

# A STUDY ON THE HISTORY OF ESTATE TAMIL SCHOOLS IN MALAYA

Parameswari Krishnan  
J.Hinduja Mayer Raman  
Rohini Krishnan\*

## Abstract

The majority of Tamil labourers that came to Malaya were involved in the rubber and coconut plantation industries. The British, in order to continuously maintain labour presence in the plantations, introduced the “3Ts” in the estates, which were the Tamil Schools, the Temple, and the Toddy Shops. At the time, Tamil schools were a significant element in highlighting the British economic programme in pre-Independence Malaya based on the divide and rule policy. The Tamil schools, as set up by the British in the estates, were in deplorable conditions, and were not intended to raise the standard of living and education level of the Tamils. They, in fact, serve the two-pronged goal of maintaining Tamil labour presence in the plantations, and ensuring they received the minimal amount of education possible, if any. This study aims to answer the key questions: what were the motives of the colonial authorities in their introduction of Tamil vernacular schools in the estates, and what was the actual situation regarding Tamil schools during the early and later periods of British rule. Furthermore, the problem statement in this study has been addressed, in that it proves that Tamil schools in the estates were not meant for the material advancement of the Indian community, but for British economic benefit.

**Key Words:** Tamil labour, British or Colonial Authorities, Estate or Plantation

## Introduction

The study on estate labour and Tamil schools have often been contested in academic writings, especially in history. However, these writings seem to almost neglect or downplay British interests in the opening of rubber estates and the settlement of Tamil labour in these

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\* Dr.Parameswari Krishnan (param@unisel.edu.my) is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, University of Selangor, Selangor and she is working on the Indian History, Malaysian History, Social History and Humanities in Colonial Malaya and Malaysia. Dr.J.Hinduja Mayer Raman (hinduja.jkp@gmail.com) is a graduate from the University of Malaya and now she is working on the Sociology and Humanities in Malaysia. Rohini Krishnan is a Assistant Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, University of Selangor, Selangor.

estates, as well as the establishment of Tamil schools, usually in deplorable conditions. The discussions often touch on the problems and challenges faced by the labourers under colonial administration. The British divide and rule policy is only seen in comparison of the three largest ethnic groups in the country. This study takes the initiative to uncover the intent of the British in establishing Tamil schools, thus identifying another instance of the divide and rule policy, through dividing Tamil schools into a few groups, such as the Tamil schools, the Telugu schools, and the Malayalam schools. Though the British realised the majority of labourers brought into Malaya overwhelmingly consisted of Tamils, and only 10 per cent of the labourers were Malayalees, Telugus, and North Indians, they still set up separate, sub-ethnic based schools by design. The British only had one motive, which was to easily administrate over a divided labour force instead of a unified labour front.

With this aspect in mind, this study looks into the background of labour life in the estates, as well as the estate education system prior to Independence. This brief historical survey, however, is very important for us to understand the writings on the history and the development of estate Tamil schools, as both aspects could not be separated in the historical arena. One must realise that the British only introduced Tamil schools to ensure the maintaining of Tamil labourers in the estates, to continue working and not return to their home country after the end of their contracts. In addition, it must also be stated that the Tamil community have strongly fought to preserve and further develop Tamil schools in this country. Although the Indian community did not show interest in Tamil schools in the estates during the early stages of British colonial rule for a number of reasons, the trend of their developing interest could be traced back to at least the early 1950s. Nevertheless, the British undeniably opened a new space by introducing vernacular schools in this country, even if they were in highly inadequate conditions.

### **Who were the estate Indian labour?**

Indian labour, as generally understood, referred to Indian labourers that worked in rubber estates and whose living situations have been set by the estate management.<sup>1</sup> As estate labour, they toiled for seven to eight hours a day, and worked till evening. Evening was leisure time for labourers, when they were through with work.<sup>2</sup> Each day, the rubber tapper began his work at 5.30 in the morning until roughly around 11.30 or the afternoon. The tapper tapped the rubber trees from 5.30 am to 7.30 am, had a short break between 8.30 and 9.30 am whilst the latex flowed into the collecting cups. Later, they collected the latex until their work ended at 11.30 am.<sup>3</sup>

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1 CO 273/405, Letter from Rayappan, Seremban, 25 March 1913, p. 6.

