

**CULTURE AND ECONOMY:
TAMILS ON THE PLANTATION FRONTIER
IN MALAYSIA REVISITED, 1998-99**

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Preface

This paper is based on a restudy during December 1998 to March 1999 in the same location and among the same Tamilian people as my initial field investigation in Malaysia (then the Federation of Malaya) in 1962 - 63. The unit that I studied originally carried the pseudonym of 'Pal Melayu'. It was a large rubber estate on the west coast of Malaya owned by a European company, situated about 35 kilometers from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. In this paper I use the same name, Pal Melayu, for the unit of my original investigation. But in deference to the wishes of my respondents during the restudy I refer to the region where Pal Melayu is located by the real names of the towns - Kuala Selangor (earlier called 'Bunga Raya'), Batang Berjuntai (earlier called 'Bintang Emas') and Bukit Rotan (earlier called 'Baku Baku'). Further more, unlike in the earlier publication, I use real names rather than pseudonyms for all the persons referred to in this text.

In order to summarize the main findings of the original study I can do no better than to reproduce the following observations by Prof. J. A. Barnes from his Foreword to my monograph, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London; University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970:

Ravindra Jain's book is about Indians who went from South India to Malaya to work, and about their children who were born there and who are now Malaysian citizens, though still identifying themselves as Indians. If he had followed the established tradition in studies of this kind, Jain might have written mainly about the extent to which these migrants have retained their Indian characteristics or acquired Malaysian qualities, or about relations between Indian migrants and their Malay and Chinese neighbours in Malaysia. Instead, he tackles his data in a different way. He concentrates his attention on relations among Indians themselves in a typical Malaysian setting. Following the pattern of intensive - rather than extensive-inquiry characteristic of social anthropology, he analyses in detail the changing structure of social life on one rubber plantation, Pal Melayu, spanning a period of seventy years. He sees the plantation as a 'total' institution, within which Indian labourers not only produce rubber for export but also grow up, marry, save and consume, quarrel and cooperate, and die.

Yet the plantation is not a segregated enclave isolated from the rest of the world. The rise and fall of British colonialism, the Japanese occupation and the Emergency, and

increasingly the development of Indian and Malaysian nationalism all impinge on the structure of plantation society, while the fluctuating price of rubber on the world market precariously provides the reason for its existence. The hierarchical organization headed by the European plantation manager and designed for the efficient production of rubber is contrasted with the partially egalitarian community system, which regulates most activities 'off' work. The same individuals have places in both systems, and Jain skillfully shows how the two systems subtly influence each other.

A particularly interesting part of his analysis deals with the several kinds of credit arrangements found in the community. The Tamil laborers are proletarians, not peasants, who have no fixed property in land or houses and who sell their labor in a very restricted market. Inelastic earning capacity has to be matched to erratically varying demands for consumption goods and presentations by recourse to the pawnshop and to circulating credits unions. Whereas in India social intercourse often tends to become highly politicized, here in Pal Melayu Indian social activity is characteristically monetized. As Jain says, 'The rich are those who not only work for money but also know how to make money work for them.' Their comparative wealth comes not from a higher income but from using their income more effectively. Yet the rich men are rubber tappers earning the same modest wages as their fellows.

Two distinctive features of Pal Melayu society should be noted. Women are employed in rubber production as well as men, and we might expect that their earning capacity would give Pal Melayu women a greater degree of social autonomy than their sisters enjoy in India. In fact, they are still in a significantly subordinate position, for the management prefers to pay the wages of all the members of a household to its male head. Thus although a young wife is to a great extent free of that dominance by her mother-in-law which she would experience in India, she is still under the control of her husband. If she lacks male kinsfolk to defend her interests, as many migrant women do, then however much she earns she is in a defenseless position. Likewise young men who may earn as much as their fathers are still dependent on them at Pal Melayu for assistance in meeting the expenses of marriage. Thus these proletarians, unencumbered by land and other forms of inheritable property, and working as separate and interchangeable laborers in rubber production, are nevertheless enmeshed in a network of cross-sex and cross-generation ties of obligation and dependence.

The second special feature is that Indian workers at Pal Melayu, as at other rubber plantations in western Malaysia, are able to maintain close ties with their villages of origin in south India. They are therefore not necessarily proletarians in perpetuity, for their favorite form of capital investment is in land in India. There is continual movement back and forth between India and Malaysia, and some married couples divide their citizenship so as to maintain a sure foothold in both countries. Despite the comparative poverty of rural India, many of the older laborers still regard it as their true home, to which they hope to return permanently. On the other hand, most of the young people who have lived all their lives in Malaya are less attracted to India, and yet are not at all eager to explore the possibilities of Malaysia outside the protective and familiar environment of the plantation. The relative proximity of India has meant that the formation of an autonomous Indian overseas community, as for example has occurred in Fiji and Guyana, has been delayed in Malaysia. Yet it is clear that the historical sequence of structural changes discussed by Jain did not end abruptly with the achievement of Malayan independence and that further adjustments in plantation society lie ahead.

Introduction

Compared to the fortunes of older Indian diasporics in the western Indian Ocean area (Mauritius & S. Africa), in the Pacific (Fiji) and Caribbean (Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana and Surinam) the majority of Indians in Malaysia¹ have experienced socio-economic mobility very late in the 20th century. A major benchmark in the rapid industrialization and economic development of Malaysia was the inauguration of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. According to one author (Abdullah 1997:201) the catalysts for the NEP were the ambitious 'affirmative action' policy and the violent incidents of May 1969. Arguing away from the local causes, and writing about Southeast Asian economies in general, Ian Brown (1997: 260-61) suggests that Malaysia was on the threshold of being designated a newly industrial country in the early 1990s. In 1991 the NEP was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) [Malaysian Human Rights Report 1998:11]. The overall consequences of the NEP and NDP as regards the elimination or reduction of poverty, of inequality in income distribution and corporate ownership within and between major ethnic groups, and the impact on Malaysia's Human Rights have all been hotly debated and polemically argued issues. Inevitably, the socio-economic fortunes of the Indian minority group, especially

those either now or previously connected with the plantations, need to be discussed within this wider context.

In the NEP years, a Bumiputera political and corporate elite connected with the ruling party was able to amass wealth through government enterprises as well as rent-seeking activities. Between 1970 and 1990, the Bumiputera ownership of share capital rose almost ten fold, from 2.4 % to 20.3%. The Chinese share almost doubled while the Indian share fell by a small percentage. After the end of the NEP in 1990, the business elite was no longer composed of non-Bumiputera and foreigners only. It is now mainly dominated by certain politically well connected Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. When equitable distribution of wealth is considered, the NEP has not benefited one ethnic group over another. Some Malays' ownership of share capital rose sharply during the NEP. However the wealth of the community as a whole did not rise in the same measure². As the Malaysian Human Rights Report puts it, "Poverty among Malays is still widespread as it is among urban settlers, indigenous peoples, plantation workers (mainly Indian) and New Village residents (mainly Chinese). The NEP thus did not achieve its objective of inter-ethnic economic parity. It also failed to achieve equitable distribution of wealth among all Malaysians" (Ibid. pp. 10-11).

With specific regard to the Indian population in Malaysia, there has been considerable debate describing them as the poverty group, the subculture of poverty and "third in the race" (see, e.g. Rajoo R. 1985; Rajakrishnan, R. 1987; Insan & authors 1989; The Far Eastern Economic Review, June 1990; Jeyakumar, D 1993). In what follows we shall certainly pay careful attention to the documented facts of Indian poverty in Malaysia. But the nature of our re-study also endeavors to show another side of the picture - a comparison between then and now (early 1960s and late 1990s) which may be termed the 'dynamics and scattering' of the Indian group - if not actual mobility - over a thirty-five year period³. Methodologically, the difference between our approach and most of the others is: (a) our study relies on a micro-perspective in relation to the macro universe, and b) our interpretations take emic factors into account from the start and subsequently build up an 'etic' picture of the Indian ethnic group. For these very reasons, however, the generalizability of our findings and analysis will be limited.

The Estate Scenario

The settlement pattern of Pal Melayu has changed in response to the change of crops, reduction in labour force, change in the ethnic composition of estate workers and the replacement of a European manager by an Asian one (a Chinese until 1997, then succeeded by a Malaysian Malayalee from 1998 onwards). The important change is that instead of three clear-cut nucleated residential 'labour lines' (Division I & II and 'factory Division'), there is only one labour lines area - a portion of former Division II. The houses are no longer the type of kampong houses I described before (Jain 1970:13-21), but single storeyed flats made of concrete and cement. There are no longer communal bathing and toilet facilities, but individual bathrooms and flush toilets in the flats. The drastically reduced number of dwelling units in the labour lines are also ethnically mixed - Indian, Indonesian and Bangladeshi labourers and their families live cheek-by-jowl. The centrally located Mariamman temple, football field and Divisional Office buildings - including the Manager's office - remain where they were in the 1960s. There have been some changes in the bungalows of the Asian estate staff, for example the Assistant Manager's bungalow is now next to the Indian Manager's bungalow). But the new manager still lives in the old European manager's bungalow.

The total area occupied by Pal Melayu in 1998-99 is roughly the same as in 1962-63, viz., about 4000 acres. However, the cropping pattern has changed phenomenally. In 1962-3 nearly 95% of the planted area was devoted to rubber. But in 1998-9 the proportion of rubber to oil palm planting is 13% to 87%. The number of labourers on Pal Melayu is also drastically reduced. Whereas in 1962 there were 541 labourers, in November 1998 there were 161, a reduction of nearly 70%. The smaller size of the labour force is related to the greater mechanization of oil palm cultivation compared to rubber and its much less labour-intensive character. The sex-distribution of workers in 1962 was 52.3% male and 47.7% female. At present women constitute less than one-third of the labour force. This again is related to the differences in technology between rubber tapping and oil palm collection. Very significantly, the ethnic distribution of all workers on Pal Melayu today is only 80 (50%) Indian, 67 (41%) Indonesian, 13 (8%) Bangladeshi and one Malay. (There are no Chinese workers on Pal Melayu.) In my sociological census of 1962, the resident population of Pal Melayu was 1536 of which 1509 or 98% were Indian. At that time the non-Indian population of 27 consisted of 2 Europeans (the manager and his wife), 15 Chinese (2 households), and 10 Malays (2 households)⁴. The logical question therefore, is about the fate of the earlier large population of Indians (mainly Tamils) on Pal Melayu. But before examining it, we shall look at some of the

changes in the infrastructure of the estate and also at macro level changes to plantations in Malaysia.

