

# COOLIE WOMEN IN THE EMPIRE'S RUBBER GARDEN

## HISTORICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

As in all other plantation colonies, Indian labor migration to Malaya in the initial phase was primarily short-term and overwhelmingly male. It was clearly a period of “men moving,” a term used by Eric Hobsbawm in his study *The Age of Capitalism* to describe the nineteenth-century cross-regional bulk movement of men, primarily of the laboring class.<sup>1</sup> This gendered migration to Malaya soon changed. Rising Indian nationalist movements highlighted the skewed gender ratio amongst laborers recruited from India, which they asserted was the cause of “immorality,” including a range of social and moral vices, among Indian coolies overseas. Based on this argument, some nationalists pushed for a complete ban on overseas labor migration from India while others argued for a more balanced gender ratio.<sup>2</sup> Such nationalist voices led planters in Malaya to fear the loss of their regular labor source from India. British planters and administrators, therefore, promoted a gender-based strategy for labor recruitment, not merely to appease nationalists but, more significantly, to ensure a local means of reproducing labor in the future. Consequently, the fears of the planters led to an incentivized migration of coolie women and coolie families. Whilst the primary aim of this policy was to ensure a secure future labor supply, it was officially presented as establishing morality and ideal family life amongst overseas Indian laborers in plantation colonies, thus seeking to deprive nationalists of an emotive mobilizing issue by showing that their concerns were being addressed.<sup>3</sup> Indian women wishing to migrate out of India for a myriad of socioeconomic and cultural reasons often capitalized on such gendered incentivization of coolie migration. Even though many planters throughout Malaya valued coolie women both as laborers and as the source of future labor reproduction, which would decrease the planters’

reliance on imported labor from India, plantation and migration lore has constantly celebrated coolie men and erased the narratives of coolie women.

This chapter investigates why colonial administrators and European planters in British Malaya promoted Indian coolie women's migration to Malaya and simultaneously reveals how coolie women themselves actively engaged with such opportunities. The chapter thus modifies the prevalent view presented in labor and migration histories concerning Indians in colonial Malaya, which presumes that the coolie women *only* migrated as dependents of migrating coolie men, thus discounting the choice of Indian women to migrate and become coolies. It focuses on coolie women who migrated to Malaya, with or without male relatives, as migrant laborers in their own right. Finally, this chapter provides the historical and contextual background crucial for understanding the everyday lives of coolie women on the estates, which is the subject of analysis in the chapters to follow.

## THE LABOR CONNECTION BETWEEN INDIA AND MALAYA

Indian migration to Malaya began as early as eleventh century BC, although such migration was primarily transitory in nature and did not involve labor migration.<sup>4</sup> Regular migration and settlement of Indian labor in Malaya began only after Malaya became incorporated into the British Empire from the eighteenth century onward. The transition of Indian labor migrants from temporary sojourners to settlers commenced only in the late nineteenth century with the growth of the rubber industry in Malaya.<sup>5</sup>

Following the 1833 abolition of slavery within the British Empire, imperial economies underwent major transformations. Colonial capitalists and planters from the Empire's Caribbean colonies, whose output had dropped dramatically following abolition, became eager to engage in planting ventures elsewhere and their interest turned to the hitherto neglected fertile lands of Malaya.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the 1830s, Indian labor in Malaya primarily consisted of convict work-gangs, mostly from Bengal, who were sent to Malaya to serve their terms by laboring on railway and road construction sites.<sup>7</sup> Upon completion of their sentence, they were usually repatriated to India. Thus, no settled pool of Indian

labor was available in Malaya. Most convict laborers were men. The first female convict, the only woman amongst 173 convicts, was shipped to Malaya in 1825. Within a few weeks, another woman was sent to Malaya amongst a group of 121 convicts.<sup>8</sup> In 1826, 80 convict men with 3 convict women were sent to Malaya. By 1865, there were 187 women convicts and 3,152 male convicts in Malaya.<sup>9</sup>

With the boom of the rubber industry in Malaya after 1900, planters began communicating with various recruiting agents in India to seek advice and help in recruiting Indian labor for their estates. Planters from Malaya soon realized, however, that they were late in entering the labor recruitment enterprise in India. By then, most established sources of labor in north India were already dominated by labor recruiters and agencies established by the older plantation colonies of Fiji, Suriname, British Guyana, Jamaica, and Mauritius. In 1902, W. T. Taylor, Colonial Secretary to Singapore, had written to R. P. Gibbes, the Trinidad Government Emigration Agency in Calcutta, seeking advice on Taylor's plan to set up an agency to recruit coolies in north India for the estates in FMS and the Straits Settlements (SS). Taylor, in this same letter, also requested Gibbes' agency to recruit for FMS and SS on behalf of Taylor and his agency. In his response, Gibbes wrote: "I regret that it would be not possible for this Agency to act on behalf of the Straits Government in addition to the Colonies which it already represents." Furthermore, Gibbes wrote that the competition for labor in north India was fierce and the chances of Malaya being able to recruit labor from north India were "very remote indeed." Gibbes explained that the great bulk of north Indian labor was already being recruited for Assam, Natal, Mauritius, Fiji, British Guyana, Jamaica, and even Dutch Guiana, and hence it would be impossible for agents from Malaya to find a place in labor-recruiting networks.<sup>10</sup> Colonial administrators and planters of Malaya, reading such signs of non-cooperation from other British colonial officers, were forced to look for other alternatives and hence turned to Madras, in south India. The geographical proximity of the Madras Presidency to Malaya kept travel time and associated costs for planters to a minimum. However, even in south India, other labor recruitment agencies had preceded them, recruiting for the jute industry in Bengal and the tea industry in Assam. Frequent correspondence between the United Planters Association of Malaya (UPAM) and the British Resident General in FMS during 1902 reflected the