2 CO 438/5, *Federated Malay States, Annual Report On The Social and Economic Progress of The People of Perak For The Year 1935*, Kuala Lumpur: The F.M.S. Government Press, 1936, p. 96.

3 CO 273/499, Memorandum regarding conditions of the Indian labour in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, p. 1.

**Image 1: Indian labourers in the estate carrying latex in Malaya.**



Source: National Archives Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

The true meaning of the estate Indian labourer is given in the following explanation. In India, these groups of people were discriminated as they came from the lower castes, while in the estates, the Indian labour were poorly treated and the British labelled them with a specific identity, the ‘kuli’ or coolie, a term of Tamil origin meaning ‘small wage.’ In the plantation hierarchical structure, the coolies sat at the bottom rung of the ladder, with the Europeans being at the top. The Europeans stayed in isolated areas far away from the labourers’ settlements. Below the managers were the Asian staff, such as the clerks. This group usually consisted of Ceylonese or Malayalis. They functioned as the intermediary between the managers and the labourers, and oversaw the labourers’ daily activities. Although the clerks were related to the labourers through language, ethnicity, an culture, the former were not close with the latter. This strained relationship between the two groups was by design to prevent good rapport between them.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the South Indians, the Ceylonese that came to Malaya were generally English-educated, and most were appointed as clerks in European-owned estates. They rarely used their positions to seek the betterment of the Indian labour that suffered in the plantations. On the contrary, they threw their lot with the employers and oppressed the Indian labour in the estates. They also have a condescending attitude towards the Indian labourers due to their social and economic standing. This situation fomented Indian labour discontent with the Ceylonese.<sup>5</sup> In short, the Jaffnas spared no sympathy for the Tamils.<sup>6</sup>

Although the clerks, the *kangani*, and the mandores were closest to the labourers, there was no sense of camaraderie between the two groups. The former saw the latter as less-educated and of lower status. They often swindled the labourers in most situations. For example, the estate employers collected a certain amount of money from the labourers during

4 CO 273/534, Conditions of Labourers In Malaya, Memorandum, Excerpts from the “Swathesamithiran” forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controller of Malaya, 27 July 1927, p. 3. See also, K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India Di Malaysia*, Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008, pp. 8-10.

5 K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India Di Malaysia*, p. 25.

6 CO 273/534, Condition of Labourers In Malaya, Memorandum, Excerpts from the “Swathesamithiran” forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controller of Malaya, 27 July 1927, p. 6.

festivals, and would use the money to provide toddy and goods for the labourers. The balance would be pocketed by the employers. In fact, a part of the money taken from the labourers were divided among the employers. Toddy was provided to intoxicate the labourers, and they would not question the estate employers' swindling of their rightful share.<sup>7</sup> This fraud was not only practised among the Europeans, but also by clerks, *kangani*, and mandores that constantly exploited the poor labourers in the estates. There was no redress of this injustice, and the labourers suffered their superiors' deceit.<sup>8</sup> The labourers have no recourse to complain, and endured their situation.

### Where were the estates located?

The estates were isolated from the villages and the mines. This created a communication problem between them with the Malays and the Chinese. This problem meant a lack of opportunity to the ethnic groups to interact with one another. This situation emerged from the British divide and rule policy. In order to attract labourers to and subsequently not leave the estates, the estate management provided basic necessities such as schools, housing, temples, toddy shops, and so on, though these amenities were dilapidated and unsatisfactory.<sup>9</sup> This living condition contrasted with the Indians that lived in towns or municipalities. Most urban Indians were traders, estate owners, teachers, police (sepoys), government staff, professionals, and so on. Their standard of living were higher than the estate labourers. For instance, they were free to work without being bound to any party, and received higher wages compared to estate labourers.<sup>10</sup>