To move again to the macro-level, I have already mentioned the inauguration of the NEP in 1970, and shall explore its consequences and implications for the Indian ethnic group in a short while. In terms of state legislation, changes in citizenship and employment laws in 1968 and 1969 resulted in some 60,000 Indians having to leave Malaysia and a further 50,000 or so on plantations having to live in constant fear of eviction through the possible non-renewal of work permits (Sandhu 1993:176, Jain 1985: 196-198). Next, following the enforcement of NEP, the area of land under plantations dropped from 906,106 hectares in 1983 to 704,127 hectares in 1992. Commensurately, the number of workers on the payroll of rubber estates declined more than 40% from 104,979 to 59,127 during the same period. The fall in numbers would be even greater if estates other than rubber estates were included. Most of the affected estates were located in Selangor⁵. Estates were converted for industry, housing, as well as luxury hotels and golf courses. The former Chief Minister of Selangor, Tan Sri Muhammed Taib indicated that the number of estates in the State would decline from the existing 185 to 12 by the year 2020 (Malaysian Human Rights Report, 1988, p. 11-12 and 65). Another trend was the drastic reduction in the proportion of Indians among estate workers, from 45.5% in 1967 to only 21.8% in 1980 (M. Puthuchery 1993: 358). Finally, the replacement of rubber by oil palm on estates is also a Malaysia-wide phenomenon. In the late 1980s an estimated quarter of a million people worked on Malaysia's rubber and oil palm plantations. In this period oil palm and rubber were Malaysia's second and third most important export commodities after petroleum (Insan 1989:8). Already by 1983, oil palm had become a close second to rubber as Malaysia's main export crop as Table 1 shows:

Share of Rubber & Oil Palm in Malaysian Export Earnings: 1970-83 (In Millions of Dollars) [Based on Mehmet 1988: 20]

Item	1970		1975		1980		1983	
	\$	%	\$	%	\$	%	\$	%
Rubber	1724	33.4	2026	21.9	4617	1604	3664	11.1
Oil Palm	264	5.1	1320	14.3	2515	8.9	2977	9.1

As Gullick has pointed out, "Palm oil has become a major element in the economy; in 1960 palm oil and kernels accounted for 2 per cent of the exports - in 1980 they are estimated to yield 12 percent ... Since oil palm gives a much higher profit per acre than rubber, it was inevitable that land which was replanted or newly cleared for planting would come under oil palm rather than rubber" (Gullick 1981: 154-155). Similarly Lucas and Verry observe, " many of the estates (owned largely through Bumiputera trusts for most of the NEP period) have limited their labour demand by switching from rubber to the less labour intensive oil palm - a switch which has not been dictated by any trend in the relative prices of palm oil and rubber" (Lucas and Verry 1996: 563). Malaysia is now the largest single producer of palm oil in the world. However oil palm is a more demanding crop than rubber trees. It generally grows better in coastal areas than in the drier inland areas. This is an additional reason why oil palm has been favoured for extensive planting and replanting on estates of Pal Melayu region⁶.

We may now consider relevant facts about the labour situation in Malaysia, particularly the increase in the employment of contract labour, especially of foreign (Indonesian and Bangladeshi) contract labour. According to official reports, Malaysia has enjoyed a robust economy since 1988 with an average growth rate of over 8% per annum. The work force has grown in parallel from about 5.6 million workers in employment in 1985 to about 7.9 million in 1995 (cited in Jomo and Kanapathy 1996: 19). In tandem with economic growth, the official unemployment rate fell steadily from a peak of 8.8% in 1986 to 4.3% in 1990 (ibid.) and to a full employment situation of 2.6% in 1996 (The Star Economic Report 1996/97, cited in Malaysian Human Right Report 1998: 45). Labour demand has been growing unabatedly at 3.27% annually since the early 1980s, whereas the domestic labour supply declined to 2.8% annually, creating labour shortages. As a long-term strategy, the government encouraged, in particular, the participation of women in the labour force and a shift to capital intensive, high technology and knowledge based industries. The short-term strategy has been to utilize foreign labour, generally estimated to be around over 2 million strong in Malaysia.

In the Malaysian experience there is an interesting positive correlation between an increase in the employment of foreign workers and the incidence of contract workers. Industrialization and economic development are commonly assumed to increase the proportion of labour force in regular employment. Scholars have observed a trend of rise in the proportion of employees in Malaysia's labour force over the period 1970-1989 (Horton et al. 1991:539). While this may be true of the economy as a whole, Lee and Sivananthiran (1996) show that rapid economic growth over

the eight year period (1988-96) was also characterised by a rise in the incidence of contract labour in at least three industries. Indeed, in the construction, plantation and sawmilling industries, contract labour has emerged as an important aspect of labour market development⁷. As pointed out earlier, much of the increase in the incidence of contract labour in these industries is accounted for by the influx of foreign migrant labour. Whereas both the principal employers and contractors cite labour shortages as a major reasons for this recourse to contract labour, we agree with Lee & Sivananthiran (*ibid.*, p. 89) that "this argument is somewhat spurious. The real, underlying reason for their recourse to contract labour is their perceived need for more flexible employment practices, brought home by the recession of the mid -1980s."

The perspective of employers in respect of labour shortages and increased reliance on foreign contract labour, may be shown by summarizing the findings of a paper submitted by an employee (estate manager) of the company that owns Pal Melayu (Mougin 1993). According to Mougin, the local workforce has not proved sufficient. The plantation sector, according to this author, has had to compete with the "bright lights of the city" and local workers have shied away from the fields "to prefer air-conditioned factories". One of the consequences of this high turnover of workers has been that on plantations today the labour population has an average age of 40 years and above, with the younger work force making less than 10% of the total workforce⁸. The author cites the UPAM (United Planting Association of Malaya) Surveys that reveal an acute labour shortage, which was already felt in the mid eighties. This shortage, as a percentage of total workforce, was 5.98% in 1985, shot up to 11.56% in 1991 and stood at 7.80% in 1993. This shortage, by category of workers, was 40% for weeders (unskilled workers) and 29.2% for oil palm harvesters (semi-skilled workers). The rate of shortage on estates owned by the Company to which Pal Melayu belonged, was 13.6% on 31st October 1993 and on Pal Melayu 30.9%!

In short, the consequences of the shortage of labour is a chain reaction leading to the ultimate deterioration of standards and yields which in turn makes it difficult to produce crops economically. With this situation deteriorating rapidly agriculture has become more dependent on foreign labour for its salvation. (Mougin, *ibid.*, p. 5).

The UPAM survey carried out in September 1993 pointed to an official figure of 37,510 foreign workers on its member estates or a very high percentage of 37.2% of the total workforce. The figure for foreign workers in Pal Melayu in 1993 was 65 out of a total workforce 178 (37% or close to national average). But it had increased to 80 out of total workforce of 161 (50%) by November

1998. None of the labourers on Pal Melayu in 1993 - local or foreign - were direct recruits. They were all contract workers. In 1998 there were 39 check roll workers to 122 contract labourers (75.76%).

In attempting a balance sheet of present and future mobility prospects of contract labour - both local and foreign - the findings of a survey by Lee and Sivananthiran (op. cit., p. 89) are noteworthy:

Overall, the survey reveals that contract workers tend to be less educated than the labour force average. Given the number of years of experience they have had, their work history is characterised by a high rate of job turnover. The vast majority of contract workers has no written contract and is denied most of the benefits provided for under labour laws. However, they generally earn higher monthly pay than do other workers. Their higher earnings may, to some extent, compensate for the loss of statutory and other benefits. Contract workers may be compelled to form stronger attachments to their contractors through the various loans and advances the latter provide. The determinants of contract workers' monthly earnings show that premium is put on their experience and skills, but that contractors offset the cost of providing any statutory and other benefits to contract workers by paying them less.

The above is said of contract labour as a whole in the three industries of construction, sawmilling and plantations. The picture is much more dismal when plantation workers alone are considered. For one thing, the planters' grievance that there is acute labour shortage and severe difficulties in retaining contract workers has more than a grain of truth in it. The above survey revealed that principal employers - except those in the plantation industry - viewed both domestic and foreign contract labour as a permanent feature of their enterprise⁹. On plantations there was the unreliability of retaining contract workers who readily find more lucrative work in urban centres. Another feature of contract labour appeared in interviews with contractors, viz., almost all contract labourers in the plantation sector were unskilled workers - harvesters, tappers or sprayers. On plantations there were no contract workers at supervisory or skilled levels. There is high demand for contract workers by principal employers and contractors in Malaysia. From the workers' point of view, "the influx of foreign contract workers can be explained by income differentials between Malaysia and their home countries, geographical proximity and socio-cultural similarities" (Lee and Sivananthiran, *ibid.*, p.82-83)¹⁰. A possible reason why so many contract workers would continue working with their present contractors is that they are often tied to their contractors through various benefits which they provide. Of these benefits, worker indebtedness through wage advances was

highest in the plantation industries (83%). Apart from wage advances, foreign contract workers are also tied to their contractors through loans for the payment of the government levy on foreign workers. Taking into consideration all these characteristics of foreign contract labour on plantations, it seems fair to conclude that immigrant labour flows have a "wage-depressing effect" and seriously undermine the policies to redress poverty and improve human capital (Mehmet 1984 cited in S. Meyanathan 1993: 378).

On the basis of data collected in the Pal Melayu region, we are going to argue that in this area at least the decisions of the majority of Tamil workers and their progeny not to continue as estate workers were 'proactive' ones (cf Richmond 1994:58-61), In contrast to explanations based on the combined operation of 'push' and 'pull' factors (the former supported by Human Rights advocates for instance and the latter by spokespersons for the management) which are largely reactive considerations, the dynamics and scattering of Pal Melayu's Indian population has not been simply a knee-jerk reaction to certain situations. Instead it has been a positive, planned and concerted movement of variously informed and resourceful agents in a process. For a start, the small number and other socio-economic characteristics of Indians from the 1960s still working on Pal Melayu supports such an interpretation. In this light let us examine the data of those original (i.e. 1962-63) families whose descendants have continued to work on Pal Melayu

Tamilian Workers on Pal Melayu and other estates of the region

Among the descendants of resident Tamilians on Pal Melayu, the first one I met was Paramsivan alias Elappan at the house of teacher Muniandy¹¹. Paramsivan was born on Pal Melayu of rubber tapper parents, Ramasamy and Kanamma. Teacher Muniandy is the son of Kanamma's brother, Subramaniam and is married to Kannamma's daughter Patamma, Paramsivan's sister (see Figure 1).

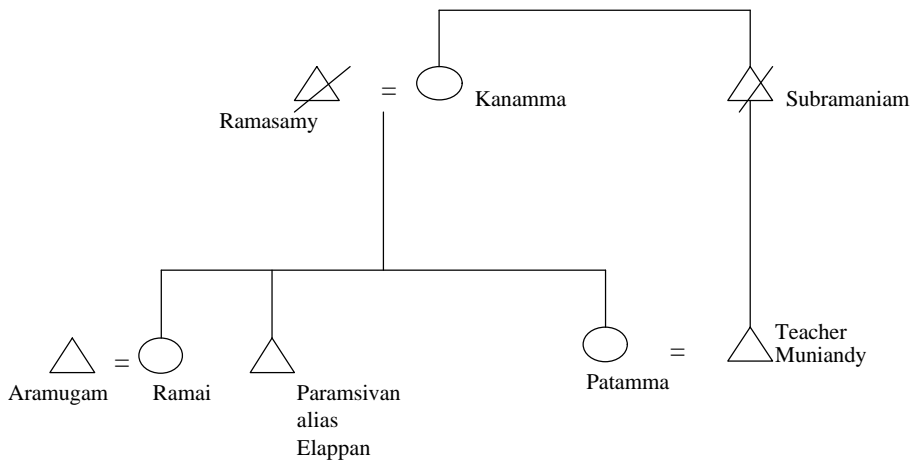
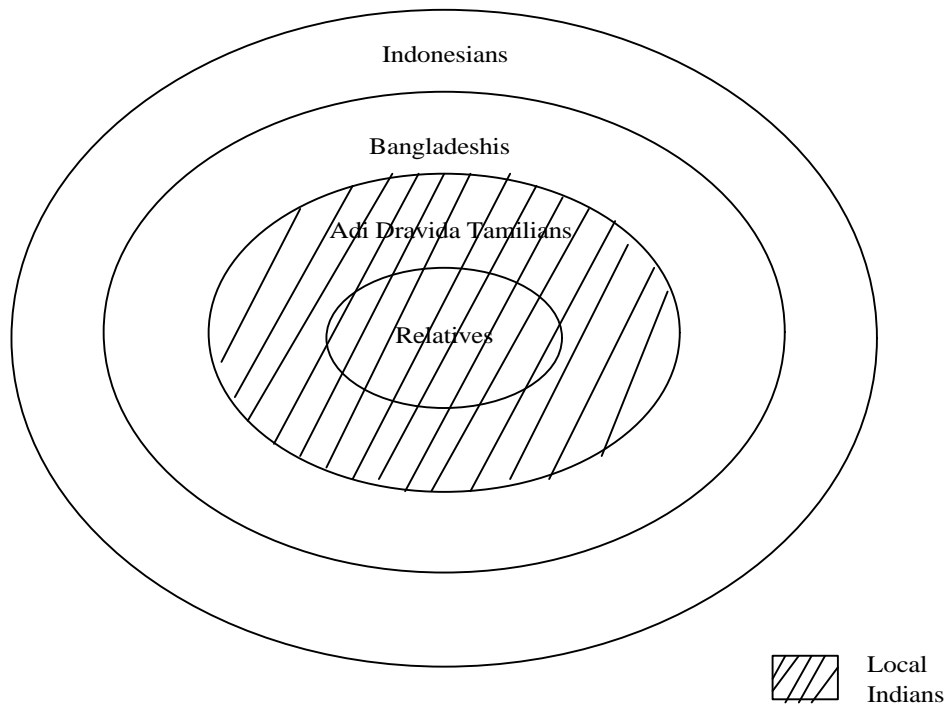


Figure 1

Teacher Muniandy's father's sister (also mother-in-law) had wanted the alliance to continue by asking for teacher Muniandy's daughter's hand in marriage to Paramsivan. But teacher Muniandy refused the proposal because he thought consanguineal marriages to be undesirable since they led to 'lowered intelligence in the progeny of such unions’.

