned till 20th May 1946 when it was merged into the Indian Relief committee of Malaysia set up by Jawaharlal Nehru. It discharged money to ex INA personnel and their dependents and those in military camps which included relief in kind, transport, feeding ex INA stray personnel, defence cable and telegrams and maintenance of 145 INA personnel released from Kluang. The expenditures involved in Nehru’s visit in 1946 were paid from this fund.¹⁰¹ The fund helped more than 76,000 Indians between 1st April 1946 and 30 June 1947 and spent about \$ 20,489 in relief work. More than 781 were given cash relief, 56,120 provided with clothing and 600 found employment by the Committee. In addition to this it arranged for the repatriation of 3,622 people to India, sent 670 widows and children to various institutions and tended to the cases of 900 missing persons across Southeast Asia.¹⁰² His visit coincided with the presence of the Indian Government Medical Mission sent by the Congress to Malaya. The Mission stayed in Malaya for three months during which it visited 300 estates and tended to 64,000 labourers and treated 30,000 individuals. The mission worked in close association with the medical and health services of the Government and Estates to tackle widespread disease and malnutrition afflicting the people of Malaysia resulting from the occupation of Malaysia.¹⁰³ On the Indian side Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy took interest in the medical Missions sent from India by the Congress to Malaysia and China. Dr. Roy arranged funds, purchased equipment and medicines, selected the personnel and arranged for their transport from Calcutta to various parts of Malaysia.¹⁰⁴

“His visit was very beneficial as he was able to achieve much for the Indian community, especially in the establishment of a Trust. It was as a result of his efforts that many Indians had been arrested for collaboration with the Japanese were released. Those who were unable to pay their passage to India were assisted by the Indian Government, who also

relaxed export regulations in order that succour in the form of new and old clothes could reach needy Indians in Malaya. Three medical missions, two sponsored by the Indian National Congress and one by the Government of India were sent to Malaya to render medical aid. Due to the above activities and interest taken by the Indian Government and the Indian public, the whole situation influenced the Malayan Government to revise their policy towards Indians in Malaya.”¹⁰⁵

4. Social Reform and Estate Workers

Indian immigration of indentured labour to Malaysia for over a century invariably increased the presence of Indian population on Malaysian soil. Most of these Indians were from poor backgrounds who migrated due famine and extreme poverty in hope of a better future. Their hopes were dashed as they continued to live in poverty and worked under strenuous conditions for which they received minimal wages. Even though the British authorities in India passed numerous acts for their welfare, these were hardly favoured or followed by the estate owners and authorities. Indian leaders in Malaysia were deeply influenced by Indian nationalist ideas of social reform took it upon themselves to take up the cause of the labourers on estates and ensure their welfare and moral betterment.

Thondar Padai- The Thondar Padai or Volunteer/ Youth corps was founded A M Samy in 1945 on the Harvard Estate at Kedah. The movement aimed at the socio economic, moral and cultural uplift of the Indian estate workers. The movement drew inspiration from the independence movement in India and the Dravidar Khazagam of Madras. It’s main focus was the eradication of toddy consumption amongst the labourers and it drew inspiration from Gandhian principles of social reform.¹⁰⁶

Prohibition on sale and consumption of liquor was a part of the Indian nationalist agenda from the 1900’s and “provisional reform associations were formed to conduct this agitation and both Christian missionary and Hindu reformist elements came”¹⁰⁷. “Picketing of liquor shops was an essential part of the prohibition campaign that Gandhi initiated in

various parts of India. He has observed that this was an aspect of the Satyagraha Campaign in which women and children could join as they were the most affected by the spread of drunkenness in society. The campaigners in Malaya, too, addressed themselves primarily to women and children and evidence shows that the e took part in large”¹⁰⁸ In the civil disobedience movement (1930) thousands of men and led by the members of the Congress Working Committee picketed the shops and in 1931, the Congress Working Committee in its Karachi Session, pleaded for total prohibition.