During the colonial period, most estates in Malaya were rubber estates. These estates were usually divided into 'labour quarters' and 'staff quarters.' The staff quarters consisted of rubber factories, smoke houses, storehouses, housing for managers, clerks, and *kangani*, schools, and hospitals/clinics. In the labour quarters stood labour housing, including toddy shops and *Aaya Kottai / Aaya Kottagaior* nurseries for babies and children of labourers.<sup>11</sup> The British introduced plantations at a large scale for its economic benefits. Estates increased in number, and so did the arrival and settlement of labourers in these estates. The large numbers of estates is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: The total number of estates in Malaya between 1934 and 1935.**

State	Total Estates 1934	Total Estates 1935
Federated Malay States (FMS)	2,178	2,345
Straits Settlements (SS)	335	334
Unfederated Malay States (UMS)	324	485

Source: *Annual Report of The Agent of The Government of India In British Malaya For The Year 1935*, Delhi: Manager of Publication, 1936, pp. 36-37.

7 Ibid., p. 5.

8 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

9 Bathathanathan Veloo, *Perkembangan Masyarakat India di Negeri Kedah antara tahun 1900-1945*, B.A. Academic Exercise, History Department, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 2002/2003, p. 83.

10 Ibid., p. 66.

11 Ibid., p. 75.

In Table 1, it shows that the Federated Malay States have the largest numbers of estates: 2,178 in 1934, which increased to 2,345 in 1935. This was because the British heavily focused on the states with rich economic resources.

### What is the estate indentured system?

Among the important aspects of social life was the stress that arose from the estate indentured system. Immediately after the labour force arrived in Malaya, they were sent to rubber estates. Here, they were provided with basic necessities such as housing, clothing, food, and other amenities such as groceries by the employers.<sup>12</sup> In addition, toddy shops were opened in rubber estates specifically for the labourers. These steps taken by the British in providing these amenities were done solely to maintain labour presence in these estates, so they would not go beyond the estate borders. In reality, Indian labourers were prohibited from going over the estate borders where they worked. The poor communication and transportation systems, including settlements in remote interiors made the situation more difficult. Outsiders were also not allowed to enter these estates. This meant Indian labourers lived in an isolated situation, cut off from the outside world. British policy meant preventing social interaction, not only between the Indian labourers and other ethnic groups, but also between Indian labourers and other Indians in Malaya. Estate labourers were left to live in their own community, preserving the cultural attributes from their home villages with no room for change.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, labourers have no desire to continue living under the *kangani* or plantation system, and wanted to escape the system altogether. However, their desires were obstructed by rules and regulations imposed by the estate management. For example, if any of the labourers wished to leave, they were forced to pay a certain amount of cash before leaving the estate. This situation was almost impossible, as all the money received on wage day were collected by the *kangani*, *kirani* (clerks), and *manduru* (mandores).<sup>14</sup> These restrictions dampened their wishes to escape indentured servitude, and they settled for estate life.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, a few guards were appointed in most estates to ensure labourers would not cross the estate borders. If a labourers wished to leave, for instance to the post office, he would receive a pass, and a guard would be tasked with accompanying him to ensure the labourer did not flee. In addition, labourers were also not allowed to leave without a strong reason, such as visiting friends or family members in other estates. The situation faced by these labourers were virtually indistinguishable from the slavery system, whereby they were settled and controlled like slaves.<sup>16</sup> They have no avenue for recourse, and could not report to the relevant authorities about their mistreatment by the estate management. Every aspect of their lives were under the full control of the employers.

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12 CO 273/499, Memorandum regarding conditions of the Indian labour in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, p. 1.

13 K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India Di Malaysia*, pp. 6-7.

14 CO 273/534, Conditions of Indian Labourers In Malaya, Memorandum, Excerpts from the "Swathesamithiran" forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controller of Malaya, 27 July 1927, pp. 1-3.