Paramsivan is a contractor on Pal Melayu. The contract workers under him could be plotted out according to the following diagram (Figure 2):



One kinsmen-couple working for Paramsivan is his sister Ramai and her husband Arumugam. The contractor as well as all workers under him are provided accommodation in the labour lines of Pal Melayu. In the interviews with the contractor's gang I found confirmation of some of the macro-level characteristics of contract labour on estates. Demographic factors - most prominently either the old age of the earning couples or a large number of dependent children - were foremost among reasons militating against a move outside estates. Following such characteristics were low level of education and, in general, a certain lack of enterprise among household heads. It is quite revealing that besides relatives, Adi-Dravida Tamilians also formed part of the core of an Indian labour contractor's gang on Pal Melayu and other estates in the region. As has been already noted by a number of scholars, and as we shall discuss in more detail later, there is a broad correlation among estate Tamils between caste status (i.e. Adi-Dravida Tamilians) and indices of backwardness, such as low educational levels and poverty. In the context of TAMILIAN labour still resident on Pal Melayu and other estates of the region, their proclivity to remain contract workers is one of the 'involutionary' characteristics of caste affiliation. The same 'involutionary' characteristic of kinship is manifest in the continued stay on estates by the kin-related gang-core of Pal Melayu contractors like Paramsivan¹². On the peripheries of the contractor's gang are located Bangladeshi and Indonesian labourers who, though more numerous than Tamilians, are eminently transient.

I have discussed 'relatives' as the core of contractors' gangs and the contractors are by and large non-Brahman rather than Adi-Dravida. Among these 'relatives' on the estate there is the proclivity on the part of younger members of the household to have jobs in factories outside the estate and, for the head of the household senior members (harvester and carrier themselves), to own houses in taman opposite Pal Melayu. A case in point is the following network (see Figure 3) of Padyachee households, descendants of old residents of Pal Melayu (Doraisamy thaccan and Kuppusamy Iyer) whom I had known in the early 1960s:

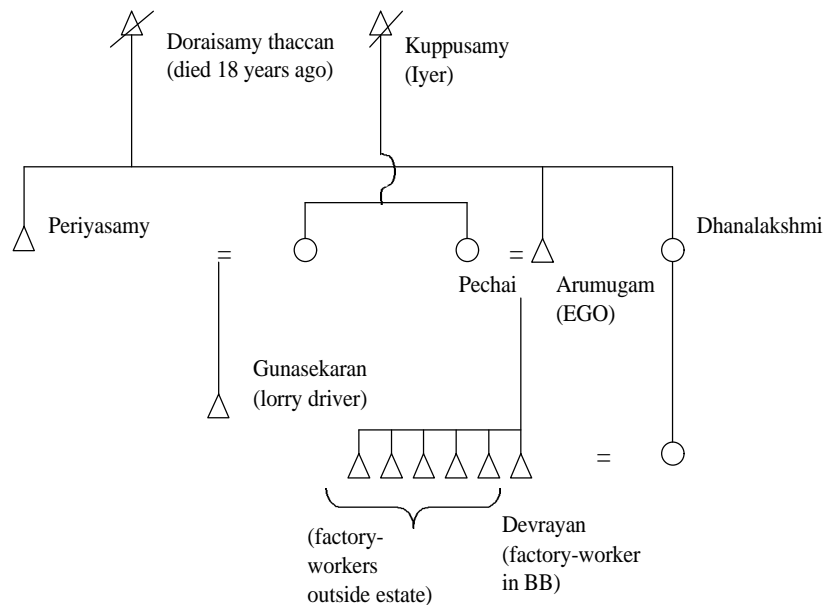


Figure 3

EGO (Arumugam) owns a house in Taman Kilaran where his newly married son, Devrayan, who is a factory worker in Batang Berjuntai, stays.

Among Tamilians still resident on the estates, there is a sub group in parts of the Pal Melayu region (but not on Pal Melayu itself) who have acquired ownership of dwellings on the estates. These may either be contract labourers or check-roll workers though my impression is that the majority is of the latter type. Again, the majority of these house-owners on estates are themselves retired estate workers but one or more members of their households may continue to work on the estate. (There is no stipulation - legal or otherwise - that a member of such homeowner households must work on the estate.) The home ownership scheme for estate and mine workers was introduced by the late Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, in 1970 and implemented in 1973. "Unfortunately, the scheme died with the last Premier, after having been implemented in 17 estates" (Aliran Monthly 1994: 14(11), p.21). The Human Rights Report also cites The Sun Magazine (4 July 1996) to the effect that "to date only 33 out of the more than 1,000 plantations in the country have implemented it" and it pronounces the scheme to be a failure (M.H.R.R. 1998:65). Although the Selangor State Executive Council announced a policy in August 1991 requiring estate owners to implement house ownership schemes for their workers, the policy is voluntary rather than mandatory and most plantation owners have not been observing it.

In January 1999, I met two informants, one an estate Senior Conductor who has risen from the ranks of having been a tapper and another retired oil-palm estate worker, who gave me details of the house ownership scheme implemented in the Pal Melayu region by the Sime Darby¹³ group of

plantation owners (a Malaysian Corporation). The Senior Conductor belongs to Selangor River Estate and the retired worker to Tennamaram Estate. The scheme in both the estates was similar in details; because of its location near Sungei Buloh in a vacant area away from the estate, the former (Selangor River Estate scheme) was known as Sungei. Buloh Housing Scheme. The details of the Tennamaram Estate House Ownership Scheme are as follows:

House measurement:	40'x80'
Total Cost of house:	\$M 10,500
Company's Contribution:	\$M 500
Down payment:	\$M 3,000
Monthly payment:	\$M 63.30 per month
(over 15 years)	
Loan from government:	\$M 7,000

fund at 5% interest

It is difficult to provide a precise qualitative picture of the mobility and well-being associated with the joining of the estate house ownership scheme, but I would like to reproduce qualitative evidence gathered by interview with M. Subramaniam, the retired oil palm worker from Tennamaram estate.

M. Subramaniam (EGO) was born in Malaysia, of parents who were Public Works Department workers, in 1937. He belongs to the Parayan caste. His parents relocated to the Tennamaram Estate after retirement from the PWD in 1957. EGO and his wife began working life as oil palm workers on this estate. They have eight children, 4 boys and 4 girls. Of the two married sons, one is an electrical engineer in a factory near Kuala Lumpur. He was formerly lecturer in a technical institute. The second married son works in a finance company. Of the two unmarried sons, living with EGO, one is learning automobile engineering and the other is like a priest (archekar) under apprenticeship to a gurukkal. Of the two married daughters, one works in a factory for TV assembly and the other is a housewife. One unmarried daughter is working as a nurse in the estate clinic and the second one is studying the UPM at the university.

EGO is proud of the accomplishments of his children but is conscious of his own efforts involved in their education and training. Although both he and his wife were estate workers their earnings were meagre. Therefore, says EGO, in 1972 he left the job on the estate and went to Pahang where he became a contractor. From there he went to Gemas and then to

Singapore. In Singapore he worked initially as a labourer on a housing estate and then as an oil drill worker at the port. He also did a stint of ship repairing. All through this time his wife and children stayed on in Tennamaram Estate and his wife continued to work. EGO sent money to his family and visited them twice or thrice every month. EGO has studied upto Standard 7th (Tamil) and up to Form 2 in the Secondary School (Malay). Later both he and his wife studied in the night school. EGO attributes his sound educational and economic status to proper planning including the joining and completion of the House Ownership Scheme. He also points to the influence of devotional songs and other religious literature in Tamil, which he made available to his children from an early age. Lord Murugan is their family-deity. (See plate 1).



Plate 1. M. Subramaniam and his wife, Tennamaaram Estate, 29th January 1999

The above case is fairly typical of the mobility aspirations and planning (therefore 'proactive' factors) among house owners in the Pal Melayu region. However, as pointed out earlier, only a

very small percentage of those who have stayed back on the estates have been provided with housing under schemes like the one above. The majority of Tamilians still residing on the estates therefore rate lowest on the scale of scattering and dynamics of the last thirty years.

A useful way of looking at the social dynamics among Tamilians working on estates graduating from the proletarian status to that of house owners is to discern a shift from the *gemeinschaft* of the earlier community life to the *gesellschaft* of an associational pattern of living, where community and neighborhood ties are not solely determined on primordial (kinship and recruiting kangany) bases. An even more powerful and pervasive move in the same direction is the membership of Peoples' Credit Cooperative Society, Batang Berjuntai, by an increasing number of estate workers in the Pal Melayu region. However, as we propose to show, even this move is community-oriented, reflecting the long socialization of the people into estate *gemeinschaft*, rather than being individualistic. The following is a brief account of the present status, founding and expansion of People's Credit Cooperative Society (in Malay, 'Koperasi Kredit Rakyat Berhad' or KKR for short) to highlight its role in promoting self reliance among its members through collective self help mechanisms introduced initially by an outside agency¹⁴.

As on 31 December 1997, the KKR was organised in 34 communities with a total membership of 1924. Its total savings stood at \$M 1,280,127.40 with outstanding loans at \$M 694,028.56 and of total loans availed since inception at \$M 2.3 million. It owns a single-storey building and one acre of land in Batang Berjuntai. Since 1985 onwards it has had no outside funding.

The founding of KKR in the Batang Berjuntai region as a pioneering Cooperative Credit Society in Malaysia goes back to 1970 when four persons Fr. C, Fatimah, John & Luke, came to Getah Estate's (a pseudonym for the Java Selangor Estate) local parish church training centre to show a film to estate workers. The film was about how credit unions helped to develop people in the Fiji Islands. Even before the screening of the film, which enthused a large number of people on Getah Estate, some of the estate workers were known to this group of promoters (members of the parish social action group) because they had started a tuition class for the estate's children and a savings scheme among them. In 1970, a few days after the movie showing which generated the demand for a credit union among the adults of Getah Estate, seven sessions of about two hours duration each were conducted for the people, all of whom were estate workers. These sessions were held at night to suit their convenience. The course touched upon the rationale of credit unions,

management and simple accounting. This is now known as the pre-membership course. The first credit union was formed on the Getah Estate in 1971 with 33 members.

