NOTES ON THE THAI-BURMA RAILWAY   
PART VI: THE BACKGROUND TO INDIAN LABOUR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Despite the somber accounts of Malay, Burmese and Javanese (Indonesian) labourers recorded in earlier articles; there can be little doubt but that the worst sufferings of those involved in the Thai- Burma Railway were experienced by workers from the Tamil (Indian) community. Drawn from the ranks of mostly illiterate plantation workers, the Tamils have left few personal accounts of their miseries under the Japanese occupation. Any attempt to reconstruct the Tamil experience must, therefore, refer to accounts of the Tamil workers as observed by others involved in the Railway, chiefly Western prisoners- of-war (POWs), and on the sometimes chance comments of later historians.

One Tamil survivor, by the name of Tosami, was still living in Thailand when the research for this series of articles on the Thai-Burma Railway was begun. His profile - as given by a Thai relative whom the author met in Kanchanaburi some years ago - fits the description recorded by the former Japanese Kempeitai (military police) official, Nagase Takashi, in his account**,** “Search for Remaining Southeast Asian Laborers.” Nagase, however - often somewhat unreliable in transcribing accurately the names of those whom he interviewed into the roman alphabet - refers to the former labourer as “*Tothami*.” Neither of the names (*Tosami* or *Tothami*) appear to be Usual Tamil names, and they could be a transcription to render the name more intelligible to Thais.

“The first ex-laborer we met was Mr. Tothami. a Malay (sic) who was born in India... When he came from India to see his brother, who was working in a rubber plantation in Malaya, the war started. Soon after the Japanese Army came and ordered people to supply the army with a person per household. So Mr.Tothami came to the Thai-Burma Railway on a three-month contract. He said with an expression of mixed feelings, ‘The job was easier than that of the prisoners, hut many of the laborers died of numerous diseases. The number of the dead was too large to remember. After the war I wanted to go back to my brother in Malaya butI did not have enough money. I married a Thai woman by accident and we had a child. Iwould also like to go back to India, but I have a wife and child to take care of.’ The shirts he and his twelve-year-old boy had on were carefully ironed by his wife... Although they looked poor, they were surely leading a happy life.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Nagase, who had met Tosami (or Tothami) in Kanchanaburi province near the old rail course in 1980, stated that he subsequently died in 1985***.*** This assumption was incorrect. Tosami moved from Kanchanaburi a short time after his meeting with Nagase, to Amphoe Phrabuthabat in Saraburi province in order to live near his wife’s relatives. Plans for interviewing Mr. Tosami during the summer of 200l, had, perforce, to be abandoned when news was received from the family that he had passed away. His death had occurred only two months before the projected meeting and he was, to my knowledge, the last Tamil survivor remaining in Thailand. Although the vast majority of Indian labourers on the Thai-Burma Railway were Tamil plantation transported from (British) Malaya, there were some exceptions which merit further explanation. Firstly. there was a substantial Indian community resident in Thailand, Bangkok having long hosted a sizeable Indian Sikh population. A small Tamil community, composed of workers previously employed by the British when they constructed the main Thai Southern railway line (from Bangkok to Malaya), continued to reside in the Thai capital. Due to their previous experience in railway construction (under British supervision) a number of Tamils from Thailand were drafted into railway work by the Japanese authorities. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The second - and much more substantial - group of Indians came from those taken prisoner from the ranks of troops of the British Indian Army opposing the Japanese invasion. As their army moved down the Malayan Peninsula towards Singapore, the Japanese naturally captured many defeated Allied soldiers: not only Western (British and Australian) personnel, but also troops from the British Indian Army, a couple of whose battalions had been deployed in the defense of Malaya and Singapore. These captured Indian troops had been drafted from all communities throughout British India, then a wide area including all of contemporary India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These Indian troops were offered the choice of enrolment in the Japanese-supported Indian National Army, (first led by a Punjabi, Captain Mohan Singh, and later by the popular and charismatic Bengali Indian nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose) Those who refused the opportunity to fight for Indian independence were sent as labourers to such sites as the Thai-Burma Railway, or far-away New Guinea.[[3]](#footnote-3)

