



Bound by Kin: The Kangani System in South Indian Plantations

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Summary- A closer look at the lives of plantation workers bound by restrictions of the Kangani System in South India and other parts of Southeast Asia.

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With the evolution of the plantation system, access to cheap but quality labour was important for landowners. The pioneer planters' initial attempts to hire the locals, particularly tribals, ended in dismal failure. Used to growing their own food and living off the land, the regimented schedule and reliance on mono-crop plantations clashed with their lifestyle. Some of the recruits died in transit and on the estates, while others fled away. These conditions might have compelled the British to think in terms of the Zamindari System which was successfully implemented about a century earlier. The result was the Free Contractors System which in the Assam tea plantations were known as Sardaris.¹ A variant of the Sardari System in the South Indian Plantations was the Kangani or Maistry System.

Kangani and their Work Gang

Kangani is an anglicised form of the Tamil word 'kankani' and describes persons who oversee workers (kan means 'eye', kani means 'keep watch').² The term was originally used for those who supervised the agricultural labourers on temple land in South India, which was restricted to men. The terms kangani and maistry are drawn from the Tamil language. Kangani can be translated as 'headman', 'foreman', or overseer, while maistry means a 'supervisor'.³

The kanganies are drawn from the estate labourers' ranks, and their relation with their work-gang members is often characterised by mutual trust and goodwill. A kangani used kinship and caste ties to bind plantation labourers to them. As the planters calculated, this common bond aided the kanganies in controlling the village workers and their workplaces.



Figure 1. Nagan Perulammal, the first female Kangani in Sri Lanka (1896 to 1936). Image: History of Ceylon Tea, 1930

These kanganies exercised the power to determine the working hours and wages of the labourers and received a good amount as commission. Generally, the kangani or maistry entered into a contract with the planter in writing and it was signed by the planter and maistry. The document is seldom registered. In some parts of Travancore, a verbal agreement was supplemented by a promissory note executed by the maistry. According to the agreement, the maistry received a lump sum amount in advance and undertook to supply a certain number of coolies for plantation work for a certain period. Most of the estates had a written agreement executed by the maistry/kangani acknowledging the receipt of the amount of the advance and agreeing to keep the stipulated number of workers in the estate and also to work with his gang, in return for which the estate superintendent agreed to pay him a commission of 10–15% on the earnings of the workers in their unit.⁴

Later, the position became heritable and, thus, kanganies belonged to the same or related families. In an estate at Ponmudi in Thiruvananthapuram, the members of a

¹ Kumar, Suresh. "The Kangany System in the Plantations of South India: A Study in the Colonial Mode of Production." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 49 (1988): 516 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44148440>.

² Modi, Renu. "Colonial Period: Indenture, Kangani and Maistry Systems." In *Sociology of Indian Diaspora*, 1st ed., Vol. 1. University of Mumbai, 2015: 12.

³ Modi, 2015, p. 13.

⁴ Kumar, 1988, p. 517.

family from Tirunelveli were the kanganies for generations till the system was abolished in 1956.⁵ Higher commission was given for increased attendance of workers, the kangani had received no advance to be given to workers, or he had brought at least 80% of the workers he had agreed to. Besides, the kanganies received remuneration proportional to the amount of work done by their labourers.

Indebted into Slavery

Most plantation workers came from areas with limited or no access to the means of production, with many indebted to local landlords and moneylenders. For low-caste Indian labourers, the opportunity to work on plantations meant a way out of their depressed conditions in their caste-ridden village.⁶ The town-based labourers also tried to improve their position by accepting work on plantations, while other workers left areas plagued by famine. The labourers were given false information about their destination and the nature of plantation work—an explanation for why people with access to land also left for the plantations. But it also means that the choice of the labourers could have been different if they had known the circumstances during transport and life on the plantations. Some were even made captive and transported to plantations against their will.

Indentured labour recruitment prevailed during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century. Under this system, a labourer was bound by a penal contract to serve one particular employer for a specified period. The state provided the penal codes (the Workman's/ Criminal Breach of Contract Act in British India and the Coolie Ordinance in the Dutch East Indies), which enabled plantations to track down, sentence, and

punish runaway labourers.⁷ This, however, did not automatically mean that the labour conditions were much different before the enactment of these legal measures or after their abolition.



