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Indian Women in Malaya, 1900 to 1945: Migration Experiences and Socioeconomic Condition

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Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the process of migration and the socioeconomic status of Indian women in Malaya between 1900 to 1945. The sustainable economic growth of the country requires an increase in terms of labour productivity. The economic growth that occurred in Malaya during the British colonisation has led to an influx of immigrants from India and China in droves. Indian labour has played a significant part in increasing Malayan economy. The presence of Indian women labour, although not as many as Indian male labour, can still be considered significant in the country's economic growth. Their presence in Malaya has put them in an oppressed situation, and various parties took the opportunity to exploit their position. This study used a qualitative approach and conducted using the method of historical research through the library and archival research concerning the primary and secondary sources. With a focus on the period from 1900 to 1945, the study will unlock the socioeconomic position of women in India during the British colonisation and their condition during the Japanese Occupation. Their involvement in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and the impact of their participation in this movement will also be included

Keywords: Indian; Woman; Socio-Economy; Immigrants; Japanese; Rani of Jhansi Regiment

1. Introduction

The migration of Indians to Malaya as a result of economic growth following the British colonisation has left its mark on the ethnic composition of workers in Malaya. The influx of Indian women workers, though less than Indian men, can still be considered relevant and an essential source of energy at that time. The history of women is less highlighted because it assumes that the role and life of women do not change, but it's a static factor in social development. Many studies that discussed the role of women in the political and socioeconomic development in Malaya involves the study of Malay women. The role and contributions given by Malay women in various fields get greater attention among local historians. This situation is due to the eminence shown by Malay women, especially in the fight for their rights since emancipation and the desire to strengthen the grip of socioeconomic and political awareness has long existed among Malay women. (Mahani Musa, 2013; Maznah Mohammad, 1989; Rohana Ariffin, 1999, Manderson, 1980; Dancz, 1987). Writings about immigrant women have also drawn the attention of a handful of local authors. They touched on the role of women workers from China and India in developing the Malayan economy, mainly in the plantations and mining sectors. (Lee, 1989; Agnes Khoo, 2004)

In Malaya, the study of Indian women is less noticeable among local historians. Studies carried out by renowned historians so far rely primarily on a holistic approach in addressing issues relating to the migration of Indians to Malaya at the beginning of the 18th and 19th centuries and their living conditions in the estates. (Amarjit Kaur, 2006; Arasaratnam, 1970; Sandhu, 1969) Besides, the fate of Indian workers and their struggles also attracted the attention of local historians. The role played by political organisations such as the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), and the National Union of Plant Workers (NUPW) in raising Indian workers' rights in the estates was briefly clarified in their historical studies without giving Indian women-specific priorities. (Anbalakan, 2008; Gomez, 1994; Ramasamy, 1993; Stenson, 1980). The rights of Indian women started to take precedence in science studies as sociologists began showcasing Indian women in their writings. Their findings showed that Indian women have always been in the fields, and even in urban areas, Indian women seem to be the communities who are consistently being marginalised and abused in different ways, regardless of their wages and profits. (Oortjitham, 1984, 1987). This article, based on a historical perspective, attempts to fill the gaps that existed in Indian women's studies, the stories of displacement from their homeland, and the social upheavals they had before Malaya gained independence.

2. The Migration Stories

When the Malay Peninsula began to grow from the economic aspect, Indian labour admissions had become a must. At the beginning of their entry, male labour is preferred compared to women labour either in the plantation, construction or mining sectors. Nearly 250,000 Indian labourers were brought into Malaya from 1844 to 1910 through a contract system. (Dancz, 1987:57)

According to Sandhu (1969), through the Kangani system, the number of male workers who brought into Malaya was more than women until 1920. Even after 1920, Indian male labourers still accounts for almost 70% of the total number of Indian labourers in Malaya. Most of the women brought in from South India are Tamil, Telugu and Malayali while there are a few who come from North India such as Sikh, Punjabi, Bengali and Gujarati. (Annual Reports of Labor Department Malaya). Almost 80% of them are women of Tamil descent.