anxiety of planters at the stiff competition they faced in labor recruitment in India. In one such correspondence, E. V. Carey, the chairman of UPAM, wrote to the Resident-General, FMS, claiming that cheap tickets should be provided for coolies, who visit their villages and are eager to bring family and relatives to Malaya. He further insisted,

Having before us the undoubted fact that the country is still very much understocked as regards to Tamil labor, it would appear to be impolitic to put any obstacles in the way of immigration if sufficient cause can be shewn [*sic*], for a departure from the orthodox system, in certain special cases.<sup>11</sup>

By seeking incentives for laborers to bring their families and relatives, the planters were aiming for a settled and reproductive labor population in Malaya so that they did not face perennial anxieties with regard to labor supply for their estates.

During the initial phase from 1833 onwards, most laborers migrated voluntarily and paid for their own passage to Malaya to seek work on coffee and sugar plantations. After the establishment of the Raj in 1858, the traffic in the Bay of Bengal was regulated by the Government of India, and voyages from India to Malaya became expensive. Consequently, laborers could no longer afford to pay for their own passage.<sup>12</sup> Following this, the indentured labor system, or, as Hugh Tinker calls it, the “new system of slavery,” was introduced in Malaya to help rubber planters recruit laborers from India.<sup>13</sup> The indenture system came into force as early as 1834 in British colonies, following the abolition of the slave system. Under the indenture system of labor, the concerned coolie was indentured for three–five years to the employer who paid for his passage to the plantation colony. The planters either went to south Indian villages to recruit themselves or used agents in south India to recruit coolies to work for a predetermined number of years on estates in Malaya. The main sites of recruitment were markets, railway stations, and temples where the recruiters were reported to find vagrants and destitute subjects.<sup>14</sup>

Coolies arrived in Malaya in debt to their new employer for the cost of their tickets. This debt was discharged by labor. Fixed wages were paid to coolies under this system, but planters repeatedly extended the indebtedness period of laborers and simultaneously kept the wages of the laborers low. Consequently,

coolies found themselves entrapped in debt and remained bonded to the planters for long periods.<sup>15</sup> While theoretically this was not slavery, in practice the experience of indentured coolies on estates resembled that of slaves. As the nineteenth century progressed, the indenture system came to be criticized, therefore, both by colonial administrators in India and other colonies who regarded it as inhumane and, toward the end of the century, by the growing Indian nationalist movement. High mortality rates amongst laborers and extensive abuse of power were the primary issues focused upon by critics.<sup>16</sup> The indenture system was abolished in Malaya in 1910 and was replaced with a *kangany* (meaning overseer or leader in Tamil) system, which became the only form of legal labor-recruitment process up until 1938.<sup>17</sup> In this system, a *kangany* or foreman, sometimes a laborer who had served at least three months on his employer's estate, was sent back to his village in south India and entrusted with the job of recruiting more coolies for the estate. The logistics of recruitment were paid for and the *kangany* was literally posed as a "walking exhibit" to aspirant coolies in his home village.<sup>18</sup> Upon gathering a gang of interested coolies, *kanganies* had to seek permission from the village *munsifs* (headmen) for the recruits to migrate overseas. Thereafter, these recruits had to be presented before the Emigration Commissioner and his staff at the depot for final health and eligibility screening. The *kangany* system was perceived as a more personal and "organized" system of recruitment, which was expected to eliminate concerns around the indenture system. Eventually, however, the *kangany* system too was critiqued by Indian nationalists, who alleged that it "always" used kidnapping and deceitful methods of recruiting coolies.<sup>19</sup>

## NEED FOR COOLIE WOMEN ON ESTATES IN MALAYA

During the period of the indenture system, the rising volume of labor migration continued to be transient and male dominated. After the abolition of indenture, planters began to deliberately recruit women and families. Rubber planting, particularly tapping and weeding, required a large and reliable labor supply.<sup>20</sup> The transient, primarily male labor force, in place at the end of the indenture left European planters anxious regarding the future

supply of laborers. Economic fluctuations, competition from recruiting agencies for other colonies, and an increasing political power struggle between the colonial governments of India and Malaya following their separation added to their concerns. Moreover, the development of an anti-colonial movement in India put pressure on the colonial Government of India to regulate unskilled labor migration from the country to the potential detriment of planters in Malaya. Consequently, planters felt the need for a locally settled Indian coolie population in Malaya, which would reduce their dependence on the *kanganies* and the Government of India. As a result, planters began introducing gendered labor migration schemes for Malaya, whereby more women would be recruited as labor units and would also serve as the means for labor reproduction, thereby anchoring the previously transient labor force. Such gendered labor-recruitment policies were not a novelty initiated by the planters in Malaya. As Piya Chatterjee and Janaki Nair reveal in their studies, planters in tea plantations of Assam had previously used such gendered labor policies to ensure the availability of local labor.<sup>27</sup>

It is crucial to understand the various socioeconomic and political concerns of planters and administrators in Malaya that led to the recruitment of women and families to rubber estates, as these factors offer new textures to our understanding of the dynamics of gender-based labor migration policies within the British Empire. I here present a detailed examination of the economic issues, political issues, and inter-planter competition that led to new labor recruitment policies.