THE TAMIL BACKGROUND

Unlike other Asian labourers, the Tamils were far from their original homes when enticed or drafted by the Japanese into working on the Thai-Burma Railway. Already a community uprooted from its bomeland in South India, this substantial community’s existence in Malaya, Singapore and even in Thailand, was a direct result of the British Empire. Spurred on by hunger and poverty in British-administered India, and attracted by the terms offered by British Imperial agents, the Tamils flocked to those other colonies in which Britain was encouraging the growth of plantations, but in which the British colonial authorities were unwilling to employ that colony’s indigenous population. (It was usually feared that re-ordering colonial society and the country’s “*natives*” according to the dictates of the newly-emerging plantation economies in such products as coconut oil, sugar, rubber, tea etc., would somehow “*destabilise*” indigenous societal norms, thus risking “*native resentment*” and perhaps even outright rebellion against British Imperial rule). Hence, the imperial practice of transporting the necessary workers from other colonies was developed. [[4]](#footnote-4)

“Large numbers of Indians had been brought over to Malaya in the nineteenth century to work thelucrative sugar plantations in Province Wellesley. The sugar crop expanded throughout the century until the rubber tree was introduced in 1877 when two cases of seedlings from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kewwere sent to the Botanic Gardens in Singapore. Within a generation their progeny were covering millions of acres throughout Malaya where the cultivated form of the rubber tree, tended by the Indian plantation workers, was providing more latex than was cropped from the entire jungle-grown Brazilian form indigenous to the Amazon valley whence Kew had obtained its original specimens. The phenomenal rise in demand for rubber led to increased immigration from southern India to supply the plantations’ needs. Most of the Indians were Tamils from the Madras Presidency and other southern provinces**,** though there were considerable numbers of Telegus, a similar racial group who also speak Tamil and often inter-marry with Tamils. By the time of the 1931 census, there were nearly 515.000 Tamils in Malaya and 32,500 Telegus, 83 per cent and 5 per cent respectively of the total Indian population. The proportions would have been roughly the same at the time of the Japanese occupation with the Tamils largely forming the workforce on the rubber estates and the Telegus working on the coconut plantations…. The Indian rubber tappers lived on the estates themselves where they were provided with free quarters - long single-storied blocks of hutments known as the ‘*Tamil lines’* - a water supply and often free medical attention. Some also received from their employerssickness and maternity benefits; a dispensary and anti-malarial measures were also generally provided. In some cases the estate workers were permitted to graze their own stock and grow vegetables for domestic consumption. At a roughand ready level it was a comprehensive employment package within a paternalistic but by no means indulgent system. There was never any lack of prospective immigrants eager to make the journey across the Indian Ocean to enjoy regular employment on the plantations and the reasonable standard of living that went with it.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia severely disrupted the British Imperial plantation economy, the Tamil workers being the hardest hit by the accompanying upheaval.

“Although some estates returned to production with the assertion of Japanese authority, total production ran at a mere fraction of pre-war levels, thus leaving large numbers of Tamil estate labourers unemployed. Most took up gardening and scavenging for jungle and other products, to keep alive.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

P. Ramasamy, a prominent historian of the Indian community in contemporary Malaysia, gives a detailed account of the hardships endured by “*the Indian working class*”, a term inclusive of Tamil plantation labourers who provided roughly 85 per cent of its membership.

“The Indian Community, having become domiciled in Malaya since the immigration ban in 1938, suffered by virtue of the fact that the majority of its members were located in the plantations. The Indian working class with a history of exploitation under the British colonial planters, suffered when very basic items were putbeyond their reach as a result of the collapse of the wage economy. Scarcity of food and other basic items during the occupation was channeled to the working class by Indian middle-class intermediaries acting on behalf of the Japanese. These middle-class intermediaries more often than not either belonged to sub-communal groups like the Malayalees or Ceylonese, and being former members of the British colonial bureaucracy, resorted to the usual practices of exploitation and unfair distribution of food. Indian estate workers who experienced the Occupation have sad tales to tell about how these intermediaries, having gained the confidence of the Japanese, bullied, assaulted, and deprived the workers of their allocated share of food. The acute shortage of food gave rise to a situation where plantation workers would go around scavenging for food from rubbish dumps and near jungle fringes. In fact, given the acute shortage of rice, many had to subsist on tapioca and other root crops. As if this was not enough, the health and sanitation system completely broke down causing untold suffering and even deaths.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

An earlier historian of the Indian community in British Malaya, Michael Stenson, paints much the same dismal picture.