From the aspect of Indian cultural traditions, women are not allowed to go out to earn a living, especially to go to a foreign country. Based on the religion and culture of Indian society, women's freedom is minimal because their role as wives is to serve the husband and the husband's family. (Dancz, 1987:61)

In the 1890s, estate management began to realise the consequences of being too dependent on male labourers alone which were temporary had increased production costs. Moreover, the political relationship between the British government in India and Malaya became increasingly tenuous due to the separation of the administration in 1867. This situation has led to the influx of workers from India were not as smooth as before. The employers took steps to ensure that Indian workers came to Malaya with his wife and their families so that they can stay in Malaya. (Datta, 2016) The British Government in Malaya and India has taken several steps to improve the inclusion of women workers. Among the measures taken were to reduce the payment for recruitment tax, introduced the Indian Immigration Act, 1922 and the Indian Immigration Regulations 1923, by implementing the ratio of one woman to 1.5 men. (Sandhu,1969)

These employers considered the Indian women who entered at that time as labour reproducers and "servicing" agents to the farming community. Some employers consider them as less-skilled workers. The salary earned by Indian women workers at that time was meagre without any bonuses and not even given food ration separately because they consider women as secondary wage earners. (Datta, 2016) Accordingly, the number of Indian women began to increase moderately in the states of Malaya. According to Dancz (1987), the population rate of Indian women continued to grow wherein 1891, and the rate showed 18 women for every 1000 men increased to 482 women for every 1000 men in 1921.

Discussion regarding gender ratio became rampant since the influx of women India to Malaya. In the annual report of the Controller of Labour for Malaya in 1938, has emphasised that the Colonial Government of Malaya and the Indian government should work together in addressing issues of gender differences immediately to solve social problems to uphold a moral life. The Indian government is ready to send more Indian women to Malaya if the colonial government of Malaya prepares to take steps as follows;

- i. reasonable salary
- ii. provide particular incentives to employers who accept female immigrants
- iii. give different allowances to married labourers
- iv. give a bonus of \$ 1.00 of every child born Indian immigrants in Malaya
- v. place a "lady travelling inspector" on board to ensure the welfare of women immigrants and children are taken care of
- vi. provide childcare centres on the estate
- vii. provide schools on the estate
- viii. giving maternity allowances to pregnant Indian women
- ix. introduced marriage registration law for Indian immigrants.

(The Singapore Free Press and Merchantile Advertiser, 26 September 1938)

3. The Social and Economic Struggle

Social problems began to increase once the number of Indian women starts to grow in Malaya. Wife enticement cases, one of the most disturbing cases among Indians in Malaya at that time. Apart from that, illicit relationships, illegal marriage bonds and toddy problems among labourers were also among the issues related to Indian immigrants in Malaya.

3.1. Exploitation

The process of recruiting Indian women is equivalent to the 'regularly organised system of kidnapping' by Hathaway, a British revenue collector in Tanjore, India. His successor, Stokes, asserted that 'maistry' or recruiting agents got lucrative rewards for every Indian women labourer they recruit. Recruitment activities are a very lucrative business, and even the 'maistry' does not mind to take drastic action such as kidnapping to ensure the continuity of Indian women labourers. According to Stokes,

"the maistry get ten rupees a head for every adult coolie they bring, all contingent expenses being paid. A lower price is given for boys who are not in such demand and a somewhat higher rate for young and good looking women". (Sandhu, 1969; 79)

Some statements prove that these Indian women did not migrate voluntarily but as a result of fraud as well as social pressure that caused them to take this action. According to one of the Indian social activists,

“there only needs to be a quarrel in the house or greed of money, and there arises the opportunity for the recruiters. There only needs to be increased anger or greed for jewellery, and she will run away. Introduces to the boss, she will sign or apply her thumbprint on to a paper that as in a contract of slavery and away she goes. She has sold her honour.” (Nijhawan, 2014)

More heartbreaking and humiliating experience awaited when Indian women labourers arrived in quarantine camps in Malaya. They need to go through a cleaning process that will take place in the base to ensure that these women do not carry any diseases or germs. They are required to remove their clothes, and their bodies will be wrapped in a thin, sparse cloth, then soaked in a Lysol-filled tank. This process said to take almost 40 minutes, done in front of the male officers on duty at the camps. (Malaya Tribune, 2 August 1933)

The gap in the ratio between male workers and female workers also have been cited as a reason for an increase in the sexual exploitation cases among Indian women labourers in Malaya. Employers on the estate do not provide suitable housing facilities for Indian workers which results in single Indian male workers living in the same house as married labourers. This action invites immoral acts to take place. (Jackson, 1961) Various complaints and recriminations between several nationalists in India regarding the issue of women’s exploitation. They have criticised the British government for not taking care of the welfare of Indian workers in Malaya and does not respect the traditions of Indian society. They stressed that one of the leading causes of immoral incidents as well as crimes involving Indian labour is due to the unbalanced gender ratio. According to one article in The Indian newspaper in 1936,