Finance for the first projects was obtained in the form of seed money from a religious congregation through the parish priest. To ensure continuity of its projects, the group also tapped other foreign sources of funding. It was able to get some funds for three years (1972-74) for the salaries of one full-timer and two part timers and for promotion, training and education programmes.

The need for more training was badly felt by the group. Two of the group's members were sent to Searsolin in the Philippines for further training in credit unions in 1971. Prior to this in 1970, three members had already been to Bangalore in South India for a course in social action. Although the starting point of the programmes of the group was economic, they now wanted to offer an integrated programme rather than just an economic one. The group also started to popularise its idea of a credit union among the neighbouring estates. A seminar for youth on economic cooperation was held with representatives from seven estates. Three of these estates later extended invitations to the promoters to speak on the subject to their people. As a result two other credit unions were formed (Plate 2).



Plate 2. With workers of the People's Credit Cooperative Society, Batang Berjuntai 7.1.99

Further expansion of the credit union was hampered by law. To have a legal status, all organizations, associations and bodies have to be registered with the government. Under the Thrift and Loan Cooperative Law, the Getah Credit Cooperative Society Limited was registered in October 1974. The Society was given a five-mile radius for operation. In its early phases the Society was heavily dependent on support of the parish priest, the availability of paltry funds from foreign sources and the activities of the promoters. From 1974 to 1977 its membership stagnated at 42 members. The two other cooperatives were also not successful. Sometime in 1976, however, three members of the group decided to come together for a review and were able to identify two lessons. Firstly, they could no longer function as a church or parish-based organisation and secondly, that a priest should not be the leader but an advisor only. These three transferred their office out of the parish premises into a small rented one-room office in town, which cost them M\$40 a month. This move marked in a symbolic way the 'breaking away' of the group from dependency towards self-reliance. In the meantime, both membership and volunteers for promotional work showed an increase. Three new credit cooperatives were organised.

However, the real spurt in the activities of the society and its growth towards the KKR came in 1979 when the Batang Berjuntai Credit Cooperative Society became part of a national cooperative movement by joining the Credit Union Promotion (CUP) Club. It now had an extended radius of operation of twenty-five miles. Because of the good performance of the Society in subsequent years, its area of operation was extended to cover the state of Selangor in 1982 and its name changed to Koperasi Kredit Rakyat (KKR) Berhad, Batang Berjuntai. This was the biggest leap taken by the Society, which now came to be regarded as the pioneer cooperative credit society in the whole of Malaysia (Plate 3).



Plate 3. People's Credit Cooperative Society office, Batang Berjuntai 7.1.99

The above history of the growth and expansion of KKR should not, however, gloss over certain facts, which restrict its range and area of operation besides giving rise to internal conflicts. The poverty of rural people, especially the estate workers, is the chief constraining factor. For example, at the annual general meeting of the Society in 1981, the delegates adopted a resolution to appeal

to the Registrar of Cooperatives for permission to amend the by-laws. The Society had so far been operating under a single by-law for credit cooperatives only. It was then proposed that a multi-purpose by-law (like that of multi-purpose cooperative society) should replace the existing arrangement. It would have allowed the members as an organization to legally venture into other cooperative projects. But this move was not successful. To quote Lim Chin Chin's informant,

However, we have remained a credit cooperative because we do not have enough savings yet. We must not rush. We must move slowly, according to the pace of the people. This is, after all, a people's cooperative and they must be able to run it themselves. We are not like the other organisations where they take money from the people and the people have no say or participation in the organisation. No, we are not like that! (Lim Chin Chin 1983: 86).

Even earlier, the society was hamstrung by financial scarcity. In 1973 - soon after the Society's formation in Getah Estate - it was found infeasible to give each member a loan of M\$3000 as down payment for a worker-owned housing scheme. And though one of RKK's active promoters, Mr. Jankey Raman, gave an enthusiastic interview in 1984 (Malaysia Straits Times February 15, 1984) about the successful working of the RKK and 'the tappers breaking out of debt cycle', within four years the same gentleman was completely disillusioned, and complained of 'loan payments exceeding salaries' (New Straits Times, September 8, 1988). He broke away from KKR and formed a non-profit company called Comdari (Community Development and Research Institute) Bhd., to 'carry out a survey on the socioeconomic conditions of 10 estates and aiming to identify unemployed young people for self-help projects'. The blurb for his interview said, 'they are not a workers union, not a consumer association and not a charitable organization, although Comdari comprises elements of all three' (New Straits Times, may 11, 1988)¹⁵. The primary objective of groups like this was, like that of the Human Rights groups, poverty alleviation, particularly among (Indian) estate workers.

The RKK is a good example of what Partha Chatterjee, in another context, has called 'social capital and civic community' (Chatterjee, P. 1998:280). In so far as people in the Pal Melayu region themselves and this ethnographer trace some of roots of the cooperative credit society on estates to the rotating credit associations among the plantation proletariat (Jain 1970: 164-174), the RKK epitomizes the growth of *gesellschaft* from *gemeinschaft* and a simultaneous co-existence of the two (for the latter point see Worsley et al. 1978: 342). However, this mechanism, both in its form and substance, remains a feature of the community life of the poor and an apt illustration of what the anthropologist Sol Tax has called 'penny capitalism' (Tax, S, 1953). The association between institutions like the RKK and poverty is singularly revealed by the fact that it is

primarily those Indian Malaysians continuing to be estate workers and those of the lower caste and income-groups living on estate fringes and town slum settlements that comprise the bulk of its membership. These are precisely the populations and communities which directly respond adversely to inflationary pressures in the wider economy. The only kind of security net available to them is the *gemienschaft* of kinship, caste and neighbourhood or the patronage of a settlement developer like Nizam Krishnan (see below). Their persistence confirms the existence of an Indian proletariat low down on the scale of scattering and dynamics in our sense. There is little evidence of entrepreneurship, a condition that some authors (cf. Jeyakumar 1993) generalise for the Indian poor in Malaysia as a whole. The same body of opinion also condemns - unfairly and without substantiation in our view - the growth of the individual and small group entrepreneurship as a solution to the problem of the Indian poor. As we propose to show in the following sections, individual and small group entrepreneurship is both a present phenomenon and a future development among a good proportion of the increasing number of Malaysian Indians in the Pal Melayu region who have cut themselves loose from the estates.

Ex-Estate Workers in Pal Melayu Region

The largest number of my respondents during the revisit fieldwork belonged to former estate worker households in the Pal Melayu region. In terms of geographical location within the region they could be divided into two broad categories: (a) those settled in *tamans* (new residential settlements) across the Kuala Selangor-Batang Berjuntai Road, facing old-established estates, and (b) those settled in the older towns of Kuala Selangor and Batang Berjuntai. A common occupational feature of the majority of employed ex-estate labourers in category (a) and for a smaller number in category (b) was their newly achieved status of blue-collar workers in industries - mainly electronics, textiles, and construction. These industrial workers were both men and women, a gender distribution that is reminiscent of their past as estate labourers¹⁶. The trend of gravitating towards blue-collar occupations from jobs requiring manual labour (tapping, harvesting, collecting and weeding) on estates is also borne out by macro-level statistics for working class Indians in Malaysia. At the latter level there are two indicators of this trend. Firstly, there has been a considerable fall, from 45.5% in 1967 to 21.8% in 1980, in the number of Indian estate workers as a proportion of total estate worker population (Puthuchery, M. 1993). Second, the share of Indians in employment as production workers has increased from 8.6% in 1970 to 11.4% in 1980 (Sivalingam, A 1993: 390). This mobility within the working class category is a prominent feature of non-estate settlements of Indian Malaysians in the Pal Melayu region. This is a reflection largely of

proactive decisions to leave residence on the estates. Further, in all my interviews with respondents in categories (a) and (b) of these settlers, their 'emic' (i.e. insider) view emphasised the positive aspect of this migration and change. Objectively too, judged against certain primary indices of socio-economic change and mobility, education, general well being (including health status), gender relations and recreational activities, the ex-estates workers of the Pal Melayu region register development and an evolutionary thrust.



Plate 4. Nizam Krishnan, Kampong Java Selangor 29.1.99

With this category of the Indian population in the forefront, we may again pose the question about their scattering and dynamics, viz, what is the pattern of mix here between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* and of the transition from the one to the other? Let us note the variations in this respect, and to do so return to our sub-classification (a) and (b) . In category (a) we place all those ex-estate workers who have bought land and built houses in the area across the Batang Berjuntai-Kuala Selangor Road fronting the estates. Here there is a mix of housing between property

developers like Nizam Krishnan (Plate 4) and those who have been patronized by them. Kampong Java Selangor or Kampong Nizam is a good example. Here class stratification is steep between property-developers and settlers. The latter are poor people, usually of Adi-Dravida castes. But even among such group-settlements, there are more egalitarian communities like those of Taman Srikota developed by a small cooperative called Koprasi Kota. This cooperative was started in 1974 by some enterprising workers on Pal Melayu, including school teachers Pachiappan and Ponnusamy. Koprasi Kota obtained 23 acres of land in the vicinity of Holmwood Estate, sufficient to build 194 homes. The chairman of this cooperative (Krishnan alias Muniandy) seemed very much a 'first among equals' (*primus inter pares*). Unlike Nizam Krishnan, his house and compound in Taman Sri Kota was not much larger or ostentatious than the dwellings of other members. Also the settlers were by and large higher caste and educated people, though the cooperative did have members of the Adi-Dravida castes also. The cooperative had about a thousand members in the late seventies but gradually people moved away after making money on land and house speculation, and in 1999 it had only 400 members.

The above is an example of what we many call collective or group entrepreneurship. But the majority of ex-estate taman dwellers are individual entrepreneurs. The typical life-history of such people is as follows. With the shrinking of estate acreages beginning in the 1970s, there were retrenchments on the large estates. At the same time plots of land were sold off by the large estates to property developers, cooperatives as well as to individuals. The individuals had received pensions from their employers and along with their other savings, these were invested in buying up plots of land. Gradually they built up houses through loans from banks. Not only were these people 'proactive' settlers but they seemed to be flourishing in a material sense. Their standards of living are a far cry from the proletarian status of estates labourers. Besides younger family members becoming blue-collar workers in factories, the middle-aged and old ex-workers have taken up self-employment as flower-growers, shopkeepers and cattle rearers. As we shall see later, they did not have to go through a phase of slum-dwelling in government-provided longhouses. To that extent, the taman -dwellers have certainly attained socio-economic mobility.

As one proceeds from category (a) to category (b) viz, migrants from estates to nearby towns of Batang Berjuntai and Kuala Selangor, nearby towns of Batang Berjuntai and Kuala Selangor, the story is one of even faster growth of individual entrepreneurship among ex-estate workers¹⁷. To illustrate this I present two detailed life-histories. Both these informants were among my closest associates in the fieldwork that I conducted on Pal Melayu in 1961-62. Starting from a common

base - that of post-Standard VI education through Tamil medium and English medium education respectively - Muniandy is a successful retired Tamil School headmaster and Ganesan is a successful businessman.

Teacher Muniandy

He lives in his own house in Taman Mubibah on the fringe of Batang Berjuntai. While he was still a rubber tapper on Pal Melayu, he finished Standard VII (Tamil) in 1957. In 1959 he went to India with his father (Arokkiam) who owned some land in the village and there Muniandy continued to study at Thiruvathur upto SSLC. Before his results came out Muniandy returned to Malaysia, but his Indian diploma was not recognized in Malaysia. He completed the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE) in the Government school in the Pal Melayu region. He obtained the Certificate in 1965 and then got the job of temporary teacher in the Tamil School in Kampong Bahru Estate. From 1967 to 1970 he lived in Tanjong Malim, Perak for Tamil teacher's training (although the training was interrupted for 6 months in 1969 because of May 13 ethnic conflict in that year). Muniandy obtained the job of a permanent teacher in Riverside Estate of the Pal Melayu region where he worked until 1980. All this while he continued to increase his qualifications, obtaining the Malaysian Certificate of Education (equivalent to Senior Cambridge) in English in 1971 and the SPM for Bahasa Malaysia in 1973. In 1974 he even tried to take the HSE exam but could not get through. Up to 1983 he was an ordinary teacher, but on January 1 1984 he was promoted to Headmaster of the Tamil School in Minyak Estate. He was transferred to Sungei Tinggi Estate in September 1987 and remained there until 30 November 1995. Incidentally both Minyak and Sungei Tinggi Estates belong to the same company as Pal Melayu. In 1996 he was transferred to Bukit Rotan Estate (where he bought a new car) and he retired on 16th September 1997.