Since most of labourers that migrated originated from the Madras Presidency, the Madras wanted “elimination of the toddy habit must be carried out in Malaya, not only for the personal benefit of the labourers, but also to prevent them from bringing back the habit when they return to India.”¹⁰⁹ The Government of India was concerned and well aware of the fact that if toddy consumption habit was brought back to India from Malaya picked up in Malaya was brought back to India, “in most likelihood the Government of India would face serious problems as faced by their Malayan counterpart.”¹¹⁰ In 1937, Gandhi told the Congress ministries, “put itself morally right only by once and for all courageously and drastically dealing with this devastating evil of drink and drugs”¹¹¹ In 1937 prohibition was imposed in parts Madras, Bombay, United Provinces, Bihar, Central Province and the North West Frontier Province.

But on the Malaya front the Indian authorities could not achieve much besides sending memoranda, reports and holding protests. Consumption of toddy amongst the labourers on the estates caused not only health problems, but also placed them in the grip of poverty as they would spend a major part of their income on toddy. The Indian Government, a number of Indian organisations, estate management, labourers, and individuals, opposed the consumption and intake of toddy. A number of cases of poisoning, diarrhoea, dysentery and even death were reported after consumption of toddy. “Dr. M. Watson, a medical practitioner employed by the P.A.M., made a strong case against toddy on medical grounds and

in 1916 governments to impose controls on the sale of toddy to Indian labourers.”¹¹²

The sale of Toddy was also a major source of revenue for the Government and two-fifths of the profits from the sale of toddy was to be paid as tax to the Government. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, in his report on Indian Labour in 1937 recommended a “policy of prohibition in the estates”¹¹³ but this was opposed by the planters as in their opinion doing so would result in labour moving out of the estates for consumption of toddy.

The anti-toddy Thondar Padai founded by A. M. Samy constituted labourers and Tamil schoolteachers. “The movement that began in Harvard estate then inspired other estates to follow suit resulting in many estates”¹¹⁴ in Kedah having their own Thondar Padai organisations. Those above the age of 15 years were motivated to join the movement through lectures and courses. “The focus of this movement was on education, hygiene, self-development, and community service. This movement reminded them that the elderly’s submission to authorities and the dangers of consuming toddy and sameu drove many estate workers into poverty, deterioration, and wretchedness. In order to strengthen their resolve, youths were trained in exercise and physical activity by ex-members of the Indian National Army.”¹¹⁵ In Kedah itself the movement managed to enlist 1000 members in¹¹⁶ and over time many estates in Kedah established their own Thondar Padai organisations such as in Sungai Toh¹¹⁷ Pawang, United Patani, Kuala Ketil, Badenock, Scarborough, Bukit Sembilan, Sungai Tawar, Victoria, Padang Meiha, Henrietta, Kuala Sedim, and Dublin.

A committee was instituted on 27 September 1946 to look into the toddy problem which was known as the Estate Toddy Committee or Ross Committee. “The committee conducted various activities, including discussion, receiving 75 memoranda and letters regarding toddy, and receiving reports from 30 medical doctors on the harms of toddy. The report of the Committee came as a disappointment for the Thondar Padai who wanted complete closure of toddy shops to eradicate the toddy drinking and the report did not suggest either closing of shops or

prohibition.” This led to the adoption of militaristic means by the Thondar Padai to achieve their aim.

28 February 1947 about 1,000 labourers from Harvard estate, and other adjoining estates in Kedah, marched from Bedong and picketed in front of the toddy shop. “It was the largest anti-toddy campaign in Kedah. Thondar Padai members protested and advised the men to abandon the beverage.”¹¹⁸ At Harvard estate, a protest was held demanding the release of 12 Thondar Padai members but the police and employers did not give in to their demands. As a result A.M. Samy called on all labourers estates of Kedah to hold a strike in protest against the toddy shops. The strike was carried out by labourers in Harvard, Bukit Sembilan, Dublin, Sungai Tawar, and United Patani to which the employers and police reacted with even more violence. The leaders of the Thondar Padai and numerous other labourers were arrested and imprisoned. In March 1947, Thondar Padai helped the labourers in Bukit Sembilan estate organise a strike. The *Malaya Tribune* of 1st May 1947 reported that due to the riots the manager of the Bukit Sembilan estate was evacuated after being blockaded on the estate. The riots resulted in cessation of production of 65000 pounds of rubber a month.¹¹⁹ All in all it is estimated that about 26000 estate workers went on strike in Kedah during 1947.¹²⁰ The riots were noticed by Indian nationalist leaders and S K Chettur, representative of the Government of India in Malaya sent a report after a six day visit to Kedah and reported that a series of events between the labour and management had resulted in the disorder. He also reported that Indians in the area felt that police actions were excessive in nature.¹²¹