15 CO 273/405, Letter from Rayappan, Seremban, 25 March 1913, p. 5.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

## Education for whom?

The genesis of the Tamil or Indian education system in Malaya have been discussed by many previous scholars. Therefore, the authors took the initiative to forgo any more discussion on the beginning of the Tamil schools in the estates. Instead, the discussion will highlight the true education system as provided by the colonial authorities for Tamil children, and identify the conditions that led to these children receiving unsatisfactory education in these estates.

The colonial government had its own motive in introducing Tamil schools in Malaya. This is because, British are aware that only Tamil education can be used as an incentive to encourage Indians to come to Malaya. Philip Loh, in his book, *Seeds of Separatism: educational policy in Malaya 1894-1940*, touches on the following, "To induce a greater flow of Indian immigration into the F.M.S the British administration in 1905 decided to establish Tamil Schools."<sup>17</sup> The vernacular education received by the children of the estate workers is to keep them staying in the estate concerned. This can be seen in N.J.Colletta's statement that, "Education has to be limited in nature (vernacular) for reading and writing in the master's language (English) would surely not increase production among labourers and might even put ideas of insurrection in their heads."<sup>18</sup> The emergence of Tamil schools on the estate was not intended to provide education to Indian children but to attract more Indians into the estates. It is clear that the government does not want to take responsibility for the education of the workers. This is because although there were many schools at that time, there was no clear policy either in terms of the teaching system or the Tamil school administration.<sup>19</sup>

One author said that English education was more beneficial than vernacular education at that time because, "English education was of restricted availability and received preferential treatment from the colonial administration though religious gave a push initially. It was of higher quality than the vernacular system and offered access of post-secondary education. It was the means to the attractive employment prospects and also because of its limited scope was the means of access to the local elite"<sup>20</sup>

Education, as an aspect of estate labour life, should not be overlooked. This was because education was introduced in the estates to bring in and permanently settle labourers in the estates. Around 90% of Indian labourers that migrated to Malaya were illiterate.<sup>21</sup> Education in the estates, as provided by the British, were done only to win the confidence of the Indian labourers. The education system was not meant to produce excellent and bright students. The lack of an organised education system meant children of labourers were left to continue living as a community of 'drinkers or drunkards' for the next generation. Furthermore, they were also a community of 'debtors' for the remainder of the lives, due to the debts inherited from their fathers.<sup>22</sup>

17 Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: educational policy in Malaya 1894-1940*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 45.

18 N.J.Colletta, "The Ecology of Child Development", dalam *International Journal of Sociology of The Family*, Vol. 6, 1976, p. 25.

19 S.Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malayisa and Singapore*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 178.

20 Eddy Lee, *Educational Planning in West Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 7.

21 CO 273/534, Education On Estates, Memorandum, Excerpts from the "Swathesamithiran" forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controller of Malaya, 27 July 1927, p. 1.

22 Ibid., pp. 1-3.

Schooling hours were arranged so as to not clash with the working hours of children aged 10 years and above with their parents in the estates. Teachers were imported from India, but at the early stages, clerks, *kangani*, or labourers with rudimentary education served as teachers in these schools. The reality was these appointed teachers were not qualified or could not provide proper teaching to the children in estate Tamil schools.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, poverty, family burden, and a lack of initiative on the part of the British essentially made them an aimless community. Parents were more concerned with the potential extra income their children could bring in.<sup>24</sup>