‘it is easy to blame him [the coolie] ...but those wisecracks who find fault in him are themselves responsible for his situation...for past many years one could observe a steady increase in sex crimes among the labouring Indian in Malaya...and the seeds have been sown by the policy of ...sex ratio...the only women available for the immigrant bachelors to marry are the [already] married women’ (Datta, 2016)

In his struggle against the British Occupation of India, M.K. Gandhi, an Indian freedom fighter, uses these moral issues of Indian women labourers in Malaya. Gandhi has accused the British administration policy, and the lack of facilities on the Malayan estates become factors to the increase in cases of low morality among Indian women on the estate. He has invited all the people of India to jointly uphold the Indian culture and Indian women through the anti-colonial movement he launched in India.

Reports in court on various criminal cases at that time involving Indian workers on the estate include subjects related to the murder (the wife) as a result of adultery and wife enticement. According to colonial archival sources and court reports, the act of wife killing occurred as a result of the jealousy of the husband. He assumed that when their wife fled with another man, then this act had degraded their position and their dignity. (Datta, 2016)

The exploitation of Indian women becomes more pronounced when cases heard in court are not in favour of the woman simply because the court could not prove the existence of a marital relationship between the two couples. This non-existence is due to the absence of laws requiring a man and woman to register a marriage in India legally. (Federated Malay States, Proceedings of the Federal Council, 1929). The statement issued by the agency evidenced this reports the Indian government in Malaya in 1935,

‘The common plea of the accused person when a husband alleges that his wife has been taken away by another man is that there has been no traditional marriage between the two. And on this plea, the culprit very often not only escapes punishment but can retain the woman also.’ (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya for the year 1934)

Due to the pressure from the Indian government to resolve issues involving immoral activities of Indian women and murder cases among Indian labourers, the Malaya government has introduced ‘Marriage Registration Act for Hindus’ in 1924. It requires all couples who are Indians in Malaya to register their marriage legally. All district officials, as well as revenue collectors in Kuala Lumpur and Seremban, have been appointed as legal marriage registrars. Unfortunately, after six months of the act coming into force, only 28 marriages were registered, of which 17 involved couples from the Sri Lankan descent and the rest involved other educated Indian couples. The objective of encouraging more labourers to register marriages failed altogether. In the Agents of the Government of India reports, has stated that this act does not bring any change because the marriage registration process involves relatively high costs as well as complex procedures. To simplify the system, the British government appointed estate manager as the marriage registrar and reducing the registration fee from \$ 2 to \$ 1. Notices regarding benefits of registering the marriage have been printed in Tamil and distributed all over the estates. (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya for the year 1929& 1934).

The introduction of this marriage registration act only met the mere demands of the colonial government in Malaya and legislative provisions, but the conservative-minded Indian workers ignored it altogether. British colonial government and the Indian government should require Indian labourers to register their marriage at the deportation centres in India before they are allowed to travel to Malaya. Through this method, the problems involving Indian women on the estate or elsewhere will be most likely to reduce.

3.2. ‘Drinking’ habits

Toddy drinking practices among Indian workers began to increase in line with the growth of rubber estates in Malaya. The existence of a toddy shop is a must in addition to temples, schools and homes. The opening of toddy shops in almost all estates is encouraged by the employers in the estates. By doing this, in their opinion, it is easier to exploit labourers who are always in a drunken state. Moreover, Indian labourers on the estate do not have the opportunity to engage in any social activities after their working hours, so the only entertainment they have is to drink toddy with friends in toddy shops. The estate authorities also prevented Indian labourers from leaving the estate in the afternoon for other social activities partly due to the poor transportation provided. So the British realised that by introducing the practice of drinking toddy and the opening of toddy shops were the only measures to bind these Indian labourers to remain in the estate.