“Because of the compartmentalized, tightly-ordered and paternalistic British employment system, Indian labourers were forced to fend for themselves to an unprecedented degree…. In a purely physical sense, Indian labourers were reduced to levels of degradation below anything previously experienced. Those who were employed on the railways, at the ports or in the Japanese military labour gangs, for example, suffered from escalating inflation, inadequate pay rates and short rations. Virtually all Indian labourers were undernourished and dressed in rags by the end of the occupation. A measure of the harshness of the impact of the occupation on Indian labourers in particular is the fact that the Indian population fell by up to 100,000 or nearly 7 per cent.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

DIFFICULTIES IN TERMINOLOGY

Much confusion has been created in accounts of Railway labourers by a misunderstanding of the terminology in general use in British Malaya. The land then known as “*Malaya*” was contiguous with today’s “*West Malaysia*”, being the peninsula joining Thailand’s Kra Isthmus to the north and running south to Johor Bahru, opposite today’s Singapore. (The states of Sarawak and Sabah, today’s “*East Malaysia*”, were not included). British Malaya comprised both *Federated Malay States* and *Unfederated Malay States*, depending on the manner and time at which the various local rulers, or sultans, agreed or were forced to agree to British “*protection*” . [[9]](#footnote-9) The term “*Malay*” was - and still is - used to denote the original or indigenous inhabitants of British Malaya, adherents of Islam and still today (just) a majority of the total population of West Malaysia.

Under British Imperial rule, a vast immigration of both Indians (as indicated above) and also Chinese was encouraged. The majority of the immigrants from India were poor Tamils engaged in rubber and other plantations. A great number of impoverished Chinese were also introduced to work in the tin mines. As the accumulated number of immigrants came to approach half the peninsula’s population, the residents (later citizens) of Malaya came to be known as “*Malayans*”. The term, “*Malayan*”, thus denotes the inhabitants of British Malaya. regardless of racial origin; - the term, “*Malay*”, is restricted in meaning, denoting only the Islamic peoples indigenous to Malaya before Britain’s arrival, and specifically excludes peoples of both Chinese or Indian racial origin, regardless of their families’ time of arrival on the peninsula. By and large, British reports and documents related to Railway workers denote total numbers and conditions of “*Malayans*” (i.e. the combined numbers of Malay, Chinese and Indian inhabitants from Malaya, in contrast - for example - to “Indonesians” or “Javanese”) [[10]](#footnote-10) Exceptions - where only inhabitants of one of the three racial groups comprising Malaya are intended - are usually clearly defined and delineated.

On the other hand, Japanese military records - such as have survived - categorise workers by their ethnic origin, rather than state of normal residence. For example, “*Chinese*” may refer to Thai ethnic Chinese, Chinese from the Straits Settlements, Chinese labourers from Malaya or - of course - Chinese from China itself (in the case of Railway workers, usually from South China). The workers from British Malaya are, thus, usually subsumed in three different ethnic categories, Malay, Chinese or Indian (chiefly Tamil). Misunderstanding about the different systems of terminology employed by the Japanese and the British has further complicated any accurate accounting of the numbers of labourers involved and the particular conditions they faced.

This explains Mural Yoshinori’s otherwise surprising assertion, *“Among romusha in Thailand the biggest group was Malay. But this group probably included Malaysian Javanese, non-Javanese Indonesian, Malay-Indian and Vietnamese. It is almost impossible now to know the percentage of these ethnic groups.*” He earlier mentions, “*The category of Chinese possibly includes both Thai and Malay Chinese.*” Although it is unlikely that many “*non-Javanese-Indonesians*” were involved as Railway labourers, the Japanese military - due to their habit of maintaining ethnic distinctions - did usually differentiate between Vietnamese and “*Malay*”, both peoples being culturally and linguistically quite distinctive. [[11]](#footnote-11)

In marked contrast, the figures supplied by Major R. Campbell, OC (Officer Commanding) ‘K’ Force, in his “*Report on the Use of Malayan Labourers*”, records,

“From June 1942 to March of the following year about 60,000 prisoners of war were brought to this task from Malaya and the D.E.I. (Dutch East Indies; now Indonesia), and thereafter the introduction of Malayan labour (Indian, Chinese. Malay and, in much smaller numbers, Eurasian) commenced, a constant stream being maintained from March to December 1943. After an interval there was a resumption of the flow, the last arrivals being possibly in the late months of 1944”. [[12]](#footnote-12)

THE PROBLEM OF NUMBERS

Although such problems of terminology have contributed to an underestimate in the numbers of workers involved, further factors were pointed out by Major Campbell.