In the late 1900s, the Tamil vernacular education system was developed by the British by starting a Tamil school in Perak (Federated Malay States).<sup>25</sup> Tamil schools are underappreciated because the British are concerned about the peculiarities of the foreigners (Indians and Chinese) and the uncertainty of their places of residence and most likely after raising enough money they may return to India or China. This is also a British reason not to connect these schools.<sup>26</sup> Tamil schools in plantations in Malaya emerged and disappeared until 1923. By introducing labour codes in 1923 the British established a concrete educational policy for Indian children in the estates. This code has stimulated the growth of quantitative and qualitative Tamil schools. But most teachers do not have the higher education. The eligibility of a teacher in a Tamil school is grade 7.<sup>27</sup> The problem is, teachers in Tamil schools are still inadequate and teachers are not qualified or trained. Even clerks, conductors, labourers and hospital helpers sometimes become full-time substitutes. By 1937, there were 548 Tamil schools throughout Malaya with an enrollment of 23,350 Indian students, but the general quality of Indian education at this time can be seen from S. Arasaratnam's statement, "There was no provision for the training of teachers in Malaya until 1937. For all these years the whole system of Tamil education was nothing but a sham and a mockery."<sup>28</sup>

The early education system of the Indian students in the colonial period was in a state of complete disarray. At first, the number of students going to school was very small. Higher education for girls is up to level 4. They also rarely go to the highest level of education. Only a few boys continue their secondary education. There are some students who do not go to school at all and some drop out of school when they reach 6th grade.<sup>29</sup> Indians also believe that their native language will maintain a cultural bond between them. Colletta mentioned it as follows, "The Indian parent is convicted that the best form of bond to his culture is through a written knowledge of Tamil."<sup>30</sup>

The British saw the opening of Tamil schools in the estates as a facility to attract Indian labour to Malaya. Based on this line of thinking, the British established shoddy and

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23 Ibid.

24 Education of Tamil Coolie Children on Estate, in Selangor Secretariat File 3996/1913, p. 2.

25 The System of Education in The Federated Malay States dalam Fail High Commissioner's Office, BORNEO 227/1903, p. 8.

26 Ibid.

27 Noor Aziawati Bte Chik Ali, Sejarah Perkembangan dan Permasalahan Pendidikan di Selangor antara tahun 1900-1940, Latihan Ilmiah, Jabatan Sejarah, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 2002/2003, p. 77.

28 S. Arasaratnam, Indians in Malaya and Singapore, p. 130.

29 J.R. Daniel, A Socio Economic Study of The Indians In The Rubber and Oil Palm Estates in the State of Perak and Selangor, Thesis M.A., Jabatan Sejarah, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1980, pp. 88-89.

30 N.J. Colletta, "Malaysian's Forgotten People: Education, Cultural Identity and Socio-Economic Mobility Among The South Indian Plantation Workers", Asian Studies, Vol. VII, 1975, pp. 87-112.

ill-equipped Tamil schools with highly inadequate teaching.<sup>31</sup> British policy was merely to turn Tamil children into clerks (*kirani*) or bookkeepers (*kanakupillai*).<sup>32</sup> As a result, the education of Indian labour children were neglected.<sup>33</sup>

...children of from about 5-12 are allowed to work in the mornings. Their parents greatly appreciate the additional earnings brought in by these means and the children's work is valuable to the estates. Moreover analogies from 'half time' experience in Europe are quite false. The work done on rubber estates by Tamil children is mostly the scrapping of trees or cleansing of cups; work which makes no great demand on their physical or mental energies, is a healthy out-door employment, and cannot be held to incapacitate them from profiting by attendance at school later in the day. Such work is generally over between 10 and 11 in the morning.<sup>34</sup>

The British opted for hard-working Tamil labour in Malaya, as to their estimation, the Tamils were passive, content, and manageable. The British also viewed the Tamils as not visionary, so would not work to better themselves. This meant they could be relied on as a permanent estate labour force, or as long as they were needed.<sup>35</sup> British prejudice was not limited to Indian labour intake, but also reflected in the housing and treatment given to them in Malaya. As stated earlier, toddy was provided as an energy source for Indian labourers to ensure the success of the British economic programme, which recouped the wages paid to the labourers through taxes on toddy sales in the estates. The British turned toddy drinking into a commercial enterprise, and neglected education as a vehicle for the betterment of the labour class. It would not be overstating the fact that the British, by design, turned the children of labourers into coolies by imposing more work in the estates and preventing them from going to school. Even if education was provided, it would be at a minimal level. This situation was clearly mentioned in the Annual Report on Education in Selangor for the Year 1923,

The attendance is very irregular, estate managers as a rule take little interest in their schools and give over-time work to the children which prevents their attendance at school...there still remain the kangany and cooly teachers who are untrained and lacking of knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

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31 CO 273/579, *Straits Settlements, Annual Report On Education In The Straits Settlements For The Year 1931*, pp. 20-21.