This toddy drinking habit also involves Indian women. Indian women began to familiarise with the practice of drinking toddy only after migration to Malaya. The stressful life in the plantation system, extreme workload and the responsibilities that await them after returning home make female labourers weak, and toddy drinks are the only solution they find. To get rid of tiredness, they began to show addiction to this drink. As evidence, the participation of women in this practice is in the Indian Agent of Malaya reports 1931 which indicated that ‘has converted almost the whole labour force into habitual drinkers including in some cases, women and children.’ (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya for the year 1931) Drinking toddy to relieve stress, was also used as an excuse for Indian women to start this habit. When Indian male labourers were sent to the Siamese border to build a deadly railway line, many lost their lives. In an investigation conducted by the United Planting Association of Malaya, as a result of the deaths of many Indian male labourers, a total of 5,730 Indian female labourers became widows. At the same time, 6,975 children became orphan in 1946. In this situation, toddy was used as a platform to relieve their stress. (Malayan Union; Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1946)

Toddy intake among Indian women has led to the emergence of various problems in the family such as disputes, fights and quarrels. The drinks they enjoy not only impact the breakdown of the household but also bring multiple effects such as physical disability, visual impairment, diarrhoea, poisoning and ultimately leads to death caused by drinking toddy in excessive amounts.

3.3. Education

Early education for the children of Indian labourer to Malaya was made available on the estate. It is the responsibility of the employer on the estate, through the implementation of labour codes 1912 and 1923, to provide schools on the estate if there are more than ten children aged six to 12 years. (Selvakumaran, 1994) However, there was no sincere effort among employers or the colonial government to provide a sound education system for these workers because they want the working generation to remain so as not to disrupt the social hierarchy. That is, there is a workforce that will take over the ageing workforce. From an employee’s point of view, they prefer their children to work with them on the estate so that the children can also earn a small income to meet the needs of the family.

Literacy rates among Indian women are meagre compared to women of other races. There were only five Tamil girls’ schools, three in Singapore and two in Perak by 1938. (Special Report on Education in Malaya, 1948; 698) Although Tamil education was provided on the estate by employers, parents still do not send their daughters to school. For example, the number of boys enrolled in Tamil school around the Federated Malay States stands at 24% (7,633) in 1934, but the girls only accounted for 11.3% of 3,156 students. (Annual Report on Education in Federated Malay States, 1934) In 1938, of the 22,820 children enrolled in Tamil primary schools, only 7,236 were girls, and in 1947 the number of female students in Tamil schools only increased to 13, 645 pupils. (Dancz, 1987) The Annual Report on Education in the Federated Malay States (1948), clearly states Indian parents themselves do not give their daughters priority in getting an education,

‘the vernacular schools, on the whole, provide education to children of illiterate or semi-illiterate parents. For this reason, the school life of a girl is short as such parents regard her education as of less important than that of her brother and she is too often taken away after a year or two, to work or to assist her mother at home. The smattering of knowledge which she has gained is quickly lost, and in due course, she becomes the ignorant mother of children. This perhaps is one of the main reason why the standard of the culture of this Indian community remains low.’

The low literacy rate, as well as their reluctance to educate their daughters, proves that the traditional culture of Indian society which considers education for daughters is futile as daughters will leave the family as soon as they get married. The literacy rate is higher among Indian women in the city, especially the children of clerks and shop owners who are aware of the importance of education for girls. The consequences of lack of awareness to the extent of education for girls has led the Indian women to fall far behind in all aspects compared with Malay and Chinese women.

3.4. Economy

Indian women’s participation in the economic field in Malaya was more focused on the agricultural sector. Most of them live in rural areas and engage in agriculture which is of little interest to women of other races, and it’s considered low, both in status and salary. According to the census conducted in 1921, 69.3% workers comprise of Indians, 18.9% of Chinese and 10.2% are Malays. Agricultural activities in the estate area, which initially focused on sugar and coffee and later switched to rubber and oil

palm have employed both male and female workers by engaging them in tapping and weeding activities. Hiring women workers as labourers also benefit employers because they can pay lower wages than male workers. The census conducted in 1921, indicates that there were 136,181 Indian women in Malaya and 73,084 of them works in the agriculture and other economic sectors. (Nathan, 1922)

The salary received by Indian women, especially those who were married was beneficial in terms of additional income to support the family. Although the tapping work carried out by male or female labourer is the same, male labourer got a higher salary than a female labourer. During the Japanese Occupation, many male workers went on to build the deadly Burma-Siamese railways. The production of rubber and tin products got halted. The Japanese started controlling imports and food rations. (Jain, 1984) Indian women emerged as the head of the family, bearing the burden of family life by tapping rubber and farming at the same time. The experience they went through and the difficulties they faced have given new confidence to Indian women to be independent and to be able to work hand in hand with men in fighting for their rights.

