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### Spatial and occupational mobility of plantation labour in Malaysia

*Retrenchments, outmigration and closure of plantations, 1951-2012*

T Mariappan, A.S.

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

Athi Sivan T Mariappan

**SPATIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY OF PLANTATION  
LABOUR IN MALAYSIA:**

Retrenchments, Outmigration and Closure of Plantations, 1951-2012

**ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT**

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door

**Athi Sivan T Mariappan**

geboren te Pulau Pinang, Maleisië

***Promotiecommissie***

<i>Promotor(es):</i>	prof. dr. B.M. Burgoon	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Co-promotor(es):</i>	dr. J.Y. Guin	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. J.C. Breman	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. M.M. van der Linden	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. A.B. Shamsul	The National University of Malaysia
	prof. dr. G.R.D. Underhill	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. F.J. van Hooren	Universiteit van Amsterdam

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>List of Tables, Maps, Plates, Charts and Figures</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<b>Chapter 1      Retrenchments, Closure of Plantations and Outmigration: The Questions</b>	
1.1      Introduction	1
1.2      Brief Overview of the Wave of Commodification of Plantation	5
1.3      Outmigration of Plantation Labour: A Review	8
1.4      Objective of the Study	14
1.5      The Research Questions	15
1.6      Organisation of Chapters	17
1.7      Conclusion	20
<b>Chapter 2      Theoretical and Methodological Questions: Review and Approach</b>	
2.1      Introduction	25
2.2      NELM Approach to Migration	29
2.3      Critique of NELM	32
2.4      Alternative to ‘Income Risk’: Risk of Work and Living	38
2.5      The ‘Transformation’ as an Outcome of Commodification of Plantation Land and Labour	39
2.6      Methodology and Notes on Sources	42
2.7      Conclusion	46
<b>Chapter 3      From ‘Villageship’ to Transitory Settlement: The Changing Function of Plantation Settlements</b>	
3.1      Introduction	49
3.2      Resident Indian Plantation Labour	50
3.3      Institutional Definition of Plantation: The Missing ‘Workers Community’	51
3.4      Historical Summary of Plantation and Labour Composition	54
3.5      The Formation of Organic Community: The Settled Labour and the Development of ‘Villageship’ Notion	59
3.6      Labour Families Settlements: From Land Settlements to Low Cost Housing	66
3.6.1      The Historical Failure to Resettle the Plantation Families	69
3.7      Disruption to Plantation Work and Living Order and the ‘Risk of Plantation Work and Living’	74
3.8      The Changing Plantation: Estates on the Eve of Migration	77
3.9      The State: Pro-Market Policies and Nationalisation of Plantations	88

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Disruption on Plantation Work and Living Order: The Commodification of Plantation Lands, 1951-1969</b>	
4.1	Introduction	97
4.2	Notes on Sources: Varying Information from Limited Sources	105
4.3	Investigating Subdivisions: The Committees Appointed by the Government	109
4.4	Non-Intervention Position of the State	119
4.5	The Ungku Aziz Report: Some Limitations	121
4.6	Subdivision Retrenchments and Labour Shortage, 1950-1961	123
4.7	Intensification of Spatial and Occupational Displacement, 1962-1969	134
4.8	Estimation of the Scale of Retrenchments	144
4.9	Conclusion	153
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Disruption in Plantation Work and Living Order 2: Work Permit Requirement and Plantation Labour, 1969-80</b>	
5.1	Introduction	157
5.2	The Work Permit Genesis and the Legal Status of Indian Plantation Labour	161
5.3	Employment Restriction Act (ERA), 1969-70	167
5.4	National Operation Council's Reversal on 'Non-Renewal' Work Permits	179
5.5	The Creation of a New Plantation Underclass, 1971-80	185
5.6	The Affected Labour, 1969-1980	197
5.7	Conclusion	211
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Shift in Labour Policy: The Preference for Foreign Labour, 1978-84</b>	
6.1	Introduction	213
6.2	Plantation Labour in the 1970s and the Indian Labour 'Return to Plantation'	215
6.3	Declaration of Labour Shortage and the Ensuing Surveys	219
6.4	The Planters' Lobby for Foreign Workers	225
6.5	The Changing Role of the State and the Emergence of Regional Cooperation for Labour	232
6.6	Conclusion	240
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Organization of Exit: The Differentiated Approach of Migration</b>	
7.1	Introduction	243
7.2	Outline of the Approach	245
	7.2.1 Note on Data and Classification	247
7.3	The Risk of Plantation Work and Living	250
7.4	The Family and the 'Organization of Exit'	251
	7.4.1 The Family Types and Categories	253
	7.4.2 Family: Mediating Structure and Agency	255
	7.4.3 Forced Exit and Defiance	258
7.5	The Plantation Migration Flow and the Differentiation	262
7.6	The Communal Social Capital and Family	266