### *ECONOMIC CONCERNS OF PLANTERS*

Because Malaya was closer to India than other plantation colonies, the return journey to India was affordable for coolies, and as coolies (primarily male during this phase) were not highly paid in Malaya, nor did they have any opportunity to establish a family, they had few incentives to remain. Consequently, most repatriated at the end of their three–five-year contracts. With every batch of returning migrants, the planters lost trained and experienced laborers. Although rubber tapping and weeding were not particularly skilled jobs, some training was essential to ensure efficiency in production. The transience of their labor force increased costs for planters, for whom the license fees for

registering recruiters and the recruiting agents' own fees were ongoing costs, added to by the logistics involved in the recruitment process. Planters soon realized the unstable character of an overwhelmingly male labor force.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the encouragement of female and family migration was seen by colonial planters and administrators as a means of ensuring a settled labor population in Malaya which would reproduce itself locally, obviating the need for ongoing recruiting costs.<sup>23</sup> In fact, once female coolies began settling in Malaya, child labor on estates became an increasingly visible sight on colonial plantations. Although by colonial law, no child under the age of sixteen years was to be formally recruited as a laborer; children were often found helping their parents by collecting rubber from latex-collection cups and cleaning them. Thus, growing up on the estates and watching others engaged in various estate work, coolie children developed skills and knowledge regarding estate work, reducing training expenses for planters. Issues of child labor and the effective entrapment of coolies in plantation life deserve attention as a separate project and hence are not taken up in this study.

### *POLITICAL CONCERNS OF PLANTERS*

In addition to the economic factors contributing to the planters' desire for a more settled labor force, planters in Malaya also had pressing political concerns arising from inter-colonial governmental politics between British India and British Malaya. Since the establishment of the Raj, the Indian colonial government had heavily regulated labor recruiting and migration processes for Malayan plantations, placing both legal and logistical obstacles in the route of planters who, under East India Company rule, had long benefitted from being under the same administration. The Planters' Association of Malaya (PAM), which later came to be known as the United Planters' Association of Malaya (UPAM), began collectively lobbying through the Government of Malaya for more favorable treatment from the Indian government with regard to labor recruitment. Initially, PAM had some success in this regard. For instance, FMS and SS along with Ceylon continued to be exempted for a long period from the Indian government's gender restrictions on Indian emigration, enforced by the Indian Emigration Acts of 1864 and 1922,<sup>24</sup> whereas other colonies such as Fiji and Mauritius were strictly subjected to the Acts. But a trend for the

Indian government to become increasingly restrictive in allowing emigration of Indian laborers to plantation colonies alerted the planters in Malaya to the need to plan for alternative labor supplies. PAM knew well enough that they were largely at the mercy of an Indian government which had no need to respond to their concerns; hence, they saw the need to develop a labor supply within Malaya.

By 1917, planters in Malaya were well aware that they could not rely on the colonial administrators in British India being sympathetic to their labor needs. The Government of Madras, in 1917, had telegraphed the Colonial Office in London and the Rubber Growers' Association to inform them that from

1918 onwards in accordance of the India Act, the Government of India, as advised by its military authorities, considered it necessary that, in view of the large supply of Indian labor required for military purposes, the recruitment of all indentured labor should stop immediately and that the labor essentially required in Ceylon and the Federated Malay States should be reduced to the lowest minimum.<sup>25</sup>

Once this decision of the Government of India was communicated to colonial administrators and planters in Malaya, there began a series of requests from the High Commissioner of the Malay States to the Colonial Office in London for the Colonial Office to intervene to insist that the Government of India allow at least 82,000 laborers to be sent to Malaya every year. Both the Government of India and the Colonial Office balked at such numbers, however, and rather argued that the Government of Malaya should cooperate with India as the former had continuously received favorable treatment from India regarding the supply of Indian labor.<sup>26</sup> This clearly signaled to the planters and colonial administrators in Malaya that they had to fend for themselves in catering to the growing labor needs of the rubber industry.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the situation was made worse for planters in Malaya by a rubber slump which coincided with the rise of anti-colonial movements in India, demanding the absolute stoppage of emigration by unskilled Indian laborers to overseas colonies. In 1930, under pressure from Indian nationalists, the Government of India banned all unskilled labor migration to Malaya for a brief period. The Government of India argued