Muniandy has done well economically but basically through state provision rather than by private business enterprise. He now owns four houses and one acre of land, all in Malaysia. His two-storey house in Banting is let out as are the two houses in Batang Berjuntai. He lives in the fourth house. All these houses were bought through government loan obtained at 4% interest. He still pays back the loan at M\$500 per month from his pension. He owns two cars, both through government loans, which he repaid before his retirement in 1997.

He has been a reluctant participant in local and regional politics; the only office he held briefly was as Assistant Chairman of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). He has been more active in what he describes as social rather than political public activities. He was Chairman of the Kuala Selangor branch of the Malaysia Bell Club (a youth organization somewhat in-between Boy Scouts and Rotary) from 1972 to 1978 while teaching in the Tamil School of Selangor River Estate.

On the other hand, he has been much more involved in religious organizations. He is still the Vice-Chairman of the Kuala Selangor branch of Malaysian Hindu Sangam and Vice-chairman of the Batang Berjuntai Thandayudapani Temple Committee. In fact, alongside his acquisition of educational qualifications he has been steadily building up his knowledge of Hindu religion. From 1975 to 1971 he undertook religious training (Yoga, Meditation, Lectures, Prayer songs etc.) for ten days every December organized by the Sivananda Ashram in Batu Caves. This training is meant to impart knowledge of Hinduism and then spread it widely in the area one comes from. Between 1975 and 1999 Muniandy has lectured on Hinduism, sermonized from Ramayana and Mahabharata, officiated at Navaratri celebrations and taught mantras (hymns) and prayers to youngsters in nearly half-a -dozen estates and towns of the Pal Melayu region. He has been a staunch adherent of the Hindu Sangam, which came into conflict with another Hindu association, namely, Mahamandram (cf. Ganesans's life history). The Hindu Sangam has close connection with the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. Every three to five years Muniandy goes to India with his family for pilgrimage.

Although not himself active in politics, Muniandy is friendly with Sivalingam, the sitting assemblyman for Selangor State from MIC in the Kuala Selangor region. Sivaligam is the same caste as Sami Vellu, the national chief of the MIC, viz., he is a Thevar (Muniandy too is a Gounder, non-Brahman). Sivalingam became a property developer in Padang Java (which he named as Kampong Karuppan after his father's name), made a lot of money and contributed funds to the party. He represents the new brand of Tamil politicians, part of the post-estate worker syndrome of Indians in the area. When I asked Muniandy if the caste background of Sivalingam (his being of the Thevar caste) was an asset, he responded that it was of some help. In fact, if an Indian politician is clever his caste background is not of any great significance, but if he is not so clever then his (higher) caste is of help.

As an illustration of someone from the lower caste of Barber having made good in the world, Muniandy gave the example of Moglali Krishnan, who is a successful tour-operator in Kuala Selangor. This man got into land deals through cooperatives in the area and made a lot of money (even Muniandy lent him money). Two of his sons are studying medicine in Manipal, India. Krishnan arranged for Muniandy and his wife to tour Bangkok for five days in a group. They stayed in a four star hotel and paid only M\$900 per head inclusive of return airfares. Muniandy is now planning to go with a group to China (a week's tour costing M\$1600) and wishes to travel to Australia as well. He advised me also to contact Krishnan in Kuala Selangor to make a trip to Medan (Indonesia) where there were many Indians (Tamils). Here we see that trips to India are rather in the background and those to other neighbouring countries exhibit the newly-found deterritorialised interests and aspirations of ex-estate workers.

About the impact of Prabhakarans's Sri Lankan (LTTE) movement in Malaysia, Muniandy started with the usual disclaimers but then admitted that having a Land of the Tamils would be a matter of pride for all Tamilians. The pride in the language and of a locality where this language was supreme is why Muniandy thinks there is great support for Prabhakaran and his movement among Malaysian Tamils. When I mentioned Nepal as the only Hindu state in the world, Muniandy agreed that this was a matter of pride for all Hindus everywhere. Thus language and religion were two great sources of pride for Indians and especially for the diasporics.

Ganesan, son of Ponnang Kangany

When I first met Ganesan in 1963, he was living on Pal Melayu and a student of Form 2 in the Sultan Abdul Aziz lower secondary school in Kampong Kuantan. (In those early days because of my poor spoken Tamil, he was one of my best interpreters in fieldwork.) By 1964, the school had moved to Kuala Selangor, just below the hill, from where Ganesan finished schooling, getting the SPM certificate (Malaysian Certificate of Education, equivalent to Senior Cambridge) in the English medium. Since he only passed in Grade 3, he retook this exam in 1966 but again got only Grade 2. He then tried to get a teaching job but was unsuccessful in several interviews. Meanwhile in 1967 he got the job of a School Clerk (Grade 1) in Kampong Kuantan Primary School.

He gave up efforts to gain further education qualifications after the race riots of May 13, 1969, and tried to find another way to remedy the failure.



Plate 5. Restoran Lucky, Batang Berjuntai, February 1999

Ganesan had always had a knack for business, so he started a small restaurant in Batang Berjuntai in partnership with Maniam, also of Pal Melayu (Plate 5). Nine other people joined in the venture and each contributed M\$100. With a capital of about M\$4000, Madras Café was launched. Ganesan kept his job as a clerk in Kampong Kuantan during the daytime but at night he would relieve Maniam, who was now a full time worker in the restaurant having given up his job as a tapper on Pal Melayu. The business premises were rented for two years from an Indian Muslim businessman. In those days only the Indian Muslims and Chinese held businesses in towns, not the estate working Tamilians. After two years of running the Madras Café, Ganesan got the hang of doing business. He held 20% of the shares in the business while Maniam held the majority. In early 1970s the partners moved the premises to where the present Lucky Restaurant is located. They rented it from the

Chinese shopkeeper who had built it up. The Chinese owner was the one from whom Ganesan and Maniam had been buying provisions for the restaurant.

While their joint business was doing well, Maniam and Ganesan became kinsmen when Ganesan married Maniam's wife's brother's daughter on 6 September 1970. His wife Parwati (daughter of Subramaniam, a topper on Division 3 of the Nigel Gardener Estate belonging to the same company as Pal Melayu) was not an estate worker. She gave birth to two daughters in 1971 and 1974 after Ganesan had bought a house in Kampong Sungei Rambai on 3 August 1971. He let out this house until 1975 because during this period his father (who had retired as a kangany on Pal Melayu) and mother, still working as a tapper, lived in the labour lines of Pal Melayu. But in 1975, after selling his house in Kampong Sungei Rambai, Ganesan moved out of Pal Melayu with his parents, wife and children to the newly constructed house in Batang Berjuntai (where he is living now). Ganesan's reason for this move is that he did not wish his children to grow up in the estate conditions. He took the decision to retire his mother early from Pal Melayu even though she had to lose her gratuity.

In the early 1980s the three partners (Ganesan, Maniam and Kesavan) bought out the shares of the others, but this new partnership ran into trouble. According to Ganesan, Maniam got into 'bad habits' and neglected the business altogether. A good business started losing out because of mismanagement. At this stage, Ganesan's younger brother, Velu, who was a messenger in the Indian Overseas Bank (now the Bank of Commerce) in Batang Berjuntai tried to buy up the business and the premises, through a bank-loan, for M \$ 150,000.

Since Maniam was the leading shareholder in starting the business (now known as Lukcy Restoran), he was known as 'Lucky Maniam'. But soon he lost his creditworthiness, credibility and reputation, which was all expropriated by Velu. Lucky Restoran was the first Indian restaurant in Batang Berjuntai. Velu chose to live in the shophouse above the premises. Ganesan's wife, Parvati, decided to join the restaurant as a full-time worker. It is very much a family business in the sense that Velu's wife and children as well as Ganesan's wife and children all cook and work for the restaurant. Only Ganesan, because he is a government servant (a clerk in the Tamil School) is a silent partner. The day to day business side is looked after fully by Velu. However, Ganesan has started a flourishing

catering business from Lucky Restoran. He says he needs about \$4000 per month to cover the overheads He gets only M\$1000 per month as salary. Velu pays M\$1000 a month to his wife, Parvati, for Lucky Restoran work. The remaining M\$2000 is earned by Ganesan from the profits of his catering business. Ganesan has been a pace-setter in that business. There are now 13 TAMILIAN caterers in the Batang Berjuntai-Rawang-Batu Arang area. There are also 7 Indian restaurants in Batang Berjuntai, all started after the successful launching of Lucky Restaurant in the 1970s.

Ganesan's first and only son so far was born on 2 January 1981. His father, Ponnang Kangany, died soon after the birth of his grandson. Ganesan's wife had an operation after his fourth child died. Velu's first son also died.

Ganesan's economic activities mesh in with his social, religious and political career in the Pal Melayu region. He points out that the estate people of Pal Malaya during the time I first came to know them had a very low level of religion (they worshipped only the village deities) and their participation in wider celebrations like the Tamil Tirunal was more social than religious. As he moved out of the confined world of the rubber estate into the town and engaged in entrepreneurial activities, Ganesan discovered a much wider (Great Tradition) face of Hindu religion. Subsequently, the lead taken by individuals like him and Teacher Muniandy led to the introduction of higher, more sophisticated, forms of religion even on estates. Earlier (i.e., during the early 1960s) higher forms of Hinduism were the monopoly of Ceylon Tamils who officiated as priests in urban centres of Malaysia. (We have already noticed how teacher Muniandy attended religious Camps in Batu Caves). In Ganesan's case his membership of a Hindu organization called Malaysia Hindhu (SIC) Dharma Mamandram was decisive. Its national president was Arutchelvar Sankarandasan Sangaratna Lt. Kol (B) K. Sathaya, KMN, AMN, PSC, or Colonel Sathaya, as he was referred to by Ganesan. He inducted him into 10 day courses for teachers of Devaram (Tamil religious classes). This influence gave a new lease of life to religion. When Ganesan came to Batang Berjuntai at the age of 25 or 26, he was made Secretary of Sri Thandayudapani Temple Committee (a temple dedicated to the Great Tradition deity Subramaniam). Later he became its Treasurer. In the late 1980s he stepped down from the position of an office-bearer but remained a member of the Committee.

While at the local level Ganesan has been involved in the religious activities at Thandayudapani Temple, at the regional and national levels he has been active in Mamandram. His association with Hindu organizations is of a conservative nature. Ganesan says he looks at Hinduism from a personal level, looks inside, and is therefore not an activist like Rajo (a Tamil school teacher in Batang Berjuntai). For this reason Ganesan is quite involved in the ritual life of the temple, including the teaching of mantras (hymns) to small children and cooperating with the gurukkal priest (who is a young Brahmin from Tamil Nadu hired by the Temple Committee). In fact in the early 1980s Ganesan became the Secretary and the Muthukumaran Gurukhal, the Chairman, of Kuala Selangor District Branch of Mamandram. From 1984 to 1993 Ganesan remained the National General Secretary of Mamandram and was succeeded by Dr. Rajendran of Kuala Lumpur. As the National General Secretary, Ganesan traveled widely. He visited all the prominent estates in West Malaysia and spread the Mamandram in rural areas. Because of this religious organizational activity, says Ganesan explicitly, he was not at all active in the Cooperative Movement. The organizational activity brought him into contact with people at all levels (by which he means Tamilians in West Malaysia) including Prof. Marimuthu. This enabled him to play a part in 'Hindu religion, language and community'. Thus he was handling religion and politics in tandem (see below). Above all, this enabled him to find answers to his own destiny and to mature.