“The I.J.A. (Imperial Japanese Army) authorities stated that they had destroyed all pertinent documents and it is therefore extremely difficult to arrive at an accurate figure for the total number of labourers brought to Siam (Thailand)... (When it was pointed out to the Japanese authorities that they had accurate records of prisoner-of-war movements and therefore it was likely that they also had accurate records of labour movements, they explained that International Law demanded this in the case of prisoners-of-war, but that there was no necessity for such records in respect of movement of free labour.” [[13]](#footnote-13)

Early estimates were often based on the very incomplete statistics provided by the Japanese military. Charles Gamba, in his early pioneering work on Trade Unionism in Malaya, reports

“….approximate data obtained from the Japanese by the British authorities immediately after liberation, show that 74.000 Asians, mostly Southern Indians, were transported to work on the Siam railway. 25,000 of these were reported to have died, 12.000 returned to their former place of employment, 5.000 escaped or were unaccounted for, and a further 32,000 were reported missing. This last figure has never been explained.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

Echoing Gamba’ s numbers is the brief excerpt on the Railway cited in Sinnappah Arasaratnam’ s well-known study of the Indian community in Malaysia and Singapore.

“Then there were Japanese military projects in remote and jungle-infested parts of the country as well as in the brutal terrain north of Malaya, in Thailand and Burma, to which Indian labourers were taken and put to hard labour. The most notorious of these was the Siam Railway project, aptly termed the ‘*death railway’*, because of its heavy toll of workers mobilized for this project. An estimate puts the number of Indian lives lost at over 60,000.... The Indians were about 14 per cent of the Malayan population in 1940: this proportion had dropped to 10 per cent by l947.” [[15]](#footnote-15)

But as research into the conditions obtaining in wartime Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia has progressed, the unreliability of the Japanese figures became more evident. Following increasing numbers of interviews with survivors and the recording of their sad experiences, these early figures were clearly considerable underestimates. Contemporary historians of Indian labour in Malaya seem to agree on a figure of around 80,000 Tamils being impressed as Railway labourers. First posited by K.S. Sandhu in 1969**, [[16]](#footnote-16)** the figure was later accepted by Michael Stenson,

“In the course of 1942-43, about 80,(XX) Indian males volunteered or were coerced into joining labour gangs. to build the infamous ‘death’ railroad from Thailand to Burma of which it is probable that only half survived to return to their families.” [[17]](#footnote-17)

P. Ramasamy in his more recent work has also found this figure acceptable, “To Indian labour, the most unforgettable and tragic episode of the Occupation was the forced recruitment of labour to work on the infamousDeath Railway from Siam to Burma Between 1942 and 1943. More than 80,000 labourers were recruited to work on the railway. It seems that out of this number, less than half returned to their families.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

However, as already mentioned, Major Campbell of ‘K’ Force found that Malayan labour had continued to be recruited after the lapse of a brief interval, and stated that the last Malayan labourers had possibly continued to arrive in Thailand until the late months of 1944. Many Tamils would presumably have been included in these later “*Malayan*” arrivals. Moreover, if more than 80,000 Tamils were impressed, then Major Campbell’s total “*Malayan*” labour figure must be too low. “*Possibly 100,000 Malayan labourers were transported to Siam, hut this figure is given with considerable reserve*.” [[19]](#footnote-19) Other figures are mentioned in his report with the proviso,

“A general impression prevails that the body of labour transported to Siam was much greater than these figures indicate, and while various statements would appear to confirm this, there is as yet no conclusive evidence.   
(a) A Japanese corporal, attached to a Japanese HQ at Appuron, Burma, when speaking of the difficulties encountered by the Japanese in the building of the railway is reported to have instanced the fact that 250,000 Malayan and 100,000 Javanese labourers were brought to work on the line, but that 170,000 had died. This statement has not been confirmed. (b) A Malayan overseer of Malayan labour is reported to have stated that of 80,000 Malayan labourers introduced 30.000 had died by October 1943.   
**(c)** Other overseers, at a later date, are reputed to have suggested 100.000 deaths among Malayan labourers.” [[20]](#footnote-20)