7.7	Organization of Exit: The Differentiated Approach of Migration	272
7.7.1	Voluntary Migration among the Married Category	275
	i. Married Net Migration	275
	ii. Married Commuting Migrant	278
	iii. Married Partial Migrant	282
7.7.2	Voluntary and Forced Migration among the Singles Category	285
	i. Moved to nearby plantation area	288
	ii. Moved to distant housing estates	288
	iii. Moved near to employment area	289
7.7.3	The Non-Migrants: Singles and Married in Final Retrenchments	290
	i. The Non-Migrants Employed in Plantation: The Married ‘Non-migrant’	296
	ii. The Non-Migrants Employed in Plantation: The Single ‘Non-migrant’	300
7.8	The Odd Categories of Plantation Labour	301
7.8.1	From Residents to ‘Occupiers’: Defying Eviction Notice as part of Organisation of Exit	302
7.8.2	Outmigration and pauperisation of plantation labour	304
7.9	Conclusion	306

## **Chapter 8      Overview of the Cessation of Plantations, 1983-2012: Spatial Transformations, Retrenchments and Remaining Plantations**

8.1	Introduction	309
8.2	Plantation Lands and Crops Transformation in Selangor by Districts, 1970-2015	312
8.2.1	District of Klang	315
8.2.2.	District of Kuala Langat	317
8.2.3.	District of Kuala Selangor	319
8.2.4	District of Hulu Langat	322
8.2.5	District of Hulu Selangor	324
8.2.6	District of Sabak Bernam	326
8.2.7	District of Kuala Lumpur (later Federal Territory)	328
8.2.8	District of Gombak	329
8.2.9	District of Petaling	331
8.2.10	District of Sepang	332
8.2.11	Aggregated Data for Selangor	335
8.2.12	Transformation of Plantation Lands: A Summary	337
8.3	Land Use Maps: Spatial View of the Cessation and Persistence of Plantation 1984 -2012	340
8.4	Plantations Ceased Operation in Selangor, 1983-2012: Retrenchments and Compensation	347
8.4.1	Causes of Mass Retrenchments in Plantations	349
8.4.2	Retirement, Retrenchments and Compensations	354
8.4.2.1	Retirement and Retrenchment Benefits	354

8.4.2.2	Eradication of Squatters and The Estate Land Board: Provision for Low Cost Housing	357
8.4.3	Retrenchments and Compensation in Selangor, 1983-2012	361
8.5	Remaining Plantations in Operation, Selangor	375
8.6	Conclusion	380
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>The Great Transformation: Spatial and Occupational Mobility of Indian Plantation Labour</b>	
9.1	Introduction	381
9.2	Migration to diversify income risk?	382
9.3	Explaining outmigration from plantation: The ‘risk of plantation work and living’	382
9.4	Quantifying the Affected Labour Families	386
9.5	The Hegemonic Framework of Transient Labour and Commodification: A Reflection	389
9.6	Concluding Remarks	392
	<b>Bibliography</b>	395
	<b>Samenvatting</b>	415



## Preface

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

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

This compelled me to return to Malaysia for additional fieldwork – I made several visits for durations ranging from six weeks to two months each time. Each visit was to explore yet another dimension that I had belatedly discovered and regarded as being a critical area. In the midst of compiling information on the 'organisation of exit' – how different methods were employed by labour families in moving out of the plantation – I discovered that there was also a phenomenon of mass 'return to plantation' in the 1970s by those Indian labour families who were displaced from the late 1960s. This phenomenon was initially masked by the acute labour shortage of that period, especially since 1978. Later, when the figures for Indian labourers were separated from the total number of labourers, the aggregated data supported my findings on the phenomenon of 'return to plantation'. Since this phenomenon has never been described in the records of either the plantation fraternity or the state, I was extremely keen to delve into this further. However, I was in a quandary – how do I elaborate on 'the return to plantation' in a work focusing on the mass exit from plantation?