Figure 2. Indian Indentured labourers in the West Indies. Image: Wikimedia Commons, 1875

Although not bound by any written agreement, even the non-indentured labourers worked and lived in a state of bondage. This was brought about by the violent treatment of the plantation labourers by the planters and the overseers (named respectively kangani in south India and Ceylon/Sri Lanka, sirdar in north India and on Mauritius, tandil [Chinese foremen] in Sumatra, and mandur [Javanese foremen] on Java and Sumatra).⁸

The Pulayas and Parayas formed the lowest strata of society. The other, higher-ranked castes regarded them as the most impure of all human beings, if human at all, for they were regularly referred to as enslaved people.⁹ They were also offered by their masters as presents to friends or as gifts to temples. As humiliating for the Pulayas and Parayas, the members of these so-called slave castes were also required to observe

⁵ Kumar, 1988, p. 517.

⁶ Kumar, 1988, p. 517.

⁷ Modi, 2015, p. 2.

⁸ Behal, Rana. "Indian Migrant Labourers in South-East Asian and Assam Plantations under the British Imperial System." *NLI Research Studies*, no. 127 (2017): 6.

⁹ Baak, Paul E. "About Enslaved Ex-Slaves, Uncaptured Contract Coolies and Unfreed Freedmen: Some Notes about 'Free' and 'Unfree' Labour in the Context of Plantation Development in Southwest India, Early Sixteenth Century–Mid 1990s." *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 1999): 126. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x99003108>.

practices of subordination following their ritual status. Maintaining a minimum physical distance from higher castes was one of these requirements. If they did not do so and approached a higher caste transgressing the 'pollution distance', the former was accorded a severe punishment by the latter, sometimes inflicting death on the serf.

It should also be acknowledged that these 'unfree' labourers, despite being often cruelly treated, were, at least in some respects, better off than the so-called 'free' labourers.¹⁰ The former workers, particularly those attached to paddy lands, were assured of employment and food during the greater part of the year. The latter category of workers was indeed 'free' to offer its labour to the highest bidder but could find neither work nor nourishment in cases of lack of employment or scarcity of food.

For this reason, many attached labourers had no reason to break the bonds with their landlords. In addition, for most agricultural labourers, the journey to the estates, which took about two to three days on average, was considered highly objectionable. Besides infection of the bronchi, most human suffering in the plantation districts was caused by hookworm, dysentery, smallpox, plague, cholera, and malaria. These diseases were often fatal, as medical knowledge was limited. Furthermore, agricultural labourers realised that caste background continued to play a crucial role in the estates. They feared cruel treatment by higher castes and Europeans. And lastly, many labourers were aware that the wages offered differed from the actual payments. The plantation workers were often paid less than promised.

Indebted by Kinship

The advance offered by the kangani was of crucial importance in many regards. For example, it enabled those workers who were financially bonded to a particular landlord and moneylender to pay off their

debts. In addition, many of these labourers, who were often extremely poor, could not resist taking the advances offered by the kanganies. They had to take care of their immediate basic needs, like food, clothing, and shelter. Others, and this group was less significant, used the advances for extraordinary expenditures, like marriages and other important social events. Finally, the advance system remained widespread throughout South India during the nineteenth century.

The kanganies gave the workers an exaggeratedly optimistic impression of plantation life, which partially took away their fear of all kinds of frightening diseases, inhuman work conditions, and low wages.¹¹ The recruiters obtained most of their labour from among their own family and friends. The workers were thus, apart from their financial bonds, also closely related to the kanganies in a strictly social sense. And lastly, the recruiters showed their gang of labourers the way through the jungle to reach their destination estate. The mobilised labourers were immobilised at the same time. Although freed from landlords and moneylenders, they were enslaved by their new employers. As mentioned above, the advances offered by the recruiters were often immediately used by the workers to pay off already existing debts, to meet basic needs, and to defray expenses related to family affairs.

Moreover, the advances were accepted to pay for the journey to the plantations, particularly food. Thus, even before reaching the estate, the contracted labourers became indebted to the kanganies, who, as seen earlier, were bonded through contracts and debts to their superiors: the planters. In addition, the financial situation of the labourers did not improve during their contract period. Most kanganies were, in fact, jobbers; apart from the recruitment of workers, they supervised 'their' gang of labourers on the estates. This meant, for example, that the kanganies, who, apart from their fixed pay as overseers, received

¹⁰ Baak, 1999, p. 127.