It is intriguing that statements (a) and **(c)** are mutually self-reinforcing (particularly when the widely accepted death rates for Asian labourers are taken into account), while statement (b) appears to accord with K.S. Sandhu s estimates for Tamil labourers already noted. [[21]](#footnote-21) Perhaps the statistics of the un-n med Japanese corporal at Appuron were based on rather more substantial evidence than Major Campbell at the time realised? [[22]](#footnote-22)

THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE LEAGUE & THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY

“For Japanese strategic purposes, the Indians were more directly politicized than any other group, by means of the Indian Independence League (IIL) and the Indian National Army (INA).”[[23]](#footnote-23)

It would hardly be appropriate to attempt to deal fully with the important and complex phenomenon of the IIL and INA in this article. Briefly sketched, a Japanese officer, Major Fujiwara Iwaichi, had contacted Sikh emigres in Bangkok prior to the Japanese invasion of Malaya in order to capitalise on very real Indian resentments against British imperialism and their treatment under the Raj. The IIL(*Indian Independence League*) was the result of these activities. Major Fujiwara followed the Japanese troops on their advance down the Malaya Peninsula, winning over Indian troops serving under British command and local Indian civilians. His activities produced results: by August 1942 there were over 40 branches of the League established with a membership of some 120,000. At first the League’s official head was Resh Behari Bose, an Indian émigré long resident in Kobe, who had once been involved in organising a failed assassination attempt of the British Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, in 1912. In September of 1943 the Japanese authorities agreed to Fujiwara’s request to form an *Indian National Army* (INA), at first under the command of Captain Mohan Sing, comprised of some 16,300 Indian prisoners-of-war of the former British Indian Army. Later in 1943, leadership of both organisations passed to the charismatic and widely-respected Congress leader, Subhas Chandra Bose and a Provisional Government of Free India (*Azad Hind*) was formed in October of the same year. INA troops accompanied Japanese forces into India in the disastrous Imphal campaign of 1944. Perhaps not surprisingly, following the failures at Imphal considerable disillusionment with both the IIL and the INA seems to have occurred.[[24]](#footnote-24)

“As a consequence of the establishment of the IIL and INA, the Indians, it has often been asserted, were suddenly elevated from being the pariahs of British Malaya to a most favoured community status under the Japanese. In a sense, this was true.” [[25]](#footnote-25)

It might be expected that these events would likewise prove advantageous to the Indian Tamil community; hut the reality was somewhat different.

RECRUITMENT

“While the working class suffered, the Indian middle and clerical classes were not seriously affected In fact, under the Occupation, the Japanese, anxious to revive the plantation production system, elevated the former estate *kirani*(clerical staff) to positions formerly held by the Europeans. The *kirani,* on their part, in order to please their new masters, imposed the worst forms of regimentation in the plantations... According to Jain [[26]](#footnote-26) *‘...the more tyrannical a kirani was the more successful he became with the Japanese. Conversely, in the eyes of the Japanese officers, a kirani who identified himself with the labourers was at best incompetent and at worst suspect.” [[27]](#footnote-27)*

As noted in the accounts of labour mobilisation from Java (Indonesia) and Burma, the Japanese in Malaya used local (Indian) intermediaries for recruitment of Tamils for Railway work, with similar appalling consequences;

“With the cooperation of the estate *kirani* and other Asian intermediaries, forced labour recruitment was the order of the day. A number of those who were recruited to work on the railway project are still living in the country. Interviews with several of them over the years reveal that recruitment was not all voluntary. The Japanese imposed a quota that had to be fulfilled by the estate *kirani****.*** The estate *kirani,* out of fear and an ‘*extreme sense of loyalty’* to the Japanese imposed their own method of recruitment. Blackmail, threats, and other methods were invariably employed to obtain the labourers’ compliance to go to Thailand. In the course of such recruitment practices, some *kirani* pursued over-zealous methods on account of Japanese protection. According to those interviewed, instances of the *kirani* singling out newly married males for duty in Thailand was very common. Having separated the husbands, the *kirani* would then make an attempt to take the newly wedded women as their mistresses.” [[28]](#footnote-28)