that this was done to protect the interests of the Indian laborers in Malaya as the government had received reports from Malaya that, due to the economic depression, there was a significant fall in the standard of living of Indian laborers in the country. In these conditions, the only movement of unskilled laborers the Government of India was prepared to allow was assisted migration for those whose families were already in Malaya. Furthermore, from the early 1930s, the Government of India began signaling to Malaya that it would not be able to give any assurances with regard to future Indian labor migration. In particular, Malaya would no longer be exempted from Rule 23 of Indian Emigration Rules, which required one male labor migrant to be married and accompanied by his wife for every five single men migrating.<sup>27</sup> Again, in the May 16, 1934, meeting of the Indian Immigration Committee (IIC) of Malaya, it was highlighted by the chairman of the IIC that the Government of India had pressed for further changes in the emigration rules for unskilled labor to Malaya; the previous system under which only informal consent of the village headman was required was no longer deemed adequate.<sup>28</sup> Coolies now needed a documentary permit from the village headman to allow migration. The IIC was highly critical of this amendment, claiming that it would “unnecessarily” complicate the recruitment process. In response, the IIC proposed that the Government of Malaya write to the Government of India to inform them that planters in Malaya were maintaining the minimum wage for coolies on their estates and that as economic conditions were improving, those coolies who had returned to India were now contacting friends and authorities enquiring about when they could again migrate to Malaya. Being concerned about their future ability to recruit new coolies, the IIC was desperate to get back those coolies who had repatriated to India during the depression years. Although this issue was briefly addressed, the Government of India’s reluctance to allow the emigration of coolies to Malaya continued until 1938, when they completely banned assisted emigration of unskilled labor. The main issues of debate between the IIC and the Government of India during this period were minimum wage and sex ratio. Rule 23 of the Emigration Rules regarding sex ratio was finally imposed on Malaya in 1936.<sup>29</sup>

The anti-colonial movement in India initially aimed for moderate reforms focused on alleviating poverty and socioeconomic ills of the colonial regime. The issue of Indian emigrants in overseas colonies of the Empire was not

initially a priority for Indian nationalists, and barely featured amongst nationalist concerns until the early twentieth century. However, with M. K. Gandhi's involvement in the issues of Indians in South Africa and eventually in other colonies, a focus on the situation of labor migrants became a strategic means for nationalists to question the moral obligation of the colonial power toward its subjects. Thus, by the first decade of the twentieth century, the Government of India faced extreme opposition from growing anti-colonial public opinion centering on the abuses of the indenture system and the grievances of overseas Indian laborers.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the Government of India became anxious to emphasize its legitimate position as a paternalistic colonizer and tried to appear determined to secure fair treatment for overseas Indian laborers. Such efforts to restore legitimacy came at the cost of the interests of colonial planters and governments in other colonies.

#### TENSIONS AMONGST PLANTERS IN MALAYA

During the early twentieth century, as Indian nationalism within the country and around the world increasingly focused its protests against the indentured labor system, planters and colonial administrators in Malaya began experimenting with the *kangany* system. Significant numbers of planters wished to retain the indenture system, however, and voiced their concerns through various channels.<sup>31</sup> During debates in the Legislative Council of Malaya around the Labor Recruitment and Supply Bill of 1902, Mr Vermont, a planter of the Wellesley Province of British Malaya and a member of the Council, told the Council that he had personally experienced grave failures in recruiting coolies through the *kangany* system, and urged the Council to aid the planters to recruit more efficiently. In response, the Governor, presiding over the Council meeting, encouraged Mr Vermont to learn how to solve recruitment issues from the planters of the Pacific island of New Caledonia, where British coffee plantations had faced similar problems since the 1890s. In reply, Mr Vermont harped on the fact that "planters in Caledonia are billionaires" and that he was not.<sup>32</sup> *The Straits Times* published this debate soon after the Council meeting. Mr Carey, a planter from Selangor, in a letter responding to the debate in *The Straits Times*, argued that Mr Vermont's pessimistic remarks with regard to labor supply were unjustified as they were

merely “his personal experience with coolie recruitment for his own estate in Province Wellesley.” Mr Carey further claimed that he had experienced no problems in recruiting a good number of coolies from India through the *kangany* system and that this was the general experience of planters in Selangor. He added, “I see no sign of Tamil labor famine or any indication or fears to be expected in any given term of years.”<sup>33</sup>

Mr Carey's response to the Council debate invited a longer discussion on the topic by other planters, amongst which the letter from Mr Gordon Brown (planter at Sungei Krudda estate, Perak) to the Editor of *The Straits Times* clearly reflects that there were a plurality of interests and opinions, resulting in brewing tensions between planters. In his letter, Mr Gordon Brown wrote:

Sir, I read with great interest your leading article on the cooly [*sic*] question on November 2nd. I noted you considered Mr. Vermont's remarks pessimistic, for Mr. Carey asserts that there is no difficulty in recruiting coolies for Selangor. Writing from Perak I find it most difficult to recruit coolies. I unfortunately have not got any of the well-fed, exhibition kanganies to send to India as a walking advertisement and so I have to deal with the professional recruiter. I have been trying to get sixty coolies since last January, I have only succeeded in procuring twenty-nine; though I took a trip over to India myself to facilitate matters.