32 CO 273/534, Education On Estates, Memorandum, Excerpts from the "Swathesamithiran" forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controller of Malaya, 27 July 1927, p. 1.

33 K. Mohamed Ali, 'The Education of The Estate Worker's Children', *Tamil Oli*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1963, p. 22.

34 Education of Tamil Coolie Children on Estate, in Selangor Secretariat File 3996/1913, p. 2.

35 K. S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 57 & M. R. Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case*, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980, p. 17.

36 *Annual Report On Education In Selangor For The Year 1923*, in Selangor Secretariat File 951/1924, p. Part.V. Tamil School.

Education was an important tool in overcoming the problem of alcoholism among the community. At the same time, the colonial government had their own motives in introducing Tamil schools in Malaya. Their main motive was not to better the lives of the labourers, but use education to retain labour presence in the estates.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, the British saw the opening of Tamil schools in the estates as a facility to attract Indian labour to Malaya. This line of thought led the British to open inferior Tamil schools and unsatisfactory curriculum,<sup>38</sup> in line with British policy to turn these Tamil children into future clerks (*kirani*) and bookkeepers (*kanakupillai*).<sup>39</sup> This meant the education of Indian labour children in the estates were in a state of neglect, thus leading to the assumption that these children were only meant to remain as labourers.<sup>40</sup> It is important to discuss the education aspect, as based on research of official British documents, it proved that children also partook in toddy consumption. This was because estate managers did not make school attendance compulsory, but allowed the children to work in the estates.<sup>41</sup>

British policy of divide and rule was not limited to dividing the three largest ethnic groups in Malaya and ruling over them. This policy also applied to the division of Indians in schools by ethnic lines, with the Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu schools. In the beginning, two or three types of schools have existed in the estates, with either Tamil, Malayalam, or Telugu schools existing separately, or the three types of schools under one roof but operating separately according to ethnic division, of the Tamils, Malayalees, and Telugus. This situation was present in virtually every estate in pre-Independence Malaya. The British evidently wished to divide the Indians into smaller sub-ethnic groups, based on settlements, workplaces, castes, wages, temples, work division, and schools. The British realised that 90% of the Indian labour brought into Malaya were Tamils, the remaining 10% being Malayalees, Telugus, and North Indians such as Punjabis, Gujaratis, and Sikhs. However, the British found it in their interest to separate the Indians into disparate groups to prevent a united and close Indian front that might threaten British administration. Clearly, Tamil schools in the estates were not meant for the betterment of the Indian community, but for British economic purposes, the schools being a basic facility to retain labour presence in the estates and their continued employment under colonial authority. The breakdown of Indian ethnic groups in schools is shown in Image 2.

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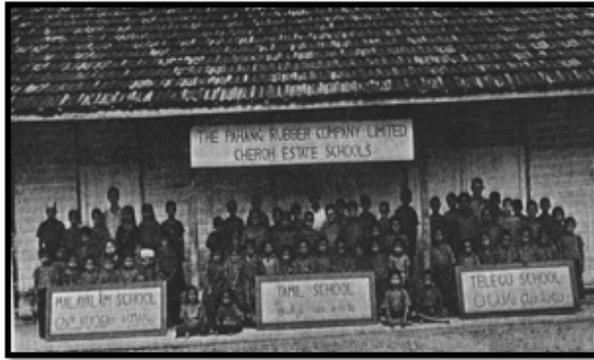
37 S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, p. 178.