Jain records the activities of an Indian staff named Sivan in the Pal Melayu Estate, who rounded up all able-bodied men to work on the railway. Sivan then told all the women whose husbands had thus been removed to consider himself as their husband. Furthermore, *“…Sivan and the Japanese once ordered some women workers on**the estate to come to the dispensary. There, behind closed doors, they were stripped naked and beaten by the Japanese soldiers. Women were frequently beaten at the office.*” [[29]](#footnote-29) In addition to the exactions of the *kirani****,*** other (perhaps more subtle?) methods of encouragement were also adopted.

“In the six months beginning in April 1943, 70,000 Malayan Indians were recruited and made the rail journey north to Ban Pong. Some had apparently accepted the offer of work at Padang Besar near the Malayan border and were surprised when their train did not stop until it reached Ban Pong, 750 miles further north. On arrival there they were told that they would be marching to Burma to work, though their clothes were quite inadequate for the early monsoon conditions and their one dollar pay was similarly insufficient for the inflated canteen food prices demanded by the Thai traders along the railway.” [[30]](#footnote-30)

KS. Sandhu mentions that he heard claims that some labourers were lured to “*Thai Nadu*” under the illusion that they were going to a longed-for motherland of “*thainadu*” [[31]](#footnote-31) Major Campbell mentions some rather less imaginative recruitment methods;

“The proffering of free or cheap toddy was a satisfactory bait for the Indian labourer and the susceptible who accepted this Japanese hospitality were netted for Siam. The rounding up of dispersing cinema audiences afforded a simple method for collecting labour.” [[32]](#footnote-32)

Against such recruitment practices, the role of the IIL (*Indian Independence League*) and the INA (*Indian National Army*) has become clouded in considerable controversy;

“The activities of the League and Army gave a sense of unprecedented communal solidarity. Never before had the Indian community been so united in a single movement like the Indian independence movement in Malaya…. During the Occupation, Indians of all classes and sub- communal backgrounds joined the movement, even though some groups were forced. The strong and overpowering nature of Indian ideology brought the Indians together.” [[33]](#footnote-33)

In her study of Indian society in Malaysia and Singapore, Sinnappah Arasaratnam clearly indicates that many Tamils were enthusiastic contributors to the independence movement;

“The impact on Indian labour of the activities of the League and the events of the war was equally great. The Independence League took political activity into the plantations for the first time. Labourers volunteered for the Indian National Army and others formed local volunteer corps or *Thondor Padai* in the estates, devoted to nationalist activity. The spread of nationalist ideas in the estates had already begun just prior to the war. Nationalist pamphlets and broadsheets in Tamil conveying Congress propaganda had already found their way into the estates. The League served to intensify this trend and bring it into the open. Tamil school teachers, *kanganys****,*** and the most literate among young labourers were the leaders of this awakening. They participated fully in the League’s activities.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Stenson, on the other hand, points out early contradictions within the Indian Independence League;

“Initially in 1942 (the IIL) was dominated in Malaya by the former C.I.A.M. (*Central Indian Association of Malaya*) leadership. Such men as N. Raghavan, K.P.K. Menon and S.C. Goho were ardent Indian National Congress supporters. Despite their resentments at British repression of the Indian estate workers’ strikes in 1941, they remained Anglophile in their attitudes and political style…. Deciding to join the IIL primarily as a means of protecting Indian community interests under the Japanese, the former C.I.A.M. leadership remained intensely suspicious of Japanese motives.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

P. Ramasamy’s account is in substantial agreement, echoing many of Stenson’ s cautions;

“Apart from the calls of nationalism, many Indian labourers joined the IIL, to escape the cruelty and harshness of the Occupation. . . . Although the League officials sought to provide relief measures for the Indian population, they began to be used by the Japanese in 1944 and 1945. The Japanese, in anticiption of an Allied invasion, began to utilise the League officials to procure labour for defensive works. Under threats and pressure from the Japanese, the League officials had to search for and supply labour to the Japanese. Those labourers who were reluctant to participate were forced by the League officials through threats, such as the denial of rice rations. Furthermore, the League’s financial demands became quite intolerant as the war progressed. In order to be less dependent on the Japanese, a donation drive was launched, hut later replaced by a subscription move. Those who evaded subscription faced the grim prospect of having to explain to the Japanese secret police, the Kempeitai.” [[36]](#footnote-36)