I find my requirements are best suited with indentured coolies but I would be glad to get any species to go on with. I believe there is just now an actual stoppage of shipments of any coolies other than kanganies; these gentry should shortly be in great demand. I gave the kangany system a trial a few months ago but the selected individual has neither returned nor been heard of since. It is aggravating for us who feel the pinch so badly here, to learn that Mr. Carey sees no signs of a Tamil labor famine as Selangor is well off.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, planters who were not well-off like Mr Carey had more at stake if the colonial government refused to support their labor needs. Realizing this, the planters became all the more interested in anchoring the Indian labor force in Malaya, for which labor reproduction using Indian coolie women became absolutely essential. Moreover, with the Montague Chelmsford

Reforms of 1918<sup>35</sup> the colonial Government of India became visibly amenable to pressures from the Indian National Congress and this served as a clear signal to the Government of Malaya that the Government of India could not, or would not, continue to favor Malaya at the cost of the Indian people. In the 1920s, following the enactment of the Indian Emigration Act, 1922,<sup>36</sup> the governments of India and Malaya had an open disagreement regarding labor policies. In fact, there arose a series of debates in India as to whether emigration of Indian unskilled labor to Malaya should be allowed at all after March 1923. Subsequently, the Government of Malaya's anxiety regarding the regular flow of Indian labor to Malaya was expressed in the correspondence between the two governments. Planters and recruiters from Malaya began to lobby, making anxious pleas along with public comments through various channels in support of an uninterrupted labor supply from India. For instance, a recruiter from Malaya, in his letter to the Editor of *The Straits Times* in 1922, expressed his and the planter community's discontent by stating that the 1922 Act was "extremely unfavorable for recruiting" and that "the PAM rightly stigmatized the Act as sinister." Appealing for the unrestricted immigration of unskilled Indian laborers into Malaya, he even argued that such migration was not only advantageous for Malaya but brought advantages to the Indian laborers and India too and hence should be allowed to continue.<sup>37</sup> Finally, in 1923, Malaya (inclusive of FMS, Unfederated Malay States [UFMS], and SS) came under the Act's stipulations. Although Indian emigration to Malaya was not completely banned, the Government of Malaya was forced to amend the prevalent Labor Code in Malaya in line with the Act in order to be assured of labor supply from India.

#### ADDRESSING LABOR CONCERNS THROUGH PLANNED GENDERED LABOR RECRUITMENT

Given the labor supply insecurities arising from the aforementioned socioeconomic and political factors, the eagerness of planters to secure a locally settled pool of Indian laborers came as no surprise. Planters, from the early 1900s, began to encourage recruitment of coolie women as laborers and by 1910 there was clear collaboration between colonial planters and colonial administrators in Malaya to ensure increased immigration of working-class

Indian women.<sup>38</sup> As mentioned earlier, such gendered labor policies were justified by the colonial Government of Malaya's interest in providing a more balanced sex ratio in the plantation colonies to improve the quality of social life amongst labor-class Indians. This policy enabled the Government of Malaya to respond positively to pressure from Indian nationalists and the colonial Government of India, whilst also moving to end Malaya's dependence upon India for labor.

The census reports during 1901–1931 clearly record the growth of colonial interest in encouraging Indian women's migration.<sup>39</sup> G. T. Hare, the superintendent of the 1901 census for British Malaya, reported in the 1901 census that the increase in Tamil females had been "most remarkable" in the years between 1892 and 1901, and that the 1901 census recorded an approximate increase of 231 percent since the last census. Hare, expressing a positive view of Tamil women's migration to Malaya, remarked, "It is hoped that the Tamil female population and immigration will improve in the future years as Tamil females are adapt [*sic*] to agricultural work and have no difficulty in getting employment in Malaya. The importation of Tamil families should therefore be encouraged as much as possible...."<sup>40</sup>

Migration of coolie women was also promoted by the Labor Department of FMS, which asserted that Indian coolie women made an excellent source of labor. In 1910, C. W. Parr, Commissioner for Labor in FMS, in his report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Conditions of Indentured Labor in the Federated Malay States, stated, "Steps should be taken to encourage the immigration of women .... employers should be encouraged to import as many women as possible. Women are said to work well and to make excellent tappers...."<sup>41</sup>

The need for female labor became so crucial for the colonial enterprise that *kanganies* were regularly given infrastructural aid to ensure that they recruited more single female coolies by being paid extra for every woman they recruited. The Superintendent of Indian Immigration at SS and FMS, L. H. Clayton, noted in his annual report of 1908, "Recruiting allowance for a male coolie recruited by a kangany was \$3.00 whereas for a woman coolie it was \$3.50."<sup>42</sup> It is telling that even though women were paid lower wages than men as workers, the planters paid more to recruit them. This hints at how crucial coolie women had become for the survival and success of the rubber estates in Malaya.