VT Sambanthan - VT Sambanthan’s parents came to Malaya in 1896 and his father owned many rubber plantations. Sambanthan studied at the Annamalai University in South India and was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence. He also became a member of Youth Wing of the Indian National Congress.¹²² Mahatma Gandhi’s religious principle of “*ahimsa*” (non-violence), Sambanthan understood and “*satyagraha*” (insistence of truth) as important tools for a nation fighting for independence

had an impact on him, and motivated him to join Malayan politics with an aim gaining independence for his homeland. Sambanthan returned to Malaya in 1946 and not only took over the family business, but continuously strived for the betterment of the labouring class on the plantations.

He wanted the workers to be empowered as also be a part of the society and have equal political rights. At a time when the rubber estates were being fragmented and the work of the plantation labourer was at stake, Sambanthan started the National Land Finance Co-operative Society in 1960 which provided them an opportunity to own land. "He toured rubber plantations to persuade workers to buy shares in the cooperative; a worker with a registration fee of \$2 and a share costing \$100 (payable in instalments) could buy a stake in a plantation"¹²³ Sambanthan distributed a portion of the land of the Ulu Ayer Tawar Estate to the workers through the shares of the National Land Finance Cooperative Society (NLFCS). "From the more than 242.8 hectares of estate land, 26.3 hectares was purchased and divided into 220 lots measuring a quarter acre each which were distributed to help the Indian community with the original purpose of improving their standard of living through plantation activities."¹²⁴ "At the time of his death in 1979, the cooperative had bought over 18 estates, totalling 12,000ha and had a membership of 85,000 workers."¹²⁵

He encouraged workers to adopt Malaysia as their home rather than return to India and made them realise their importance in the development of the county as well as their place in it.¹²⁶ He encouraged them to become citizens of Malaysia and aided them in this effort. Since most of the workers came from villages in Tamil Nadu and were uneducated, he personally tended to their procedures involved in acquiring citizenship. "The MIC would fill up citizenship forms for these migrant workers and bring a Justice of Peace to the estates for mass swearing every weekend during the year when passing the Malay language was not yet mandatory for citizenship."¹²⁷

The decision to build Mahatma Gandhi Tamil School in Sungei Siput, Perak was taken in 1951

but there was no state fund available. A Veeraswamy and A M S Suppiah Pillay, donated 2 acres of land for the school, but it was their sons Sambanthan and Periaswamy who donated \$25,000 each for construction of the school, which was designed by the Danish architect B M Iversen. "Responding to the call of educating and liberating the poor plantation workers' children, the labourers too responded with a total donation of \$7000."¹²⁸

In 1954, he set up the. "He also lobbied for the introduction of the English language medium in Tamil schools in Perak and transformation of the South Indian Labour Fund into an education fund to assist children of plantation workers."¹²⁹ The SILF replaced the Tamil Immigration Fund on 1 September. The fund has disbursed over RM470, 830 to 699 poor Indian Malaysian students between 1962 and 1992.¹³⁰

5. Doyens of Women and Children Welfare

A number of Indian women who were part of the INA later contributed towards the cause of women's rights and education such as Janaky Athi Nahappan and Rasamma Bhupalan. They dedicated their lives to various social and political causes in Malaysia. These women worked not on racial or political lines, but were determined to ensure better lives for the more underprivileged sections of society and equal rights for women.