In his other important work, “*Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*”, Ramasamy adopts a much more critical view;

“….the occupation did not benefit workers: the real beneficiaries were educated Indians. The forced recruitment to the Siam-Burma Railway by League officials - usually educated Indians - served to alienate them from workers. In fact, many plantation workers joined the I.N.A. merely to avoid going to Siam.” [[37]](#footnote-37)

Jain, however, adopts a considerably more reductionist view;

“There is no evidence that the labourers on Pal Melayu joined the Indian National Anny for nationalistic reasons. If there was a trace of nationalism in a man’s decision to join the army, it could be summed up in these words of one of its ex-officers (now headmaster of the school on Pal Melayu): ‘*For estate workers, the sole justification of joining the Indian National Army lay in the guarantee of a more honourable end in the cause of one’s country, as against the ignominious death of a forced labourer in Siam*’.” [[38]](#footnote-38)

1. Nagase Takashi: “Crosses & Tigers” (Allied Printers. Post Publishing Co.Ltd., Bangkok, 1990); p.6.   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Roger Beaumont “*The Hidden Truth: A Tribute to the Indian Independence Movement: Based on the Reflections of Mr. Darsham Singh Bajaj*” (Minerva Press, Bangkok & London, 1996); p.140.   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tanaka Yuki: “*Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*” (Westview Press, 1996); pp.120-122. Tanaka estimates the number of Indians sent to work in distant New Guinea to be between 8,000 and 10,000. He also discovered some disturbing accounts of Japanese cannibalizing Indian workers for food. It is unclear just how widespread such distasteful occurrences had become, but the mere fact that it happened at all, suggests that the treatment experienced by Indian labour in New Guinea was no less horrendous than that obtaining on the Thai-Burma Railway itself. Although I have taken the liberty of quoting Tanaka’s account extensively below, together with his carefully annotated references, it should be stressed - in order to prevent possible misunderstandings - that no incidents of such cannibalism, of either Asian workers or Caucasian POWs have as yet surfaced on the Thai-Burma Railway.   
    ‘The following testimony was given by Hatam Ali, a Pakistani (*sic*) soldier taken prisoner on February 15th (1942). His company was mobilised into forced labour in various places in Malaysia, and attempts were made to recruit members into the Indian National Army, a pro-Japanese force that had been established to benefit from Indian anti-British sentiment. Ali refused to join and was put into a labouring party of about 1,000 prisoners who were sent to Manokwari in New Guinea toward the end of 1943. Soon after they arrived, they were put to work on the construction of an airfield, and in April 1944, 206 prisoners were sent to a new site 300 miles from Manokwari under the supervision of S Unit, one of the construction units. Ali was one of these.

   ‘*I was included in this number. We were taken to a place about 300 miles away; we were employed for 12 hours daily on hard fatigues and were given very little to eat. There was no medical treatment and all prisoners who fell ill were immediately killed by the Japanese. Later, due to Allied attacks and activity, the Japs also ran out of rations. We prisoners were made to cut grass and leaves and due to starvation, we even ate snakes, frogs and other insects. At this stage the Japanese started selecting prisoners and every day 1 prisoner was taken out and killed and eaten by the Japanese. I personally saw this happen and about 100 prisoners were eaten at this place by the Japanese. The remainder of us were taken to another spot about 50 miles (away) where 10 prisoners died of sickness.At**this place the**Japanese again started selecting prisoners to eat. Those selected were taken to a hut where flesh was**cut from their bodies while they were alive and they**were then thrown into a ditch alive where they later died. When flesh was being cut from those selected, terrible cries and shrieks came from them and also from the ditch where they were later thrown. These cries used to gradually dim down when the unfortunate individuals were dying. We were not allowed to go near this ditch; no earth was thrown on the bodies and the smell was terrible.’*