Three years later in 1911, A. M. Putney, the superintendent of the 1911 census for British Malaya, in his review report of the 1911 census, emphasized the need to increase the number of women migrating to Malaya. He insisted, "The sex ratio disparity amongst the immigrant communities were disconcerting for the Government of Malaya."<sup>43</sup> He even advised administrators and planters to focus specifically on improving the sex ratio of coolie-class Indians. In the same spirit, J. E. Nathan, the superintendent of the 1921 census of British Malaya, in his report on the 1921 census observed: "Both planting community and the government have long recognized the desirability of lessening the disparity between the sexes among estate-laborers and coolies recruited from India and they are being encouraged to bring their wives and families to FMS."<sup>44</sup>

From 1928 to 1930, the rubber industry in Malaya experienced a major slump and various studies suggest that most laborers tended to return to India during such slump periods. Hence, the 1931 census can be used as a litmus test to judge the success of colonial initiatives with regard to anchoring the Indian estate labor population in Malaya. Superintendent C. A. Vlieland, in his report on the 1931 census, argued, however, that the popular idea that there was a marked exodus of Indian Tamil labor from Malaya during slump years was a myth caused by "overestimation." He explained that the estate population of Tamils remained more or less the same compared to pre-slump years and that the estimated decrease was only 1.86 percent. He further hinted that the exodus of Tamils of other classes and of Ceylon Tamils could have been misinterpreted as including Tamil estate laborers too.<sup>45</sup> Vlieland's arguments are supported by vagrancy reports of FMS during 1930–1935, which suggest that many Indian coolies, particularly Indian coolie families were not allowed to leave Malaya during the slump period. Rather, they were left to their own devices or locked up in vagrant asylums. Arguably, planters may have collaborated with administrators in Malaya to keep coolie families in the country in anticipation of a market recovery, in order to avoid increased recruitment costs during the recovery.<sup>46</sup>

The censuses from 1911 to 1931 clearly show a constant improvement of the Indian Tamil coolie sex ratio. The total percentage of Indian women coolies on estates rose from 23 percent in 1901 to 35 percent in 1921 and over 39 percent in 1931 (see Table 1.1). Nonetheless, throughout the colonial history in Malaya, there remained a constant sex ratio imbalance amongst Indians. But to make

**Table 1.1** Indian male-to-female ratio on FMS rubber estates (1911–1931)

| Year | Indian Male-to-Female Ratio |
|------|-----------------------------|
| 1911 | 3:1                         |
| 1921 | 1.8:1                       |
| 1931 | 1.5:1                       |

*Source:* Compiled and calculated from: *The 1911 Census of British Malaya*; *The 1921 Census of British Malaya*; and *The 1931 Census of British Malaya*.

a fair assessment of the situation it needs to be acknowledged that sex ratio imbalance was a marked problem amongst all immigrant communities, especially amongst estate populations, and when compared to other groups, the sex ratio of the Indian community was the most balanced. This suggests that Indian nationalist pressure on the issue was effective in producing significant policy responses.

## COOLIE WOMEN AND CALLS FROM THE EMPIRE'S RUBBER GARDEN

Most studies of coolie labor migration, whether on the indenture or the *kangany* system, not only focus on male migration, but also over-generalize the recruitment and migration process as one characterized by kidnapping and fraudulent recruitment of laborers.<sup>47</sup> In reality, for many laborers, migration was seen as a positive alternative to unemployment, hunger, family problems, and caste prejudices in their homeland. Whilst there were instances when coolies were indeed duped and kidnapped by recruiters, the fact remains that there were many others who willingly and consciously chose to migrate hoping that the new host society would offer better employment conditions and prospects than what they were leaving behind.

Coolie women have been widely portrayed in colonial and nationalist discourses either as appendages to their coolie husbands who followed their men, or as victims of kidnapping or false promises by recruiters. Neither of these depictions does justice to the variety of reasons motivating coolie

women to migrate or the spectrum of their experiences of migration. Some women migrated alone, some as contractual wives, and some as coolie wives. Their personal situations and motivations could vary greatly: some wished to escape family quarrels, some were widows mistreated by relatives and society, some were involved in prostitution. Such stories seldom made it to the archives, primarily because recruiters sought to hide such facts about their recruits' background during the coolie registration process at the ports of disembarkation, as, due to initiatives of the colonial Government of India, the Protectors of Emigrants might prevent such women from migrating and if they were found to be eloping, then they would be sent back to their families.

Colonial discourses represented coolie women as appendages to their men for two reasons. First, to avoid responsibility for allowing the supposed kidnapping or fraudulent recruitment of women and, second, to justify paying coolie women lower wages than coolie men (see Chapter 2) as they were presumed to be married to wage-earning coolie men. Indian nationalists, on the other hand, seeking to emphasize the victimhood of coolie women at the hands of the colonial power, always presented coolie women as victims of fraudulent lures and kidnapping by labor recruiters. Scholars of Indian and Malayan history who focus only on this coercion theory of recruitment effectively accept the erasure of the agency of coolie women propagated by both colonialists and anti-colonialists. They fail to recognize that, for many coolie women, migration to Malaya was a conscious decision viewed as a positive alternative, sometimes the only alternative, to adverse conditions at home which might range from hunger to abusive or unhappy marriages or a disgraced life as a *devadasi*<sup>48</sup> or a widow in a caste-prejudiced society. As Shobna Nijhawan establishes in her recent study of Indian women nationalists and the politicization of indentured labor issues, Indian women nationalists such as Nandrani Nehru and Savitri Devi argued that all coolie women recruited from India for the plantation colonies were victims of deceit and fraud. In examining cases of coolie women who escaped home out of choice, Nijhawan proves that these nationalist assumptions were highly problematic,<sup>49</sup> disregarding that many women chose to voluntarily migrate to escape socioeconomic conditions.