It was around this juncture that Prof. Jan Breman, a commentator of my paper, suggested a focus on the structural historical perspective of the displaced plantation families. Since Prof Breman had studied the plantation labour in Sumatra, I was motivated to explore the historical angle of displacement. This led me to focus on two significant events - the 'subdivision of plantation' and the Employment (Restriction) Act (ERA). These two events shed a record number of labour families from the plantations particularly since mid-1960 to 1969, but very little is known about this. By this time, I was already back in Malaysia. Thus, began my journey in archival work, lasting almost 15 months. It helped me to better understand the development of labour shortage in plantations and the formalisation of foreign labour in Malaysia.

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

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

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

great assistance from the Selangor Union branch and former plantation leaders. This data provided a picture of the position of plantation families on the eve of their final migration.

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

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

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

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

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## List of Tables, Maps, Plates, Charts and Figures

Table 3.1	Reserve Lands in Plantations, 1957-1990	73
Table 3.2	Work Designations in Plantation Garage/Workshop by NUPW	81
Table 3.3	Gender Composition in Plantations, 1967-1984	85
Table 3.4	Wage Comparisons in the Rubber and Oil Palm Estates, 1973-1982	85
Table 3.5	Ownership of Private Rubber Plantations and Hectarage	91
Table 4.1	European Estates: Owned Transferred from January 1955 to September 1957	112
Table 4.2	Yield Per Hectare of Rubber in Estates and Smallholdings, 1950-1970	112
Table 4.3	Yield Per Hectare of Rubber in Estates and Smallholdings, 1950-1970	121
Table 4.4	Weeders and “others” Labour in Rubber Estates, 1950-1961	128
Table 4.5	Number of Plantations by Year and Labour Force, 1950-1953	128
Table 4.6	Acreage Affected by Subdivision by States	133
Table 4.7	Number of Plantations Subdivided and Labour Affected, 1962-1967	140
Table 4.8	Number of Plantations & Hectarage by Year and Labour Force, Peninsular Malaysia, 1950-1970	147
Table 4.9	Comparison of 1962 & 1967/68 Surveys for Agricultural Employment and Unemployment	150
Table 4.10	Indian Agricultural Workers, 1967	151
Table 5.1	Original and Amended Schedule under Section 4 of ERA, 1968	163
Table 5.2	Percentage of Indians Born in Malaysia or Singapore (Including non-plantations Indians)	165
Table 5.3	Plantation Work Classification for Work Permit Renewal, 1969	169
Table 5.4	Constitutional Provisions and Simplified Requirements for Citizenship	182
Table 5.5	Summary of Employers Prosecuted under the Employment Restriction Act, 1968	190
Table 5.6	Employment of Indian Labour in Agricultural Sectors, 1967	199
Table 5.7	Composition of Plantation Employment by Type of Plantations in 1969	200
Table 5.8	Non-Citizens Employed in Plantations by Occupation Type, August 1969	200
Table 5.9	Employment in Plantations by Ethnic Groups, 1968-1972	202
Table 5.10	Total Labour Employed by Months, 1969	202
Table 5.11	Repatriation through SILF, 1968-1972	204
Table 5.12	Arrivals and Departures of Indians and Pakistanis, West Malaysia 1961-1971	204
Table 5.13	Estimated Net Migration of Indians, 1947-1980	206