Janaky Athi Nahappan was born in Kuala Lumpur and was also a part of the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Indian national Army and fought at the Indo Burma border. She rescued a number of soldiers during the bombing of the Red Cross hospital in Rangoon and trekked through dense forests to bring back the INA soldiers to safety.¹³¹ After the war, she became actively involved in politics and devoted herself to the MIC. In the 1940s, she joined the Indian Congress Medical Mission in Malaya and visited rubber estates throughout the country. While touring the estates she interacted with the Indian emigrants and this first-hand experience of living and working conditions of the labourers encouraged her to establish a political organisation

that would tend to the betterment of the Indian immigrants in Malaysia. In 1946, she helped John Thivy to establish the Malayan Indian Congress,¹³² held the post of commissioner of the Selangor Girl Guides Association and has been an active member of National Council of Women's Organisations. In 1972 she was a member of a commission set up by the Malayan Government for reviewing the existing laws and determine the possible reforms in light of the UN conventions on consent to marriage, minimum age and registration of marriages.¹³³ She was awarded Padma Shri in 2002 by the Indian government.¹³⁴

Mrs F.R. Bhupalan: Mrs F.R. Bhupalan was part of the Rani of Jhansi regiment, of the Indian National Army, to fight the British and fought at the war front in Burma.¹³⁵ After the defeat of Japan, she dedicated her life to the betterment of society, in particular women and education. She started her teaching career at the Methodist Girls School in Penang in 1955, which made her aware of the discrimination in pay scale for men and women. The difference in pay scale was justified by the Government by stating that transfer women due to their family obligations and that that women were less permanent in service and were not the main breadwinners. Wage discrimination was evident in the Unified Teaching Service Scheme (UTS) of 1957, according to which that teachers with the same qualifications and seniority would be placed on different salary scales based on whether they taught the senior or lower classes. In 1960 she founded the Women Teachers Union of the Federation of Malaya and fought for equal pay for women teachers.¹³⁶ "Fighting for equal pay for women teachers was "the first real struggle for women in Malaya".¹³⁷ Calling first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman women's biggest ally then, Rasammah said he was the only one who listened to WTU and took up their cause. "He truly believed in the elevation of the marginalised and women teachers will always be grateful to him," and a single wage scale for teachers became a reality in 1964. An article dated 13 May 1964 notes that she sent a telegram on to Tengku Abdul Rahman appealing to give urgent and immediate attention to the question of equal pay for

equal work. "Despite the long delay in dealing with the matter our confidence in the sense of justice of our Prime Minister and Government remains unshaken."¹³⁸ On 22 January 1966 the teachers accepted the Government's method of implementing equal pay for women,¹³⁹ which brought a fruitful end to a four and a half year struggle by teachers headed by Bhupalan. Bhupalan was keen on the setting up of a single teachers organisation, "The WTU has pledged itself to work for the development of one strong teacher's organisation which will speak for all the teachers throughout the length and breadth of the Federation".¹⁴⁰ This was ultimately achieved in August 1965 with the merging of 19 unions representing 27,000 teachers to form the Malayan Teachers Union. It resolved to seek affiliation with the Malayan Teachers National Congress.¹⁴¹

She played a key role in developing the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Vocational Training Opportunity Centre (VTOC), which has trained more than 1000 women since its inception. "It is here that poor girls were given a chance to shake off the shackles of poverty through free training in hairdressing and beauty courses, computer and secretarial skills, and sewing and tailoring."¹⁴² Rasammah was the first honorary secretary general of the Malayan Teachers National Congress, which is affiliated to the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP). She was the founder principal of the Methodist College and in 1983 and received the Tokoh Guru award in 1986.¹⁴³ "Currently, she is chairperson of the National Council of Women's Organisations' Law and Human Rights Commission, finance chairperson of YWCA-KL and sits on the Methodist Education Foundation board."¹⁴⁴ She attended the World Confederation of Organisations of the teaching profession held at Addis Ababa from 31 July to 9 August 1965,¹⁴⁵ and attended a 10-day meeting of the World Confederations of Organisations of the Teaching Profession in Paris.¹⁴⁶ She was also the chairman of the Women's Institute of Malaya which was a non-political, non-religious and non-racial organisation that dedicated itself to the cause of the nation.¹⁴⁷ In 1956 she held the post of vice President of the Indian Association¹⁴⁸