38 Most schools in Penang and Province Wellesley, and all schools in Malacca were estate schools set up by volunteer bodies for free, per the orders of the Controllor of Labour. Private schools were set up by missionaries. See, CO 273/579, *Straits Settlements, Annual Report On Education In The Straits Settlements For The Year 1931*, pp. 20-21.

39 CO 273/534, Education On Estates, Memorandum, Excerpts from the "Swathesamithiran" forwarded with Section of States F.M.S. Despatch No. 307, dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1926, Letter from A. Caldecott. Ag. Controllor of Malaya, 27 July 1927, p. 1.

40 K. Mohamed Ali, 'The Education of The Estate Worker's Children', p. 22.

41 CO 717/181, Conditions of Indian Labourers In Malaya, p. 102.

**Image 2: An estate school, divided into three classes, Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu.**

Source: National Archives Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

Compared to the Chinese, interest in establishing Tamil schools was not strong among the Indian community. Most Chinese schools were built with donations from the Chinese community and generous towkays. It was the opposite with the Indians. Not only were Indians unable to bear the cost of maintaining a school, there was a lack of generous Indian towkays. In fact, the number of schools founded by the Indian community were not high. For instance, Thambusamy Pillai founded a school in his own name in 1906 for the children of railways workers in Sentul. At the same time, the Ramakrishna Missions opened the Vivekananda Tamil school in Kuala Lumpur. These efforts led to the further establishment of 122 Tamil schools by 1922.<sup>42</sup> However, it must be noted that these schools were set up in urban areas, and not in estates. In the estates, virtually all Tamil schools were set up by the British, inadequate and dilapidated. Estate labourers at the time were illiterate and came to Malaya with the full intent of returning home after the end of their contract. School amenities were not their main priority, especially with the burden of living in the indentured plantation system. They were more concerned with the potential extra income their children could bring in, instead of sending their children to the derelict estate schools set up by the British. These labourers were not expected to open schools. At the same time, estate managers, the majority of whom were Europeans, were indifferent to Tamil school welfare. This situation only changed with the Labour Code 1923, which made the provision of education facilities for Indian labour children between the ages of seven to fourteen years compulsory.<sup>43</sup> However, estate employers refused to honour this requirement, due to the prohibitive cost. In most estates, they did not construct special buildings as schools, but turned the smoke houses into makeshift schools. Employers were also half-hearted in their appointment of qualified teachers to teach in these estate Tamil schools. Hence, clerks, mandores, hospital assistants, and anyone with free time were assigned to the teaching position. Teaching was arbitrary and without a curriculum guide.<sup>44</sup>

42 A. Kandan, *Malaysiavil Tamil Palliyum Tamil Kalviyum* (Tamil Schools and Education in Malaysia), Ipoh: t.p., 1979, p. 19.

43 *Report of the Royal Commission on the teaching services, West Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 24.

44 S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*, p. 181.

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At the early stages, responses to Tamil schools were highly discouraging. However, by the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of schools and attending students increased. For instance, in 1925 there were 235 schools with 8,153 students. Five years later, this number increased to 333 schools and 12,640 students. In 1937, there were 548 schools with 23,350 students. This trend continued until 1957, with 50,766 children attending 902 Tamil schools across the country. Table 2 provides a clearer picture of this trend.

**Table 2: The Development of Tamil Schools in Malaya.**

Year	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1953
No. of Students	35479	35456	38743	38833	37100	43257
No. of Schools	843	890	889	881	861	869
No. of Teachers	1152	1260	1341	1388	410	1564

Source: K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India di Malaysia*, Pulau Pinang; Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008, p. 136.