In fact, economic conditions in India, particularly in famine-ridden Madras, and the constant social problems arising from the caste and gender



structures of Indian society under British rule, seemed to favor the planters by creating ample reasons for migrants to leave. Women of different age, caste, class, marital status, and geographical location migrated for a broad range of different reasons, and their life situation also influenced their experiences during and after migration to Malaya. Moreover, each coolie woman, whether migrating as wife, mistress, or single woman, responded in unique ways to the complex situations and relations in which she found herself. Thus, categorizing all these migrant women as “dependents” accompanying male relatives is clearly not in accord with the evidence of a broad range of migrants and situations.

Push factors such as famine or abusive social systems are insufficient to account for the varied reasons for which many coolie women, especially single women, migrated to Malaya. While some coolie women migrated as “coolie wives” (either as genuine wives or as contractual wives to migrating coolie men: a status discussed later), there were many others who migrated alone to escape abusive marriages, family quarrels, or lives as widows or prostitutes. Abbe Dubois, a French missionary in Tamil Nadu in the late eighteenth century, opined that the position of women in south Indian society was no better than that of slaves, who were expected to satisfy the physical needs and desires of men. He further noted that during the colonial period, it was a regular scene to witness Tamil women being beaten by their husbands and in-laws, and if ever she managed to escape to her father's house, she would be sent back to accept the marital authority of her husband over her. Dubois also opined that being a widow without a son was the worst possible situation for women. Due to the prevalence of child marriages, many young girls were married off to elderly men, and as a result they would become widows at a very young age. If they had not borne a child by then, they were looked down upon and treated with “scorn.”<sup>50</sup> While Dubois writes about the social position of women in the eighteenth century, various scholars have presented similar views of women's situation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century southern India. For instance, the social historian P. Subramanian notes that the position of women during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in south Indian society was more deplorable than that in the rest of India. He argues that this was due to strict adherence to the caste system, which further deteriorated with the Mughal invasions. Subramaniam claims that, to protect their culture from outside influences,

Tamils emphasized their cultural uniqueness through customs such as sati and practices of caste distinction. He insists that the status of a woman after her marriage was just like that of a Shudra in the caste-divided society, having no rights but only duties toward men.<sup>51</sup> Although these generalizations may well be exaggerated depictions of the situations of colonized women of a type frequent in colonial narratives, nevertheless, they were based, to some degree, in reality. It was true that there were a large number of widows and *devadasis* in Madras during the late nineteenth century. The Census of Madras Presidency of 1891, a period well before migration to Malaya began, records around 20 percent of the total population in Madras as widows.<sup>52</sup> Such social conditions seem to have changed little for women in Madras up until the 1930s. For instance, the *Manifesto of Madras Devadasis* in 1927 reported that there were 20,000 *devadasis* in Madras alone.<sup>53</sup> The fact that widows and *devadasis* were not treated well in Indian society remains unquestioned; such issues still arise today. It seems probable that for widows and *devadasis* in Madras, the need for labor in Malaya offered the hope of a better life free of the restrictive customs of Tamil Nadu.

Concurrently, during the 1920s and 1930s, social movements in south India sought to “emancipate” the “backward castes,” and issues around women featured as popular concerns for these movements. The Self-Respect Movement became one of the most popular amongst south Indian lower castes, especially Tamils. Launched in 1925 by E. V. Ramasamy, better known as Periyar, the movement encouraged members of the socially and economically “lower” castes of south India, especially women, to move beyond the caste identities and cultural boxes in which they were placed by Brahmins through the exploitative caste system. Periyar, while focusing his movement amongst the non-Brahmin and lower castes of India, propagated female education, widow remarriage, and women’s right to inherit property. He even propagated the idea of women’s right to desert a relation and their marriage if they were not happy with it, and also promoted the idea that women had the right to “birth control” (by removing their uterus) and the right to decide whether they wanted to play a reproductive role at all.<sup>54</sup>

The popularity of the Self-Respect Movement and its ideals amongst the lower-caste masses suggest that women of these castes were likely to have been influenced by ideas of being able to assert their rights and control their lives and marriages. Periyar’s movement focused on the districts of Madura,

Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Arcot, Salem, Chingelput, and Coimbatore, amongst others, which were the districts wherein the majority of the lower-caste masses resided.<sup>55</sup> Not coincidentally, these were also amongst the most popular districts for recruitment of coolies for Malaya, making the conjecture that some migrant coolie women were influenced by the ideals of this movement not unlikely.