¹¹ Behal, 2017, p. 12.

commission on their gangs' earnings at the end of the year, and derived much benefit from keeping their workers indebted.

As long as the plantation labourers had to clear their debts, the kangannies could force them to work longer hours than initially agreed, coerce sick workers to fulfil their daily tasks in the fields, and detail labourers beyond the periods of the contract, all of which contributed to a larger amount of wages paid by the planters, of which, as mentioned, the kangannies obtained their share. To reinforce the debt slavery, the workers received a weekly food issue on credit together with small cash advances. Only after the workers were allowed to return home, which often occurred only months after the expiry of their contracts, did the labourers receive the balance of their wages, which in most cases were paid by the kangannies themselves. For the planters, kangannies, together with workers escaping their particular estate, was a problem of a more serious nature. It often meant irrecoverable debts and an immediate labour shortage.

In many cases, the kangannies themselves left the plantation to find higher wages and better living conditions nearby. In other instances, planters, seriously short of workers, took the initiative. They contacted influential kangannies, already bonded to fellow planters, either personally or more often through others, to come over to their estate. Although farmers with relatively healthy estates and good wages were comparatively well off, the fact that kangannies and labourers could look for the best employer was disadvantageous for all planters. It drove up the price of labour.

To counteract this development, district planting associations frequently discussed rules intended to prevent the crimping of workers. Kangannies with their labourers leaving Travancore territory before the expiry of their contracts represented perhaps the most important labour problem

planters had to face.¹² No legal means existed by which the planter could secure their extradition to enforce their contractual obligations. Despite the abolition of the Criminal Breach of Contract Act, the labourers became indebted to the recruiters and, because of the low wages and the dishonest payments, were unable to pay off their debts. This continued at least until the early 1960s.¹³

The System in Practice

On payday, which occurred occasionally, many workers obtained a black receipt, meaning they still owed money to the kangani. The recruiters-cum-field supervisors disguised their holding back of payment and manipulation of the accounts by informing the particular workers that they had been lent more than they had earned. The kangannies used their position as creditors to force the workers to work long hours. Working days from 5 a.m. until 10 p.m. were no exception.

The kangannies also dominated the workforce in other ways to reinforce their position as superiors. Learning to show respect, the workers were not allowed to protect their feet or cover their heads from the burning sun. Though often regarded as the only way out of their arduous circumstances, running away was hardly an option for the malcontents. Many workers, males and females alike, saw no way out of the cruel labour regime and committed suicide, taking poison or hanging themselves in the labour lines or trees.¹⁴

The maistries supplied credit to the workers for sundry purposes, and the advances were adjusted only at the time of settlement. By that time, they would have accumulated to ₹25 or ₹30. The penal provisions of the various punitive acts, the practice of payment of account once in three years and later once a year, the vigilance of the officers of the Labour Department of the UPASI, and the kangannies created in the

¹² Kumar, 1988, p. 518.

¹³ Kumar, 1988, p. 518.

¹⁴ Baak, 1999, p. 129.

plantation a class of indentured labour akin to slavery.¹⁵

Labourers always repaid their debts to the kangani due to their social dependence on him. The kanganies were given the authority by the management to mete out severe and drastic punishments and, in the first two decades of the century, in some cases, even had authority to kill the estate workers who engaged in premarital sexual intercourse.

The estates were considered as semi-autonomous space within the state. The planter's authority prevailed over the district administration. The civil services and judiciary gave them all possible support. These functionaries of the state never interfered with the internal administration of the estates. The law had labour instructions, but it remained only on paper. The frequent famines in South India came to be favourable for the planters. Most job seekers would have been agricultural workers in the employment of land owners for generations, paying debts accrued over generations. The planters preferred low-caste labourers because they were believed to be hard workers and were available from the South. Each estate needed 500–800 workers in the hills.¹⁶ In the initial years, the work in the plantations was only from September to the next May.

Life in the Labour Lines

A Tundu practice was in practice, where labourers moving to a new estate had to show a piece of paper demonstrating that they were not in debt to their former estate. The labour lines are the worker's houses near the plantations. It was divided into several tiny rooms, with 6–8 people in each. By the 1860s, the standard of the labour lines changed, and the lines now consisted of 6–10 rooms, each averaging about 150 sq ft and containing 10–20 people.

¹⁵ Muhammedali, T. *Histories Unbounded*. Kerala History Congress. Current Books, 2019. <https://books.google.ie/books?id=gFM-zwEACAAJ>.