Ganesan commented on his changing role vis-a-vis Col. Satayam of Mamandram. From being a disciple, he became associate, manager and then independent. In the last stage he realized that Col. Satayam was using his position in the religious organization to gain financially. His position in the organization enabled him to finance his son's medical education. All this, says Ganesan, made him introspective. Muragan became his chosen deity. He cut himself loose from the patronage of Col. Satyam, but he came under the influence of one Pachiappan 'who was the instrument chosen to answer my inner needs'. Pachiappen introduced Ganesan to the teaching of Pamanswamigal. Ganesan also devoted time to self-study; with new knowledge came new messages and he learnt much about the scientific basis of religion by reading books by Dr. Kadir Ibrahim. All this while Ganesan engaged himself in doing grass-roots work on estates through local branches of Mamandram. He ran the religious service centre in Pal Melayu every Tuesday.

Ganesan avers that politics and money-making in his case have been within the limits of his personality (which, he says, is outgoing and activist to a limited extent), his location in the familial and kinship networks and his religious frame of mind. While it is obvious that his work through religious organizations has always had a political edge, he has also had skirmishes with local and regional politics directly. In 1981, he became Secretary of the Pal Melayu Branch of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). His business-partner and kinsman Maniam (Lucky' Maniam) became the Chairman. They were opposed by a clique headed by Muniandy (alias Krishnan) and Pachiappan. At the national level this faction (Ganesan and Manian Vs. Muniandy and Pachiappan) was aligned to the factionalism between Sami Vellu and Manickvasagam respectively. In 1978, the Sami Vellu faction had lost because then Manickvasagam was the ruling side. But when Manickvasagam died, Sami Vellu came to power though he had to counter Kanthan, Manickvasagam's brother. At that time the Kuala Selangor branch of the MIC was a large one. In order to destabilize this branch and disempower office-holders loyal to the Manickvasagam faction, Sami Vellu broke the Kuala Selangor Branch into six branches, of which Batang Berjuntai was among the largest with 12 delegates. At a crucial election for Selangor state Sami Vellu beat Kanthan. Ganesan was party to Sami Vellu's victory and he described in detail how, at a strategic Manickvasagam faction meeting to discuss the election strategy being held under the cooperative society aegis by Muniandy alias Krishnan and Pachiappan, a man called Boniface smuggled in Sami Vellu, who then used the secret information received to mastermind his victory. Eventually Sami Vellu became the President of the MIC. At the regional level a branch was created at Sungei Rambai perhaps jointly for Pal Melayu and Sungei Rambai village). As reward for their loyalty Maniam was made Chairman and Ganesan, the Secretary of this branch. From there the two went up to the State level, Maniam as Vice-Chairman of Economic Committee and Ganesan as a Committee Member for State Youth. At the age of 27 Ganesan received the national award of PJK, Another political reward was that both Maniam and Ganesan received the Sultan's medals. Maniam became the Divisional Chairman of Kuala Selangor MIC and also nominated a local council member representing Kuala Selangor. Kuala Selangor MIC now has 96 branches. The social role of these branches is much reduced; related people become branch members and elections are seldom held. There are approximately 100 supporters per branch and a member pays \$3.00 per year.

Although Ganesan himself says that he hasn't been active in politics nonetheless, both as a successful entrepreneur who has prestige in the community (for example he is invited to negotiate in engagement ceremonies or *niccayatambulam* as a 'big man' or *periyamanusan*) and because of his active career in religion, there is ample linkage between his social and political activities. As one of the first to leave Pal Melayu and settle down in Batang Berjuntai Ganesan's fortunes have been waning and waxing alongside those of his regional and national political patrons. For instance, the Kuala Lumpur advocate Mahalingam, who was the elected assemblyman from Kuala Selangor and one-time close ally of Semi Vellu, spearheaded the building the Thandayudapani temple in Batang Berjuntai. Ganesan ingratiated himself with Mahalingam and thus got elected as a member of the temple committee of which Mahalingam was Chairman. However, currently Mahalingam is only a Senator and no longer a powerful leader of the MIC. His place has been taken by Sivalingam, who is the present sitting assemblyman for MIC from the Kuala Selangor region. Sivalingam represents the new breed of grass-roots Tamil politicians in the Pal Melayu region. He is a Thevar by caste, the same as Sami Vellu. He became a property-developer in Padang Jawa where a number of ex-estate workers settled and bought houses. (In fact Sivalingam christened the locality 'Kampong Kuruppan' after his father's name). He made a lot of money as property developer and contributed funds to the MIC. Ganesan also lost out in regional politics with the takeover of Mahalingam by Sivalingam.

Our discussion so far has illustrated (a) that economic conditions or market forces have impinged directly on the adaptation to new surroundings by ex-estate labour and (b) that the end of insulation and isolation of living on estates has opened up the arena for linking their lives with undercurrents of politics in the region and the nation. These trends are put into stronger relief when we consider the fourth and final category of Tamilians affected by the scattering and dynamics.

Ex-Estate Workers in Squatter Settlements near Klang and Kuala Lumpur

Studies of Indian squatter settlements in Peninsular Malaysia are few and far between (cf. Rajoo, R. 1985 and 1993). In the following account our endeavor is to trace some of those individuals and families who have become squatter settlers in Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley after being born and brought up in the Pal Melayu region and migration to industrial areas therefrom. Secondly, we

are interested in the mutual interactions and perceptions between those who are in the Pal Melayu region and those settled in the urban peripheries, namely, in Sungei Way and Padang Jawa near Klang and Kampong Muniandy, Kampong Gandhi and Kampong Bengali near Kuala Lumpur. Our field data from these settlements are neither as detailed nor as intimate as from the Pal Melayu region since it is based only on a few field visits to these areas from Kuala Selangor.

People from the Pal Melayu region moved to these new settlements, firstly because they did not want to do hard labour on estates but preferred the more comfortable work in factories and, secondly, because many new industries were opened in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur and Klang. Many of the squatters were initially allotted accommodation in government-built longhouses (*rumah pangang*) and allotted a number to be eventually moved into modern low-cost houses under a squatters' resettlement programme introduced by the State Development Corporation. The local MIC leaders cultivated the squatters for votes. Quite a few of the illegal (*hara*) houses had been renovated and they looked solid and well-appointed. The front portions of most these settlements were inhabited by Malays. Rajoo Rangasamy, who had done fieldwork in Kampong Gandhi (pseudonym Kampong Kasturi), accompanied me and remarked how since 1981-82 a change had come about (concretizaion of illegal housing and building of metalled roads).

In Taman Sri Santosa, Kuala Lumpur, live Ganesan's *pangali* ; all of them have left the Pal Melayu region. The following genealogical extract (see figure 4) shows their location and jobs (as well as kinship with Ganesan).

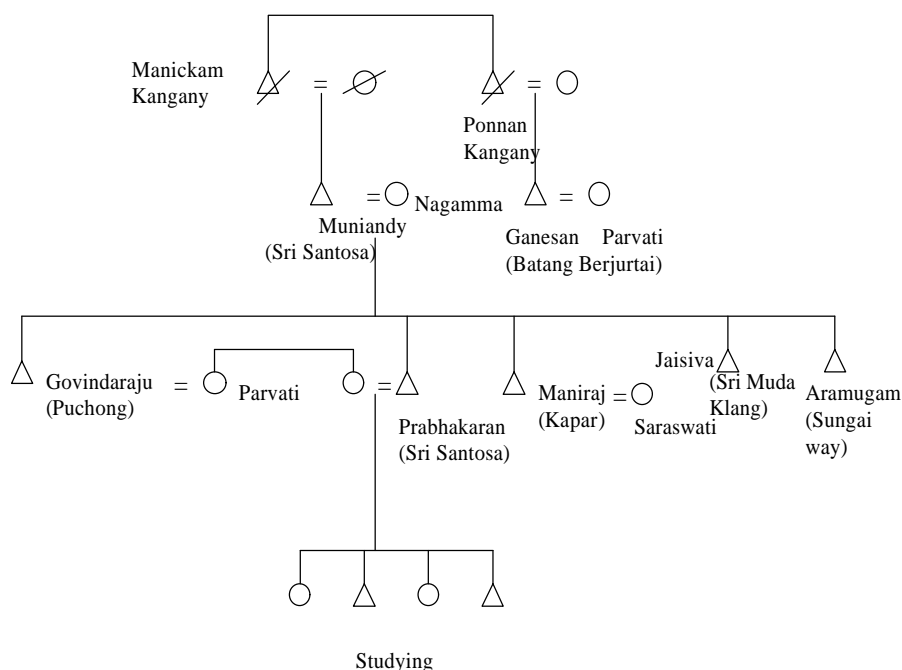


Figure 4

Muniandy is a watchman in a factory. Prabhakaran has a lorry and is in transport business. His wife is a factory worker. Similarly, all of Muniandy's sons who were settled outside Sri Santosa are in the transport business, having taxies or lorries, while their wives are factory workers. The older women look after the children while they are in school. Sometimes the younger women run small business. The ties of all these people to India are very tenuous: they have bought no land or properties there but about 60 to 70 per cent of them have visited India. None of their relatives are working on estates. Even marriages with Indian men or women are few and far between, except that the number of incoming Indian wives is larger than outgoing Malaysian Tamil girls. Marriages among relatives are still common. Many festive customs are observed even in flat-living, viz., sugarcane was bought at Pongal. Secular festivals like Tamil Tirunal are not observed here, hence no solidarity like that of estate workers. Life has improved as regards financial and economic conditions but the older people regret that they have no land to cultivate. They also complain of having to cope with only television and talking as recreation, and that there is a generation gap. According to information provided by this family at least 40% of the ex-estate working Indians are still in squatter settlements. Although it takes two generations to move from estates to flats, it takes only one generation to move from squatter settlements to flats. There is hardly any inter-ethnic mixing in social activities but within the Indian group, neighbors join in life-cycle rituals. There is a temple, which provides some sort of focus for Indian activities. The family's move to this place was the joint result of government help and the activities of private developers.

Kampong Padang Jawa is another locality, near Klang, where in the midst of a densely populated industrial area a number of migrants from Pal Melayu have built houses on a joint grant of land. There are no individual titles yet. The land has been sold to the present occupants by Malays to whom the government had allotted it (as part of the affirmative action policy for 'sons of the soil'). According to P. Venugopal, son of Doraisamy of Division B in Pal Melayu, there are 41 lots in this locality out of which only 5 are now held by Malays. The rest are all Indian owned. There are so many migrants here from Pal Melayu that the particular street on which Venugopal has built his house is known as 'Pal Melayu Lorong'. Venugopal has relatives in the Pal Melayu region. For example his sister Mariai is the wife of the late Arumugam 'Chetty', the brother of 'Lucky' Maniam. They are all Gounders and he has a large kindred (including his wife's relatives) in the Pal Melayu region. He mentioned with pride his relationship with Periasamy father of Munusamy (the government officer who has received highest mobility among Pal Melayu boys : see later) and with teacher Muniandy. P. Venugopal is a second generation Malaysian-born. He succeeded his father as a Kangany on Pal Melayu while his father (Doraisamy) went back to India and settled in village Damal. Venugopal became a sub-contractor on Pal Melayu itself and invested his life-savings and gratuity there in May 1990. His children (two grown up sons and several daughters) with their mother moved first to Padang Jawa. Venugopal came after his retirement but is still working as a security guard in the RJR tobacco company. His sons, working in Carlberg Beer Co. and running a transport business, live in Taman Santosa. Venugopal has 18 grandchildren. Although life in the new locality is highly impersonal, he doesn't mind it because he came here with all his family. Venugopal came to know about this land from his son who had a job nearby. His son, in turn, negotiated the deal through a teacher who was a land-broker. There is no 'temple facility' here and so the family has its own puja-room.