She is also one of the founder members of National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO), and was its first secretary general. This organisation is in forefront of reforms relating to women's rights in Malaysia and bringing about major legislations that did away with discrimination towards women. As stated by her, "the new Council for Women's Organisation will act as a spearhead group initiating action for the betterment of women. Our whole idea is to work on unity. We feel that women in Malaya can play a vital role in the life of the country if they all unite themselves."¹⁴⁹ The Organisation has "125 affiliates, working to raise women's status in Malaysia. Rasammah, NCWO vice president Datuk Ramani Gurusamy, 72, and All Women's Action Society (AWAM) president Ho Yock Lin, 58, are all veterans in Malaysia's feminist movement, and they have worked hard to raise the standard of Malaysian women's lives – from advocating for equal pay to amending legislation on rape, violence against women and custody rights, to creating awareness of breast cancer."¹⁵⁰

Datuk Ramani Gurusamy has devoted her life to professional, social and community work to promote women's empowerment in relation to the family, community and national development. In the 1960s, she fought for equal pay for work of equal value, for giving women Permanency and Pensionable status which entitled them to equal pay, medical, housing and other benefits. She was also involved in the formulation of the National Policy on Women and Action Plan. She was involved in the National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) for more than 20 years, during which the organisation pushed for transformations in the procedures involved in managing rape cases which resulted in the setting up a special unit of police officers to investigate rape victims, reform on laws on domestic violence, custody and guardianship of children, inheritance and property rights. The organisation's lobbying also resulted in maternity leave being extended from 42 days to 60 days and eventually 90 days in 2010.¹⁵¹ Ramani is currently the Deputy President of NCWO. She served NCWO secretary-general for 21 years and was at the forefront of its many programmes, including the formulation of the

National Policy on Women and Action Plan. National Council of Women's Organisation (NCWO) is actively involved in several organisations, such as the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations; Suhakam's Committee on Human Rights Education for Schools and the Home Ministry's Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council.¹⁵²

Uma Sambanthan, wife Tun V T Sambanthan is not only a social worker but was also involved in the cooperative movement in Malay. After the war she went to India where she majored in Chemistry from University of Madras, and studied for a Masters from Presidency College, Chennai. She started her career by teaching in Singapore, which she quit after three years and finally returned to Malaysia in 1956. Her interests lay in raising the status of women in rural areas. Alongside her husband who worked to ensure citizenship for Indian workers, she made the women ware of the advantages of taking up citizenship. "We wives started getting more involved with social work, especially in the kampungs. I was one of the founders of the National Council of Women's Organisations, the NCWO. Whatever needed pioneering, we were prepared to do. And we worked together as a multi communal group."¹⁵³ She was made founder life member of NCWO in 1956 and remained President of the organistaion for four years. She is also the co-founder of the Persatuan Sri Ramakrishna Sarada and is actively involved in the Society's early childhood development programme. From 1960 to 1972, she also devoted her time and efforts to the Children's International Art Class which encourages young children to pursue various hobbies. From 1980 to 1995 she served as chairman of the National Land Finance Co- operative Society (NLFC) which was established by her husband, and later she served as its President in 1995 and 1996. She participated in the Asian Regional Conference of the International Cooperative Alliance of 1996 held at Kuala Lumpur held in 1996, she attended the Asian . In 1992 the NCWO awarded her the the Tun Fatimah Gold Medal.¹⁵⁴

The strong presence of India's in Malaysia from its establishment to present day is a noticeable fact. The Indian leaders in Malaysia saw themselves

as belonging to the country and as an essential component of its multi-ethnic society. They integrated themselves within the Malaysian society and fought for political, social and economic causes. Many also encouraged the Indian community in Malaysia to integrate with its multi ethnic fabric and become Malaysian citizens. The women social activists dedicated their lives to cause of women and children devoid of religious, political or economic motives. They served Malaysian society and not a fraction of it. All in all, while Malaysia welcomed and accepted Indians with open arms, many Indian leaders in return played a crucial role in the freedom movement as well as development of Malaysian society and economy.

Endnotes

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