¹⁶ Behal, 2017, p. 13.

The kanganies lived in separate rooms allotted to them by the planters at the end of each labour line. The kangani usually enhanced his position by appointing sub-kanganies from his extended family.

At the top of the organisational level was the planter, the periya dorai (big master), and immediately behind him, the European assistant, the sinna dorai (small master), who lived in the smaller bungalow.¹⁷ Below them were the native staff consisting of kanaka pillai and others who ran the office, and beneath them was the head kangani, who had overall charge of the labourers. Beneath him were the sesilara kanganies (assistant supervisors), those in charge of the various labour gangs.¹⁸ The runaways of labourers were frequent during June and July due to the miserable climate.



Figure 3. Indentured Indian Women in Malaya. Image: *Penang Monthly*, 1860s

During the initial years of planting, most of the labourers recruited were male workers. The recruitment of female workers increased steadily with the start of the Kangani System. The kanganies later adopted the practice of recruiting labour on a family basis. The women workers were employed as dependents of their husbands and were given the estates' lowest and most menial tasks. The women were subjected to the same form of punitive measures as men and were whipped and flogged while being subjected to sexual exploitation. Sometimes, the kanganies forced them to

¹⁷ Muhammedali, 2019.

¹⁸ Muhammedali, 2019.

become the mistresses of their masters. They lived with no legal safeguards to protect them.

Thus, in South India, a plantation labourer belonged more to the Sardar of kangani than to the estate. The annual settlement was just on paper. In effect, the labourer was condemned to stay there till his death. The kanganies usually took up contract work from the managers, especially for weeding, and to make better profits employed women and children for the work and extracted more labour from them. As the settlement of wages was affected through the kanganies, they would retain the whole amount under one pretext or another.

Typical of a capitalist production system, the role of the government was supportive rather than interventionist, providing the conditions that were necessary for the economy to flourish. The then-Travancore government lavished funds for the creation of infrastructural facilities in plantations. The British government came in with various legislations like the Workmen's Breach of Central Act of 1859, Estate Migration Act etc. The former Act was intended to prevent the captive labourers from fleeing from the plantations.¹⁹ Even though some estates did have a written agreement with the kangani stipulating that the labourers supplied would work for ten months, by and large, there was no legal contract entered into between the labourer and the employer.²⁰ This precluded any sort of formal relationship between the planter and the labourer. However, it provided for a hierarchical relationship which gave it a feudal look.

The chief feature of the kangani-recruited labour force in Travancore was that around 80% of the labour came from the neighbouring Tamil Districts of Madurai and Tirunelveli, one of the major recruiting centres for plantation.²¹ This meant much cheaper labour was available outside Kerala and the planting companies took advantage

of such a situation. Labourers coming from elsewhere were often not familiar with the local customs and language. They were defenceless in the face of the power exercised over them. This vulnerability was exacerbated by a system of diversified recruitment among the migrant population. The recruitment of indentured labour from outside the region was thus due to colonial compulsions and a miniature of it was obtained in the plantations of Travancore.

These features of the Kangani System defy easy categorisation in terms of capitalism or feudalism. The type of economic organisation obtained in plantations had most of the features of the capitalist system: (1) private ownership and control of the economic instruments of production, i.e. capital, (2) the gearing of economic activity for making profits, (3) a market framework that regulated this activity, and (4) the appropriation of profits by the owners of the capital.²² In a capitalist system, the labour is by workers who are free agents, but here we get a lord-serf relationship.

As India became independent, the government passed many laws protecting the plantation workers and providing them with a degree of security, the most important of which was the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. The Kangani System itself was abolished in 1956. The kanganies became supervisors. It was not merely a change in nomenclature but a change that had far-reaching implications. The service conditions of the supervisors and labourers were regulated and their relationships were defined in concrete legal terms.

Kangani Coolies in Southeast Asian Colonies

Such mechanisms were devised to meet the demands of expanding merchant capital under the aegis of British imperialism in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), Malaya (present-day Malaysia), and Burma (present-day Myanmar). The Kangani

¹⁹ Kumar, 1988, p. 518.

²⁰ Behal, 2017, p. 17.

²¹ Muhammedali, 2019.

²² Baak, 1999, p. 131.