After the Japanese defeat, Indian labourer on the estate has undergone various changes, especially in terms of self-confidence and the desire to bring change to the estate community has begun to spread within them. The generation that existed at that time was the generation born in Malaya, and they no longer see India as their motherland. They began to claim their rights through organisations as well as trade unions, especially issues related to salaries. The return of British to Malaya gave a new hope among estate workers, mostly women workers in India. The wages of estate workers were increased, including for women workers, but unfortunately, the salaries received were not commensurate with the soaring cost of living compared to 1941. (Malayan Union Annual Report of the Labor Department, 1946)

4. Struggle During the Japanese Occupation

The Japanese Occupation has given a form of awareness among women in Malaya. The Japanese Occupation has brought many hardships to women in general. The experiences during the war recorded in their memory and biographies show the struggles of women in their daily lives. Various things began to worry women, especially mothers and fathers of girls who had to hide their daughters or send them to live with distant relatives to protect them from being raped and tortured or to be a Japanese military sex slave at that time. (Mahani, 2016)

Although the Japanese have a profound impact on the Chinese in Malaya, Indian labourers on the estate also suffered hardships. By the end of 1942, 18 companies have joined the Japanese-owned Syonan Rubber Syndicate which has taken over the rubber industry in Singapore and Malaya. This syndicate only allows labourers to work for 10 to 15 days in a month and pay daily wages where the rate is meagre which is almost 30% to 40% less than the wages received from the British colonialists. The Japanese military used a system of forced labour where Indian male labourers were forced to leave their families and were on to work on the construction of a deadly railway line from Bangkok to Rangoon. As a result of this, Indian female labourers lived alone on the estates, and the military took the opportunity to harass and some even raping the women. (Datta, 2015) Some women were locked in a room, stripped naked and tied to chairs and beaten.

Although the Indians had to overcome many difficulties experienced during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, a positive development invested by Japan is fighting tooth and nail to free the motherland from the clutches of colonialism. Adhering to the slogan Asia for the Asians, Japan has instilled the spirit of nationalism among Indians in Malaya to fight and to free India from British rule. Accordingly, the Indian nationalist went on to establish the Indian Independence League (IIL), a political organisation in 1928 to oppose the British administration in India under the leadership of Ras Behari Bose. When the IIL begin to receive an overwhelming response, a military movement, the Indian National Army (INA) was established under the IIL wing and placed under the leadership of Colonel Mohan Singh. (Dancz, 1987; Datta, 2016) Unfortunately, due to the leadership problems and their relatively loose goals, the popularity of IIL and INA received less response from Indians after 1942. When Japan appointed a very charismatic nationalist figure Subhas Chandra Bose as IIL leader, then the strong support of Indians began to shine. Subhas Chandra Bose is a radical nationalist leader and was once the leader of the Congress party in India. In July 1943, he became President of IIL and Chief Commander of INA. In October 1943, he established a temporary Indian independence government known as Azad Hind. The Azad Hind government declared war on Britain and the United States and gained recognition from Japan, Germany and Italy. (Hills, 1993) The IIL started getting overwhelming support from the Indians in Malaya regardless of sex because the fight IIL is high irrespective of the caste, class, gender and political ideology. The exciting thing here is the involvement of women in the IIL struggle. Subhas Chandra Bose has introduced 12 departments under IIL and 12 ministries in his interim government. One department and one ministry were set aside for women and appointed Lt. Col. Lakshmi Swaminathan, a 30-year-old female doctor as the leader. (Ramachandra, 1970; Dancz, 1987; Datta, 2015; Lebra, 2008)

Bose's action has received support from Indian women, and even this action led to the establishment of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, a women's army under INA. Women consider the move to establish this regiment as a form of respect. He once said that the role of women is vital to liberate the country from the clutches of colonialism. The call was received well from the Indian woman in Malaya and Singapore estimated to be over 2,000 Indian women have declared to join this unit after listening to his

speech. Meanwhile, a former female fighter in Rani Jhansi, Janaki Nahappan, she estimates that 1,000 women have joined this unit and most of them are educated women. Even so, there are Indian women labourers who join the Rani Jhansi unit and fight alongside elite women fighters consisting of doctors, teachers and nurses. Women's participation shows the emergence of emancipation and nationalism among women of Indian descent in Malaya. This awareness of nationalism among Indian women is noticeable through the voluntary participation of elite women and grassroots women to liberate the Indian nation from British Occupation. (Ruhana Padzil, 2016: 278)