Table 5.14	Plantation Labour Subjected to Work Permit Enforcement, 1969-1981	208
Table 6.1	Plantation Labour by Ethnic Groups, 1973-1984 (Peninsular Malaysia)	216
Table 6.2	Foreign Labour in Plantation Industry	220
Table 6.3	Labour Shortage among UPAM Members 1979-1989	222
Table 6.4	Vacancies Reported and Placement Effected in Plantation Industry, 1973-1984	223
Table 6.5	Total Labour in Rubber and Oil Palm, 1985-2014 (Peninsular Malaysia)	225
Table 6.6	Wage Comparisons in the Rubber and Oil Palm Estates, 1973-1982	227
Table 6.7	Land Development Schemes, 1971-80 and Performance of Fourth Malaysia Plan, 1981-85	233
Table 6.8	Planted Area in Smallholdings in Peninsular Malaysia, 1970-85	234
Table 6.9	Registered Foreign Workers in Plantations by Citizenship, 2010	239
Table 7.1	Estimation of Household Savings to Purchase a Low Cost House	249
Table 7.2	Perception on the Coming of Foreign Labour to Plantation (%)	262
Table 7.3	Community and Family Resources for First Non-Plantation Employment	270
Table 7.4	Community and Family Resources for First Post-Plantation Housing	271
Table 7.5	Types of Final Migration from Plantation by Period, Sex and Marital Status	273
Table 7.6	Moving to New Settlements while a Plantation was in Operation and Final	274
Table 7.7	Families and Singles Main Reason to Remain in Plantation until Final Termination	293
Table 8.1	Rubber Estates Plantable Area, Selangor 1968-90	313
Table 8.2	District of Klang, 1968-2015	315
Table 8.3	District of Kuala Langat, 1968-2015	317
Table 8.4	District of Kuala Selangor, 1968-2015	319
Table 8.5	District of Hulu Langat, 1968-2015	322
Table 8.6	District of Hulu Selangor, 1968-2015	324
Table 8.7	District of Sabak Bernam, 1968-2015	326
Table 8.8	District of Kuala Lumpur, 1968-1981	328
Table 8.9	District of Gombak, 1978-2015	329
Table 8.10	District of Petaling, 1978-2015	331
Table 8.11	District of Sepang, 1978-2015	332
Table 8.12	Aggregated Data for Selangor, 1968-2015	335
Table 8.13	Plantations in Transition, 1981-1985	352
Table 8.14	Selangor Plantations in Transition, 1981-1985	353

Table 8.15	Formalisation of Retirement and Retrenchment Benefits (1969) to the introduction of ‘Employment (Termination and Lay-off Benefits) Regulations, 1980’	356
Table 8.16	Average Monthly Income of Rubber Estate Workers, Peninsular Malaysia 1985	367
Table 8.17	Employment Tenure, Average Wages and Redundancy Benefits and Ex-Gratia Payment for Pilmoor Estate Workers, 1986	364
Table 8.18	Selected Cases Retrenchments and Compensations in Selangor, 1980-2012	338
Table 8.19	Remaining Plantations in Selangor and Composition of Labour (as of January 2012)	379
<b>Maps</b>		
Map 1	Distribution of Plantations in Peninsular Malaysia, 1910	xiii
Map 7.1	Selangor New Industrial Estates, (the early 1970s)	224
Map 7.2	Selangor Road Networks, 1964	225
Map 8.1	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 1984	341
Map 8.2	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 1990	342
Map 8.3	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 1997	343
Map 8.4	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 2000	344
Map 8.5	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 2006	345
Map 8.6	Selangor Land Use Map: Urban Areas, Rubber and Oil Palm, 2010	346
<b>Plates</b>		
Plate 1	Developments on Plantation Lands (Petaling Jaya), 1960s	21
Plate 2	Developments on Plantation Lands (Petaling Jaya), 1960s	21
Plate 3	Developments on Plantation Lands (Shah Alam), 1960s	22
Plate 3	Developments on Plantation Lands (Shah Alam), 1960s	23
Plate 5	Early Plantation Housing	96
Plate 6	Early Plantation Housing	96
Plate 7	Minister of Labour at Subdivision of Plantation Meeting, Ministry of Labour	154
Plate 8	Deputy Prime Minister at Subdivision of Plantation Meeting	155
<b>Chart</b>		
Chart 7.1	Simplified Chart of Final Migration Flow from Plantation	265
<b>Figure</b>		
Figure 3.1	Tamils Land Settlement Announcement, 1904	48
Figure 5.1:	Work Permit Renewal Form: Arumugam A/L Chola Kowdan	195
Figure 5.2:	Work Permit Renewal Form: Palamah D/O Perumal	196
Figure 7.1	Plantation Family Low Cost House for Sale by Auction	263