System coexisted with other forms of recruitment systems in Malaya such as the indenture system, and after the decline of this mechanism in 1910, the kangani method gained prominence. The Kangani System was executed in Ceylon and Malaya, while labour was recruited through the Maistry System in Burma. Both these systems used 'middlemen' and introduced a debt-bondage relationship to recruit labourers for plantations in the British colonies.

The Kangani System was initially introduced to recruit labour for coffee and tea plantations of Ceylon in the early nineteenth century. It was extended to Malaya in the late 19th century. This system was disbanded in 1938 after the banning of Indian immigration to Malaya in the same year. In the case of Ceylon, the Kangani System came into existence most likely in the 1820s or latest by the year 1830 and remained in practice until 1940.²³ Between 1840 and 1942, under these two systems, it is estimated that over 1.7 million Indians were recruited to work in Malaya (including Singapore), over 1.6 million in Burma and approximately one million in Ceylon.²⁴ Through the Kangani and Maistry Systems, labour was recruited from the erstwhile Madras Presidency, in the 19th century. The surplus labour force from the hinterlands in Tamilnadu was transferred to the tea, coffee, and rubber plantations of Western Ghats, Ceylon, and Malaya and for rice farming in Burma.

The kangani was not a "mediator of conflicts between labour and capital: he was very much the agent of capital and his primary role was to subject labour to the rigorous discipline required by the plantation production system." In contrast to the Kangani System of Ceylon, the kanganies in Malaya had less power because the labourers received wages directly from the plantation management. As compared to the indenture system, the Kangani System assumed significance because it ensured a reliable, stable labour supply and smooth

functioning of the plantations, given the close ties of ascription and subordination of the labourers due to the debt-bondage relationship. Besides, the Kangani System resolved the gender imbalance on the plantations as it encouraged family migration.



Figure 4. Indian labourers in Fiji. Image: Wellcome Collection, 1870s

In contrast to the Kangani System of Ceylon, the Kangani System of Malaya was less dependent on the kangani, as the recruitment process was controlled or regulated by the planters through their recruitment firms. Thus, the kangani had to depend on or coordinate with the recruitment firms. Moreover, the kangani of Malaya was not the centre of the plantation system unlike in Ceylon, because the plantation management in Malaya disbursed wages directly to the labourers. In addition, due to the existence of a plantation bureaucracy, the planters exercised strong control over both the kangani and the labourers. Thus, the position of kangani in Ceylon was more dominant as compared to his counterpart in Malay.

Maistry - a Middleman Employer

The Maistry System was a variant of the Kangani System in terms of recruitment and subordination of labourers to meet the growing demands of unskilled labourers for the colonial economy of Burma. The majority of labourers were drawn from the

²³ Modi, 2015, p. 10.

²⁴ Modi, 2015, p. 9.

Andhra region of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1869 and the Labour Act of 1876 encouraged and established the Maistry System for labour recruitment in Burma. The British India Steam Navigation handled the labour traffic between Burma and India. The employers in Burma preferred recruiting Indian workers through the maistries as they found this system cheaper and more manageable.

The Maistry System, unlike the Kangani System, was relatively more structured, hierarchically graded and had a well-defined labour relationship wherein the "Labour Contractor, the Head Maistry, the Charge Maistry, and the Gang Maistry constituted the hierarchy of middlemen employers."²⁵ The main characteristic of the Maistry System of labour recruitment was the enslavement of labourers to the middlemen-employers due to the debt-bondage system. The recruits were controlled through illegal deductions of wages and disbursement by middlemen-employers. The system was highly exploitative and coercive. The same wages were paid for work in the daytime as well as at night. Further, in contrast to the Kangani System, under the maistry scheme, the labourers were subservient to the maistry and not to the factory or rice farm owners. Besides, the positions of the maistry were dominant because he had the power to dismiss the labourers arbitrarily.

Arrival of Labour Supervisors

The Act of 1869 was repealed later as it was very oppressive and aggravated labour relations. The Maistry System was finally abolished in 1937 due to the poor safeguards and working conditions that it offered to its labour recruits.

The question of abolishing the system was discussed at the 3rd session of the Industrial Committee on Plantation in November 1950. A committee appointed by the government of Kerala recommended abolishing the Kangani System and creating a new cadre of labour supervisors. Over time, the kanganies were gradually absorbed into the new category of supervisory staff towards the end of the 1960s. It was abolished in Tamilnadu in 1958 and in Kerala in 1962.

²⁵ Modi, 2015, p. 15.

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