Plate 6. Sungei Way blocks, 8.2.99

The Indian colony at Sungei Way is probably the most representative of the results of squatters' resettlement programmes introduced by the State Development Corporation. There are several blocks of modern low-cost houses (Plate 6). Let me take the example of Annamalai, the son of Tata Vatiyar ('grandfather teacher' of Pal Melayu) who belongs to the Padyachi caste (his wife is a Gounder). He came to Sungei Way in 1981 before his retirement. Like the case discussed in the previous paragraph, the departure from Pal Melayu was caused by the fact that all his children (one son and six married daughters) were working in industries in this area. His only son Ambalgan started working after leaving school at the Lower Certificate of Education in 1979. He was an active member of the Tamil Youth Bell Club and served as a Secretary for Senator Mahalingam for 10 years. He is now working as a broker and travel agent living in his own house in Batang Berjuntai. Ambalgam accompanied us to his parents house in Sungei Way having informed them of the time of arrival on phone. Apparently, Annamalai's family was rich enough to have a phone and also provided sumptuous rice-and curry vegetarian food for all of us. The only kinsman living nearby is a married daughter of this old couple. Annamalai received the PJK award

(there was a picture in the drawing room) for social work done in the Pal Melayu region. Like the informant in the previous case, he also proudly declared that he has 17 grandchildren (all daughters' children). Again, there is no community temple in the locality and the couple have a puja-room where pictures of Mariamman and Muniswaran are installed. The old couple maintain contacts with India, the wife visited the village last year. But they definitely feel lonely here compared to the estate. There was, they think, more freedom on the estate. The wife especially doesn't like it there. There may be more economic mobility than before, but estate life was more preferable. They have bought land in Bukit Cheraka beside this house and from oil palm in that land they earn about M\$300 to 400 per month. = One of their grandsons is a black belt judo specialist.

While Annamalai and his wife never lived as squatters, one of their Pal Melayu neighbors in the adjoining block in Sungei Way (Madhavan) lived in the squatter settlement just here before buying his present house for M\$18,000 in 1991. He has two rooms plus one store room. Their daughter too is living in the neighbourhood. The husband is an astrologer while she works as a filing clerk in an office. One of their sons is a dispatch clerk in Gombak, Kuala Lumpur and an unmarried daughter is a company secretary. Madhavan's mother, Visalatchi is a widow living with them and suffering from diabetic cataract.

Undoubtedly those ex-estate workers from Pal Melayu who have moved farthest away are also amongst the most economically mobile. The case of Muniandy alias Masilamani son of the late Perumal Kangany of Pal Melayu (ex immigrant from Natal) illustrates this. Masilamani has bought a house in the Sunway locality of Sungei Way near Petaling Jaya. It is low cost government house which cost M\$45,000. He has now converted his two-room house into a four-room apartment. Occupationally he is a technical aircraft executive with Lufthansa. In getting this job he was helped by his educational qualifications up to Form V through schooling in Kuala Selangor while his father was a kangany on Pal Melayu. He has two daughters, one of whom is studying MA in History at the University of Malaysia and the other one is training as a dietician also in Kuala Lumpur.



Plate 7. P. Munusamy in his office, Kuala Lumpur 21.1.99

Fifty-year old P. Munusamy, son of Periasamy Kangany of Pal Melayu, is perhaps the most economically mobile second-generation product from Pal Melayu (Plate 7). He is now Principal Assistant Secretary in the International Division of Ministry of Human Resources, Kuala Lumpur. Born in 1951 in Pal Melayu, Munusamy studied at the Estate Tamil School (1958-63), at the Secondary School in Kampong Kuantan (1964-65) and then, from mid-1965 in the newly opened English medium school in Batang Berjuntai, completing Form V in 1969. During the riots of May 1969 the school was closed for two months at which time his father suggested that the entire family go back to India where Periasamy Kangany bought land in 1970. However, at this stage Munusamy's elder brother, Pachiappan (a clerk on Bukit Rotan Estate), prevailed upon his father not to take that step. Pachiappan also decided to admit Munisamy in a private school for High School Certificate (two-years pre-university course). This was the Vanto Academy run by two Malayali Indians. After 50 per cent discount, Munisamy had to pay a fee of M\$20 per month. His total cost of living in Kuala Lumpur came to about M\$60-70 per month. Munisamy was the first Pal

Melayu resident to enter the university. The MIC gave him a loan of M\$1500 per year for three years. (He has paid back all this amount with interest.) While in Kuala Lumpur he stayed with a Malayali couple, Mr. And Mrs. Fernandes who were the parents of a classmate. He paid them M\$40 per month for his keep. To meet his expenses Munisamy gave private tuition in addition to the loan received from MIC. He recalls that the attitude of Pal Melayu estate staff was absolutely non-supportive. After joining government service, Munisamy helped his parents to move out of the estate and buy a house in a taman opposite Pal Melayu. He and his family visit the parents regularly, one of his sisters is a teacher in the estate primary school and another works as a creche ayah. Munisamy is helping the latter financially to buy a house. He says that he suffers from no inferiority complex because of his estate background and continuing relations with kinsmen on or near estates in the Pal Melayu region. Munisamy has already invested in an apartment in Sepang costing M\$90,000 and a plot of land 40'x80' for M\$40,000. At the age of 27 he married his wife Radha from Kuala Lumpur on 22 January 1978. It was a love-marriage, and they now have a daughter (aged 20 years) and a son (aged 17 years). The family went to the United States fully financed by the government. The daughter is completing her AIA degree and is planning to get the MBA from U.S.A. The son wants to be an engineer.

Analysis and Implications

The four-fold typology of scattering and dynamics affecting the Tamilian population in the Pal Melayu region may be seen to serve a useful analytical purpose. It is our view that much of current writing on the Indians as a 'poverty group' in contemporary peninsular West Malaysia has focussed on situations (1) and (4) of our topology. The Human Rights activists and radical economists have either written about the Indians still living and working on the plantations or who are squatters in the vicinity of large towns some of whom have graduated to the status of flat-dwellers in large blocks of building built up and sold by state corporations and private developers. The middle ground comprising those who have either moved into taman in close vicinity to estates like Pal Melayu and those who have settled in small towns like Kuala Selangor and Batang Berjuntai has not so far been the focus of sociological analysis. It is precisely this regional perspective that we are most qualified to restudy and report on in this discussion of culture and economy in a sector of Southeast Asian Indian diaspora.

I shall revert to the economy towards the conclusion, but let me focus now on aspects of caste, religion and kinship among Tamilians in the Pal Melayu region. By and large Indian scholars,

including former estate-dwellers who are now academics and activists in urban Malaysia, writing on caste among estate workers in Malaysia, have taken an essentialist view of the institution of caste. Related to this essentialist view and its exclusion of a historical and contextual perspective, is their amnesia about the interpretation and use of the institution of caste by active agents in the social field, namely, the population of former estate-dwellers who have chosen and planned to move away from large plantations. Certain situational features need to be firmly kept in view. Firstly, we need to distinguish between the excluded and deprived people of the Adi-Dravida castes living at the sufferance of estates who had been kept in that condition largely by estate management's for their own advantage and the urban and suburban Adi Dravidas who enjoyed a higher socio-economic profile, including monopolies of cleaning and scavenging services in towns. The latter group started with an advantage in adapting to the emancipatory forces unleashed by the break-up of large estates in the region. They had been active participants in municipal committees and had enjoyed considerable economic leverage in the grant of civic contracts. In Batang Berjuntai town, for instance, the Tamil cinema hall and bus-services are owned by members of Adi-Dravida caste. Secondly, as I had discussed in my earlier study, even on the estates the purity-impurity opposition between the higher (non-Brahman) and lower (Adi-Dravida) castes had become considerably reduced. Members of all castes irrespective of their ritual status had contributed from their wages money to build the central Mahamariamman temple on Pal Melayu. On collective festive occasions like Adi Tiruvila, estate workers sat for a feast in the temple premises irrespective of their caste status (Jain 1970, Chapter 9). This development reached its culmination during the current phase of the Tamilians' emancipation from estates in the Pal Melayu region. Not only is Muniandy the Chairman of the Thandayundapani Temple Committee in Batang Berjuntai a Parayan, but both in his perceptions and reactions to caste questions, he displays at once an intimate knowledge of the workings-out of caste distinctions in Tamil Nadu and an utter disdain for the claim of being an original high caste by the non-Brahman Vanniars whom we had discussed as the 'dominant caste' on Pal Melayu (ibid, 347-349). The following is an excerpt from my field-notes dated 20.1.1999.333

CASTE WAR

There is a caste war going on among Indians in Malaysia. Let me delineate the general process and recent history. The estates had only non-Brahmins & Adi-Dravidas and no Brahmins. The companies employing Indian partly through design and partly as a fall-out of recruiting procedures let the status quo of Indian villages be here, viz., the non-Brahmin and Adi-Dravida division was firmly entrenched and it helped the management to run the

estate. The Vanniar as "dominant caste" and Adi-Dravidas as the "subordinate castes" as I wrote in my 1970 book described the situation correctly. That caste was increasingly an aspect of culture rather than of social stratification per se was broadly true of the isolated and insulated circumstances of estate living.

With the post 1969 changes and the increasingly powerful stream of Indians marching out of the estates the "djinni was freed from the bottle". Opportunities were there for any or every of the Tamilian castes for the taking, though of course because of the environment the non-Brahmins had a head-start compared to the Adi-Dravidas. But the situation has rapidly changed over the 1980s and 90s. Of course there has been economic mobility across the board for estate Indians. But there has also been important socio-economic mobility. The earlier caste-based kindred-around-kanganies - of the non-Brahmins & the Paraiyans-have broken down and the former estate population has become economically & geographically mobile as well as scattered. The 'head-start' by the non-Brahmins of which we spoke earlier is increasingly being neutralized in the sense that, in the new circumstances, the Adi-Dravidas have caught up or are very much in the process of catching up.