However, many historians are not sure what the real reason was for the action of Subhas Chandra Bose, some say it was set up to get the support of men, some even said it was a propaganda measure. Although Bose is said to be a person who is very concerned about gender equality in involving women to achieve Indian independence, his actions are often associated with a politically motivated move. There is an opinion that says the emancipation of women is not the primary goal of Subhas Chandra Bose, and his real goal is only Indian independence. This opinion has been disputed by women who are considered to be elites who have held high positions in the regiment such as Dato' Rasammah Bhupalan. She stressed that the establishment of this regiment is to show that women also need to play an essential role in the movement to liberate the homeland and work together with men for that purpose. She also noted that when Indian men who joined the British army saw Indian women willing to leave their families and join the battlefield for the future of the country, then this would create guilt among Indian men. (Gopinath, 2007)

According to Dr Sahgal, the Indian community in Southeast Asia at that time consisted of people living in poverty who did not hold high positions such as labourers in rubber estates, workers in the Public Works Department, clerks and office assistants. Based on their belief in Bose's holy intentions, nearly 1000 women joined the regiment to bring India's independence from colonial rule. In Bose's speech, Dr Sahgal stated that he stressed that the participation of women in the struggle for freedom of the homeland is crucial. The freedom they want to achieve is not only the freedom of the motherland but also freedom for themselves, "... now, this is their chance not only to get the freedom of the country but to get their emancipation". (Sahgal, 1990)

However, all archival materials and oral history resources available only focus on one group, namely the elite women. Meanwhile, the voices of subaltern Indian women, namely Indian women in estates which comprise almost 80% of the Rani of Jhansi regiment expertise are not given attention and appreciation. What was the real purpose of their participation, was it because they wanted to rise against the British Occupation? As previously informed, these subaltern Indian women are made up of uneducated and vulnerable groups to the outside world. In a situation like this, of course, nationalist ideas like the highly educated Subhas Chandra Bose are not easily understood by this group. The real purpose of Indian women on the estate participating in this regiment is to escape the shackles of punishment they face on the estate. The problem of lack of food, clothing, sexual harassment and domestic violence are among the reasons they join this regimen just to get protection. The establishment of this regiment only meets the needs of nurses and cooks to provide food for independence fighters. Although initially, members of the unit were given military training, they did not participate in any activities on the battlefield.

According to Andaya (2017), although this regiment was established to play a supporting role such as cooking, treating and side work, this regiment also received military training. It was also involved in the war in Burma. However, she also agrees with the opinion that Indian women join this regiment to escape the shackles of poverty and also experience discrimination due to different castes and social classes while being members of the regiment

'The uneducated young Tamil women who left the plantations to join the INA knew little about nationalism in India, and within the regiment, they still experienced the discrimination of caste and class. Nevertheless, they embraced the opportunity to escape lives of poverty and drudgery, and their example was often invoked by Bose to inspire male recruits.'

Public opinion says that involvement in this regiment has given recognition to Indian women. It has provided an opportunity for Indian women to re-evaluate their existence in society. Indian women who returned after the failure of this regiment were among the women who changed in terms of thinking, courage, respect and longing for freedom. However, all these opinions are suitable for elite Indian women who came back with sensational stories to share to the world. Still, what happened to Indian women on the estate, no one knows. Their information does not appear in any historical snippet about women's struggle against colonialism. This non-existence proves that socioeconomic position also plays an essential role in gaining recognition and appreciation.

5. Conclusion

Conservative views are often cast on the role of women in Indian society in Malaysia. Although the women participated in the maintenance of livelihood to meet the needs of the family, they are still considered as 'dependent' on men. They are always 'protected' and isolated from the outside world.

Exposure and influence of nationalist movements from countries such as India and the Malay and Chinese women's involvement in social activism, the workers' struggle and political consciousness that exists within them have inspired deeply to

Indian women. The acts of injustice, the exploitation of labour and the experiences during the Japanese Occupation have opened their minds and thoughts to join women of other races in fighting for their rights and interests.

It is this personal experience and awareness of nationalism that emerges among women that led them to decide to engage in politics as Indian women figures such as Janaki Athi Nahappan and Devaki Krishnan have done. Even the experience gained during the Japanese Occupation and involvement in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment also made some figures like Rasammah Bhupalan to be active in self-help organisations further to strengthen the position of Indian women in Malaysia. The socioeconomic situation, as well as the political awareness of Indian women in Malaysia, received more serious attention after the 1960s.

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