While exact figures are unavailable in the archives, the eventual and considerable increase in the number of single coolie women and coolie families migrating to Malaya led to the appointment, by the colonial Government of Malaya, of lady inspectors on board ships, to chaperone Indian coolie women migrating alone across the *kala pani* or “dark waters.” In 1925, Mr Mukarrains, the Honorary Commissioner for the Depressed Classes in Straits Settlement and Federated Malay States, highlighted in his *Report on the Traffic between South Indian and Malayan Ports* the importance of the regular appointment of “lady inspectors,” as no woman from India was keen to travel overseas without a “leader.” He further acknowledged that throughout 1925, lady inspectors were seen on board ships from south India to Malaya to help and guard the women passengers travelling alone. They were appointed by the Department of Immigration and the salary was 200 rupees per month.<sup>56</sup> Although neither census nor migration records are detailed enough to inform us how many single women migrated to Malaya from south India, these appointments confirm the significant numbers of such women migrating during the 1920s and 1930s. Another indication of the increase in single women migrants is that the Protectors of Emigrants at the ports of Negapatnam and Madras (Avadi) often detained single coolie women, who were brought to the ports close to the ensuing shipment date, and held them until the next shipment. This was done to ensure that if or when the relatives of such women came in search of these women, the concerned women could be returned.<sup>57</sup> This effort by the colonial Government of India clearly came as a result of the increased politicization of the coolie recruitment issue by Indian nationalists in order to question the moral obligation of the colonial power toward its subjects. Nonetheless, the fact that there were sufficient single coolie women migrating to justify such measures suggests that many women were deploying situational agency to seek better lives than those they enjoyed in south India. There was, of course, no guarantee that by escaping the adversities at home, coolie

women would necessarily find better socioeconomic conditions in Malaya, but this study emphasizes that by making the effort to better their situation, these women demonstrated the situational agency which colonial and anti-colonial discourses denied them, even if such fleeting agency might only lead to escaping one situation of oppression before being threatened by another.

Also relevant to the independence of coolie women was the fact that not all women who were enlisted as “married” coolie women accompanying their coolie husbands were in reality married to them, or married at all. Historian Frank Heidemann, in his study of the *kangany* system of recruitment for Malaya and Ceylon, argues that *kanganies* had considerable influence on the social relations of coolies, as they used to create alliances between coolie men and coolie women to manage the shortage of the latter on Malayan estates.<sup>58</sup> When recruiting coolies, Heidemann explains, *kanganies* often “connived them” to become “coolie husband and wife” in front of the immigration officers, who thereafter would allow them to live in such intimate arrangements “as regular as any other union.” Such contractual marriages were known as *cert-k-kolu-tal* (joining together in a play).<sup>59</sup> The actual number of married couples migrating is questionable, then, since the term “married” in migration records could have a variety of meanings in real life. *Kanganies* made use of the contractual marriage system to increase the number of coolie women migrating, since they were paid extra by planters for recruiting women.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, such marriages were again reflective of the coolie women’s exercise of choice in agreeing to the arrangement suggested by recruiters. These conditions could be restrictive of autonomy but did not extinguish it altogether. For women who had previously been abused wives or widows, such arrangements may have been an opportunity to seize life afresh. Such unions, then, were episodes of autonomy, wherein coolie women were able to exercise some control over their lives and those of others. Examples of such cases are discussed in details in Chapter 4, which explores how such port marriages influenced the later lives of coolie men and women in Malaya.

Interestingly, the Labor Commission (composed of Mr N. E. Marjoribanks, Mr Khan Bahadur, and A. K. G. Ahmed Tamby Marakkayar) appointed by the Government of Madras (1916) to visit the Malay Peninsula to review the condition of Indian labor reported that most south Indian workers coming into Malaya usually did not bring their womenfolk from India, but developed

contract alliances locally.<sup>61</sup> They also reported that while most women coolie migrants to Malaya were married women accompanied by their husbands, some were “no doubt prostitutes.”<sup>62</sup> In fact, as early as 1907, while registering a government order in colonial India regarding Indian migration to Ceylon and Malaya, it was claimed, “No Tamil women can go to the Federated States of Malaya and return with a rag of reputation left.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, in the absence of marriage registration norms in India, the marriage of coolie couples migrating to Malaya was questionable from the start.

Further, the women who migrated as “coolie wives” were not limited to being merely domestic partners. Rather, they were made aware that they were being recruited as coolies, to work on estates alongside the men. Under pressure from Indian nationalists, the colonial regime made considerable efforts to ensure that coolie recruitment was a fair process, making it mandatory that coolie men and women, whether migrating alone or as couples, proved their knowledge about their ensuing employment, expected tasks, and wages, when Protectors of Emigrants interviewed them at the ports.<sup>64</sup> So, while some duping and bribery may have persisted, women migrating as coolie wives were generally made aware of the socioeconomic role that they would play upon arrival.

## (RE)CONCEIVING INDIAN COOLIE WOMEN'S MIGRATION HISTORY

This chapter has shown that contrary to stereotypes, neither were all coolies male nor were coolie women always wives or dependents of their male relatives. Rather, it highlights that female coolies had a range of interests and experiences in the recruitment and migration process. Instances of women laborers consciously choosing to migrate coexisted with instances of women being kidnapped or tricked into migration. This variety in experiences of coolies in the recruitment and migration process also influenced their lives and social position in estate society on arrival. Though a coolie woman's choice to migrate was often made under extreme social or economic conditions, the fact that many coolie women exhibited a reasonable conscious act of decision-making cannot be discounted.