A number of factors contributed to this trend, among them being the demographic change among the Indian community. By the 1930s, the Indians have become domiciled in this country. This led to an increase in the number of children born here. In addition, beginning in the 1930s, the government bore the cost of managing Tamil schools through grants-in-aids. In 1932, for example, they allocated six ringgit per student. Three years later, this aid was increased to eight ringgit. This financial aid encouraged Tamil school teachers to increase the number of attending students in their schools, as more students meant more financial aid. These teachers met with parents and persuaded them to send their children to school.<sup>45</sup> They emphasised on the importance of education for these children. Although their actions were driven by monetary motives, they did contribute to an awareness on education among the Indian labour. This situation is evidently shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Total number of Tamil schools in the estates by state, 1930 – 1938.**

Year	Perak	Selangor	Negeri Sembilan	Pahang
1931	126	159	36	12
1933	118	132	35	7
1934	126	151	60	11
1935	126	151	62	9
1936	138	162	73	12
1938	198	236	112	17

1935, 1936: includes 3 Telugu schools and one Malayalam school (aided schools)

1938: includes 10 Telugu schools, one Malayalam schools, one Singalese schools, one Gurkha school, 13 Tamil-Telugu mixed schools, and two Tamil-Malayalam mixed schools (aided schools)

Source: *Federated Malay States, Annual Report On The Education Department For The Year 1931-1938*, Kuala Lumpur: FMS Government Press, 1932-1939.

<sup>45</sup> *General Regulations For Indian Vernacular Schools In The Straits Settlements (S.S.) and Federated Malay States (F.M.S.), 1936*, Singapore; Government Printing Office, 1937, pp. 1-5.

Although in the early years of the third decade, the number of Tamil schools increased in almost all the Federated Malay States, systematic education with the appointment of qualified teachers only began after this period. Tamil schools increased in every state, especially with the eight ringgit-per-student scheme in place. This situation led to a drastic increase in the number of Tamil schools. Nevertheless, the explanation in Table 3 also reflected the efforts of European employers to establish separate Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu schools in the estates in Malaya to prevent unity and camaraderie among the Indian population.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that Indians were brought into Malaya by the British to ensure the success of their economic programmes, specifically in the rubber industry. In the beginning, the British hoped the labourers would return to their homeland after the end of their contracts. However, this situation gradually changed at least since the end of the First World War, 1914-1918. In order to maintain Indian presence in the estates for the heavy labour, the British provided highly unsatisfactory facilities there, including Tamil schools.

This study proved that at the early stages, Tamil schools were set up for the benefit of the Europeans, to guarantee Indian labour remained in the estates to develop the estates. Until the third decade of the colonial era, Tamil schools saw no growth or development. This situation only changed after the government introduced a number of aids to Tamil schools, with the support and encouragement of the middle or elite classes in the betterment of Tamil children. It would not be far-fetched to say that the British deliberately set up a system of separate Tamil school systems in the estates to further divide the Indians (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalee, Singalese, Northern), even as they all settled under one roof, the “plantation.”

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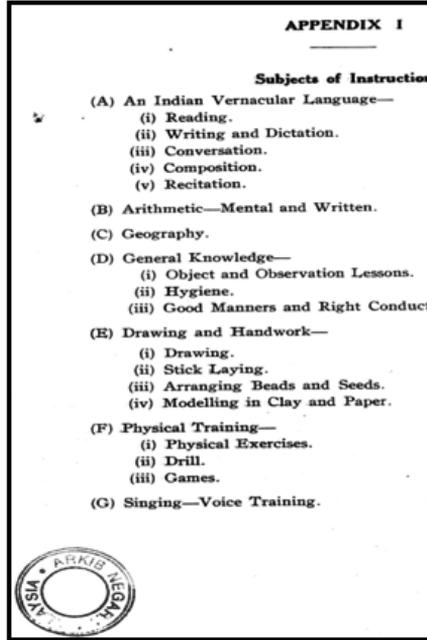
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### Appendix 1

Subjects offered in Tamil schools.



Source: *General Regulations For Indian Vernacular Schools In The Straits Settlements (S.S.) and Federated Malay States (F.M.S.), 1936*, Singapore; Government Printing Office, 1937.