What happens to the culture of caste in this context is extremely instructive. It would be a triviality to say that the Adi-Dravidas have 'Sanskritized'. The latter of the Indian variety just does not fit. For one thing, the Adi-Dravidas have made a massive inroad into the Tamilian ritual life if not actually appropriated it. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that the non-Brahmins in strictly public religious (ritual & temple) terms are existing at the sufferance of the culturally mobile and high profile Adi Dravidas. The entire history and present organization of the Thandayudapani temple in Batang Berjuntai epitomizes that process. While the non-Brahmins have concentrated on entrepreneurship basically in the economic sense, the cultural entrepreneurship of Adi Dravidas has flourished and taken a number of varied forms. On the one hand, they have become managers of the ritualistic and social (e.g. marriage registration) functions of the new temple, on the other hand, teachers of their castes-themselves educated ones like Rajagopal - have undertaken in a manipulative and entrepreneurial way to 'motivate' the youth (especially children) of their own caste but with an eye on individual mobility, popularity and leadership. The ideological and political umbrella under which this upwardly mobile Adi-Dravida category is functioning is provided squarely by Dravidian Tamilian ideology, rhetoric and organization. In this

respect the understanding between Muniandy (temple chairman), Nallathamby and Parasuraman (DMK spokesperson) and Rajagopal (ambitious teacher of the "paradigm shift" fame) is remarkable. The rhetoric and vanity of Muniandy is worth documenting. He discusses the Vanniars as Telugu refugees (rather than self-claimed rulers) in Tamil Nadu- the titles Reddi, Naicker, Naidu etc. he says are all from the Telegu country. The real Tamilians are the Adi-Dravidas. While on the one hand, he connects himself up with Tamilnadu, he also speaks of the earlier hauteur of the Ceylon (Jaffna) Tamils against Indian Tamilians (especially the lower castes) and the present 180 degree turn which impels the Jaffna Tamils to show solidarity with their Indian counterparts. Many are the stories of the supercilious attitudes of the Ceylon Tamils (cf. Rajakrishnan alluding to their Ceylonese head of the department Tilagavathi giving a public statement that Indian Tamil culture was lower than Ceylon Tamil one because the former were of "lower castes" which she later retracted by saying that she had said & meant 'clan' rather than 'caste'.) but the non-Dravidas seem to have taken their revenge on the Ceylon Tamils. According to Muniandy in Colombo at the height of Sinhalese-Jaffna Tamil conflict the former were between back (with long steel pipes) by a combination of Malaylees, Singhs, Telugus and Tamils (meaning Indian Tamils again mainly Adi-Dravida) who came to their rescue. The Sinhalese raped and ravished the Jaffna Tamil and thus (to the (great vicarious satisfaction of Muniandy) destroyed the hypocritical and supercilious 'purity' of their women. It was then that revenge had been taken and a new solidarity commenced between the Ceylon Tamils and the Indians. It is in this context that Prabhakaran has proved himself to be a real Tamil-a hero whose tapes are popular among the Dravidian Tamils, books are there and portraits garlanded. In the same vein, Muniandy kept on praising and extolling Ambedkar. (I did not deliberately mention Pandithan because that would be embroiled in local politics rather than of meta-narrative or the Myth, which was the centrepiece of Muniandy's rhetoric).

The element of so-called desanskritized sanskritization in Muniandy's knowledge system is a claim to the intricate knowledge of the caste system. Even the Parayans, he said, were divided into eight or nine hierarchical castes (what Rajagopal called 'subcastes') Talis of various castes differed. ('Did I know?' - the rhetorical question he asked me.) They had got a gurukkal from India on hire. They called him gurukkal rather than the inferior term pusari (animal slaughter associated) as in North India. In other words, they were practicing a Tamilian Great Tradition superior to the practices of North Indian or the northern-ward

Telugus who had pretended to be rulers of the Tamils. Muniandy further said that though he knew about all the intricacies and the true origins of the caste system, he would not be so foolish as to mention these in public. Mentioning all this caste stuff in public "would lead to a big fight".

Muniandy openly confessed that as marriage registrar he knew that inter-caste marriages were taking place galore. He slept over problem-marriages (pregnancies before marriage especially of inter caste unions). Also the stigma of caste did not die out completely. Women of high caste married to low caste men when they reached the age of 35-45 (when the man was becoming other worldly they other still enjoyed health and youth superior to their husbands. They looked down upon the latter, and even told their children how their father was of a lower caste than herself.

This is also the right place to mention what Aiyappu (himself from Andhra & this claiming to be an 'outsider' like me) theorized about the mixed marriages taking place. According to him the origin of mixed marriages (especially hypogamous ones) lay in the looseness of estate life where kanganies, conductors and even European managers had liaisons with married Tamil women & provided bastards. The latter were told about their true parentage by the mothers who thus became 'rebels' and started considering them to be the equals or even superior to the so-called 'pure' non-Brahmans. This "infusion of the alien seed" had given rise to the great increase in mixed marriages, elopements and flouting of caste rules in marriages.

It is interesting to note the largely defensive and economic entrepreneurial (as opposed to cultural entrepreneurial) position taken by non-Brahmins like Ganesan and his brother Thangavelu) The latter is a bit reconciled though the former has had sallies in politics and in religion but continues to have an uneasy relationship with aggressive Dravidian Tamilism. (Notice that none of the Adi-Dravidian temple committee members came to my so-called "dialogue" in the temple arranged by Ganesan and how the only person of that category who came was Rajgopal and was all the time challenging the Mahanandram people and their activities emphasizing the lack of unity).

Another point to note is that Muniandy type aggressive Tamilism helps him interact inter-ethnically. As representative of 'true' Indian type he is able to hold his own with Malays

and Chinese and show down the so-called Indian Tamil of the high caste, grasping, greedy ambience. 'Holier than thou', 'purer than pure'. Fighting and partly succeeding in higher public credibility in an inter-ethnic context. For the Indian elites the best policy is to play down caste in public (though use it fully in private-among themselves).¹⁸

While caste as the embodiment of social stratification does not play a dominant role among Tamilians in Malaysia, the caste ascription to groups by birth and the practice, by and large, of caste or even sub-caste endogamy is attributed to kinship, viz; to *sondakaras* status among those who intermarry and express solidarity as kindred-style quasi-groups and networks. In this respect the situation of Tamilians radiating spatially from Pal Melayu is similar to what Yalman has called 'micro-caste kindred' in Sri Lanka (Yalman 1967). Here the elementary structures of kinship among Malaysian Tamils produce what may be described as 'conservative' social structure when the verb 'to conserve' is being used in a positive sense. This culture of caste premised on Tamil kinship (and affinity) is an aspect of evolutionary trend in the Pal Melayu region. To give a concrete instance, the catering business of Ganesan is largely channeled along the lines of kindred based networks in localities such as Batang Berjuntai itself, the various tamans fronting the estates of the Pal Melayu region and extending up to Rawang. The modernizing conversion of older puberty ceremonies for girls (*tiratti*) into 21st birthday celebrations common among all ex estate workers has meant a big boost for Ganesan's catering business. Similarly, the attenuation of purity/impurity considerations coexisting with the bonus of esteem attached to a non-Brahman caterer like Ganesan during celebration in the Adi-Dravida households has meant a certain twisting of the arms of an orthodox Hindu like Ganesan in the direction of reluctant, though avid (because profitable), extension of business activities among the dalits. The sentiment of kinship and endogamy is strong among economic entrepreneurs like Ganesan although the next generation of even non-Brahman parents openly state their perception that caste endogamy and hypergamy etc. are doomed to extinction.

NOTES

1. According to the 1996 statistics the total Malaysian population was 20.56 million. Of these 19.65 million were Malaysians and 907,000 foreign nationals. The population of Peninsular Malaysia was 16.48m, of Sabah 2.16m and of Sarawak 1.92m. Of these 12.13m or 59% were Bumiputeras, 5.3m or 26% Chinese and 1.52 m. or 8% Indians. The total number of Indians in Malaysia

according to the 1991 Census was 1,313,588. The Indian population being dealt with in this account refers to Peninsular Malaysia unless otherwise stated.

2. It is worth-nothing that popular perceptions and stereotypes are based on the generalization of comparisons within a class or occupational stratum. Thus the middle-class and professional Indians in Malaysia, viz., university teachers, vociferously state that every Malay (Bumiputra) now aspires to be a millionaire. That such a possibility exists is supported by the Indian spokesmen by pointing out to the proliferation of Malays at Associate Professor or higher levels in every academic department of the university.

3. The specific reference here is to my ethnographic study conducted in 1962-63 (Jain 1970) and my revisit to the same region (the Pal Melayu region) during December 1998 to February 1999. The revisit was sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi. We may note here an important chronological feature of the studies on the Indian poor in Malaysia. Without exception they all deal with the duration or aftermath of the recession in Malaysian economy during the mid and late 1980s. Therefore the conclusions of these studies cannot be applied to the period of the restudy without utmost caution.

4. Figures for the resident Indian population (workers and non-workers) on Pal Melayu in 1998-99 are unfortunately not available, but projecting from the 1962 average of 6 members per household the total resident population of Indians on Pal Melayu in 1998-99 may not be more than 240.

5. The Indian population alone in Selangor and the Federal Territory, which encompasses Kuala Lumpur, accounts for 35.4% of all Indians in the country (Aznam 1990: 17).

6. There is much truth in Gullick's observation that considerably less has been written about the Malaysian oil palm industry than its older rubber industry (Gullick, op.cit. p.194). For example Mehmet (op.cit, p.43) excludes oil palm "as a relatively new crop " and Insan (op.cit) concentrates almost exclusively on rubber estates to delineate the condition of the Indian poor in Malaysia. The overemphasis on rubber estates to the neglect comparatively of conditions on oil palm plantations is likely to give a skewed picture, for, as Lucas & Verry (op.cit., p.562) observe, "...earnings on the rubber estates have hardly risen relative to the consumer price index, though this is less true of oil palm cultivation which has taken a growing share of estate employment" (*italics added*). Almost all

the literature on the Indian poor in Malaysia cited by us earlier fails to differentiate between conditions on oil palm and rubber estates.

7. According to Lee and Sivananthiran (*ibid.*, p.77), following a general decline in the 1970s, there has been a resurgence of contract labour since the recession of the mid-1980s. By 1990, its incidence had risen to 70 per cent in the construction industry (up from 64% in 1980), to 13 per cent in the rubber plantation industry (up from 10% in 1980) and to 35 per cent in the oil palm industry (up from 33% in 1980). From the micro figures obtained in Pal Melayu in 1998, this trend seems to have continued throughout the decade of the 1990s.

8. Contrast this with the population census of Pal Melayu (both labour and non-labour population) in July 1962 :

Age-group	Percentage
0-13	50.3
14-25	21.2
26-45	20.2
46-65	7.3
66+	1.0

9. The findings of this survey are consistent with the ILO's argument that contract labour plays an important role in industries subject to cyclical fluctuation in production and demand (ILO, 1996:20).

10. The allusion to "socio-cultural similarities" is almost definitely a euphemism for religion, i.e., Islam in the case of Indonesian and Bangladeshis.

11. For Muniandy, I have used the pseudonym Arokkiam (Jain 1970: 403-404). In my initial study he was a neo-literate rubber tapper. He is now a retired Tamil school headmaster living in Taman Mubibah. For his life history see later.

12. I have later elaborated on the distinctive opposition between 'evolutionary' and 'revolutionary' manifestations of Tamilian social institutions in the Pal Melayu region.

13. Sime Darby was previously a British company but is now in the hands of PERNAS, a local quasi-governmental body holding shares in trust for the bumiputras.

14. The following account is based on interviews with office-bearers of the KKR in Batang Berjuntai and on Annual Reports provided by them. For the history of KKR, a useful source is Lim Chin Chin (1983).

15. When I interviewed Mr. Janakey Raman at Batang Berjuntai in January 1999, he had moved further in the direction of doing research and becoming an information-bureau. His office carried the banner of 'Nationwide Human Development and Research Centre, Tingkat 1 (Mahligai Koperasi)'.

16. Even among resident estate labourers discussed in the previous section, the younger sons and daughters of house allottee older estate workers were increasingly drawn towards blue-collar industrial occupations. Such households enjoyed the bonus of getting free accommodation for their non estate working wards.

17. One should not overlook the existence, even in these relatively small towns, of slum-dwelling Indians. They are the real poor ex-estate workers who have either found no suitable alternative employment or have large families with small children to support. Some are physically disabled. They live precariously in makeshift dwellings erected on unauthorised land usually in the backyards of main markets.

18. A really interesting aspect of the inter-ethnic understanding between Adi Dravida or dalit Tamilians and the Malay bumiputras is the conscious upholding by the former of the latter's status as "sons of the soil". The dalit Tamilians in Malaysia claim that in being the original inhabitants of their respective lands (India and Malaysia) the Adi Dravidas and the Malays are alike and, therefore, deserving of their rulers' status!

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