Spatial and occupational mobility of plantation labour in Malaysia
Mariappan, Athi Sivan

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SPATIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY
OF PLANTATION LABOUR IN MALAYSIA
Retrenchments, Outmigration and Closure of Plantations, 1951-2012

Athi Sivan T Mariappan
SPATIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY OF PLANTATION LABOUR IN MALAYSIA:
Retrenchments, Outmigration and Closure of Plantations, 1951-2012

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Samenvatting
Preface

This labour of passion has been a long and arduous journey right from its inception. It began with a plan to examine the plight of Tamil plantations workers in Medan, Indonesia, which had hitherto escaped the scrutiny of historians or social scientists. Unfortunately, poor progress in learning the Dutch language and problems encountered in deciphering documents in the Dutch language, especially that of 19-century Dutch handwritten documents, brought this venture to an abrupt halt. After spending more than six months, I moved to an area that I am much more familiar with – that of plantation labour in Peninsular Malaysia.

This study began by focusing on the disparities among families in the plantation and the differing outcomes of their social mobility trajectory. I had noticed that amidst the majority of the impoverished plantation families, there was a small intergenerational upward mobility category. The first fieldwork conducted in 2009-10 led me to explore the roots of these disparities and to examine how they shaped the outmigration from the plantation. On processing this data, I found that there were more questions than answers. This prompted me to explore the fundamental reasons for the plantation families moving-out despite having been anchored there for generations. I then realized that it was much more complex than the conventional wisdom of attributing this outmigration to the plantations’ conversion to less labour-intensive crops or to the development of plantation land for commercial purposes. The whole process was complicated and deeply embedded in the tapestry of the social and economic structures.

This compelled me to return to Malaysia for additional fieldwork – I made several visits for durations ranging from six weeks to two months each time. Each visit was to explore yet another dimension that I had belatedly discovered and regarded as being a critical area. In the midst of compiling information on the ‘organisation of exit’ – how different methods were employed by labour families in moving out of the plantation – I discovered that there was also a phenomenon of mass ‘return to plantation’ in the 1970s by those Indian labour families who were displaced from the late 1960s. This phenomenon was initially masked by the acute labour shortage of that period, especially since 1978. Later, when the figures for Indian labourers were separated from the total number of labourers, the aggregated data supported my findings on the phenomenon of ‘return to plantation’. Since this phenomenon has never been described in the records of either the plantation fraternity or the state, I was extremely keen to delve into this further. However, I was in a quandary – how do I elaborate on ‘the return to plantation’ in a work focusing on the mass exit from plantation?
It was around this juncture that Prof. Jan Breman, a commentator of my paper, suggested a focus on the structural historical perspective of the displaced plantation families. Since Prof Breman had studied the plantation labour in Sumatra, I was motivated to explore the historical angle of displacement. This led me to focus on two significant events - the ‘subdivision of plantation’ and the Employment (Restriction) Act (ERA). These two events shed a record number of labour families from the plantations particularly since mid-1960 to 1969, but very little is known about this. By this time, I was already back in Malaysia. Thus, began my journey in archival work, lasting almost 15 months. It helped me to better understand the development of labour shortage in plantations and the formalisation of foreign labour in Malaysia.

Upon conclusion of my archival work, I was able to appreciate the uninterrupted sequence of commodification of plantation lands (and labour) right from the pre and post-independence period to this day. By focusing on the family as the social unit of analysis, I was able to reconcile what had earlier appeared to be a contradiction – family members returning to, and at the same time, exiting the plantations. The younger family members, born and bred in the plantation, left for employment, while the older labour families who had been displaced in a series of retrenchments earlier, returned to plantation employment and accommodation. Apart from that, the spatial character of commodification and crop preference was also becoming evident. Observing and analysing data over a period of several decades showed not only geospatial transformation, but also the differences between ‘coastal’ and ‘interior’ plantation lands and the types of crops, and the expansion of urban development and sporadic rural developments.

The next dilemma faced was to explain this process using a theoretical framework. The most influential theory of migration among agricultural families in the Third World was developed by a well-known Harvard scholar, Prof. Oded Stark, who emphasised the diversification of income risk as the primary motivation to migrate. It was evident that in the case of Malaysian plantation families at least, this was flawed. My focus then shifted to theoretical frameworks that laid importance on an organic community dependent on the land for their work and living. It was then that I returned to the impressive classic *The Great Transformation* (1944) by Prof. Karl Polanyi, focusing on Polyani’s notion of commodification of land and labour.

By this time, I had the data on a good number of plantations that had disintegrated. However, most commentators of my study suggested I provide an estimation of the scale of the commodification as well as elaboration on the compensation. Thus, I ventured to further data collection in this area. This was the most challenging task. It involved some archival work but most of it was raw data collection from former workers, plantation union and others. This was indeed time-consuming despite the
great assistance from the Selangor Union branch and former plantation leaders. This data provided a picture of the position of plantation families on the eve of their final migration.

This study aimed to coherently explain retrenchments, outmigration and displacement among plantation families over a span of six decades by focusing on a meso level of analysis. Covering such an extended period and with a focus on the community scale of socioeconomic processes lead to an inevitable shortfall – the need to sacrifice the rich micro details of individual plantations and their residents. This was unfortunate but necessary. The next challenge was to determine the extent of details to be incorporated into the meso level of analysis. In this context, this work is an ongoing project, with the hope that more in-depth studies will be undertaken by others to further enrich the subject.

This study took an unusually long time due to various challenges. A major issue faced was that most of the empirical discussion had to be based on primary data collection, in view of the paucity of published literature in this area. Data had to be extracted from old files and records, some of which were classified information. In addition, there was much contradicting or apparently plausible data, the authenticity of which had to be verified through further research including interviewing relevant personnel. Apart from that, my return from Amsterdam to Malaysia in mid-2012 also marked my return to my employment. I was compelled to juggle between the requirements of working and that of completing my study. To add to my woes, while writing the final chapters and intermittently refining the data, I met a serious motor accident in March 2016 that incapacitated me for almost seven months. This also involved undergoing surgery twice, which further delayed my plan of completion. By the time of the defense, a decade has passed. With all the limitations, it is hoped that this work will provide some insights on the plantation families encounter with retrenchments, outmigration and closure of plantations.
Acknowledgements

This work would not have been completed without the help of many people. It is truly a gotong-royong (collective work), as expressed in Malay. First and foremost, I am indebted to the plantation families for sharing their insights and valuable time. Research ethics require that the identity of informants be protected and I have taken all measures possible to observe this. Nevertheless, wherever it is not ‘invasive’, names of persons and places are provided without photographs. The constraints of anonymity restrict my expression of gratitude to some plantation families for the role they played in the completion of this work. With many of them, I share a friendship beyond the requirement of work.

I was able to undertake this study with a scholarship from the National University of Malaysia and the Government of Malaysia (2008-12). The late Prof Mario Rutten was my supervisor in the first few months in AISSR, and under his guidance I did the initial preparatory work. It was with Prof Brian Burgoon, my primary supervisor, that this work was undertaken and completed. His sharp observation always amazed me and it greatly helped me to refine my arguments. I am also most grateful to him for the patience, trust and the support he rendered over the years, without which this work would not have seen the light of day. Brian never failed to allot time for me despite his busy administrative function as Director of AISSR, and for all this I am always indebted. Prof. Thomas Blom Hansen co-supervised my work until he left for Stanford University in my second year, after which Dr Julian Gruin took over the function of ‘co-promotor’. I am grateful to both of them.

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