   ‘Eventually Ali’s turn came. He was escorted by two soldiers to this hut, but he ran away. He was chased by a Japanese soldier and was injured in the left ankle**,** but he finally escaped. He spent the next 15 days wandering the jungle and was rescued by Australian forces This case is a horrifying example of a situation in which POWs were kept alive as afood source for the Japanese guards. However, such cases were comparatively rare. It was far more typical for soldiers to kill and consume POWs who had become ill. Such prisoners were usually shot. However, there are cases in which army doctors would administer lethal injections to the sick prisoners. For example, on April 5th 1943, a Japanese army doctor T.T. administered lethal injections to two Indian army POWs and subsequently cut flesh from their thighs and removed their livers. He ordered another Indian POW - a cook, Rahi Lohar - to prepare the flesh and livers for consumption. But Lohar refused to do this, even after being beaten. Eventually, a Japanese soldier, N.Y., cooked the body parts. In May 1943 another Indian POW was killed by the same method and for the same purpose. T.T. was tried and executed on May 3rd 1946. and three Japanese soldiers who participated in the consumption of the Indian POWs were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment.” (Tanaka’s sources are: Australian War Memorial Collection, 541101019194 “ *Statement of No.20531 L/Nk Hitam Ali*” and AWM Collection, A47611. 80794. “*Record of Military Court: T.T. and Others*’”).   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Enormous difficulties have faced the newly independent states of the former British Empire as a result of the British-encouraged mass migrations of labour: the Chinese and Indian “diasporas” to name but the two largest and today most visible communities. The ongoing Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka has its roots in just such a massive migration of Tamil (tea) plantation workers to the British colony of Ceylon. The insurgency to date has cost more than 60,000 lives. Neither the Indian nor theSri Lankan governments have had much success in addressing the issues involved. It remains to be seen whether the Norwegian-sponsored peace talks between the Tamil insurgents and the majority Sinhalese government will be any more successful. Curiously, Thailand is the venue of these negotiations.   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Clifford Kinvig: “*The River Kwai Railway: The Story of the Burma-Siam Railway*” (Brasseys, 1992); p.114 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Stenson: “*Class, Race & Colonialism in West Malaysia: the Indian Case”* (University of Queensland Press, 1980); p.90. Stemson’s estimated figures for Tamil workers and survivors from the Railway are based on information from K.S. Sandhu: “*Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration & Settlement, 1786- 1957”* (Cambridge University Press, 1969); p.184. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. P. Ramasamy: *“Indian War Memory in Malaysia”* in R Lim Pui Huen & Diana Wong (eds.): “*War & Memory in Malaysia & Singapore*” (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2000); p-92.   
    [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Stenson: op.cit; p.90. The decrease in population experienced by the Indian community in Malaya during the Occupation was discussed and foot-noted in a previous article in this series. See “*Part II: The Silenced Voices of History*” (Journal of Kyoto Seika University; No.20, 2001). Also Stenson: op.cit; p.156 and Note 40, p.165. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. To the *Federated* and *Unfederated* Malay States should be added the early, largely Chinese, “*Straits Settlements*” of Penang Island, Malacca and Singapore. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some “*Indonesians*”, particularly Sumatrans (but not Javanese) are virtually indistinguishable from Malays. The two peoples - Sumatran and Malay - share not only the same religion, but also the same language. (The national languages of both Malaysia and Indonesia are much the same, termed ‘Bahasa Malaysia” and “Bahasa Indonesia” respectively). The people of Java share the same Islamic religion but nevertheless preserve their own, and different, language.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Murai Yoshinori: “*Asian Forced Labour (Romusha) on the Burma-Thailand Railway*” in Gavan McCormack & Hank Nelson (eds.): *“The Burma-Thailand Railway”* (Silkworm Books, 1993); pp.61 & 62.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Major R. Campbell: “*Report on Use of Malayan Labourers on Thailand-Burma Railway*”: Report to the Under-Secretary of State, Colonial Office, dated 25th November, 1945. (Public Records Office document C0273/678/1); p.5. Major Campbell was the OC (Officer Commanding) of the so-called “K” Force, a team of medical officers and para-medical orderlies recruited by the Japanese from among the inmates of Singapore’s Changi Prison and sent to alleviate the Railway labourers conditions in July of 1943. I am indebted to Rod Beattie, Supervisor of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s Kanchanaburi cemetery for obtaining a copy of this invaluable document on a recent visit to London.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Major R. Campbell: op.cit; p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Gamba: “*The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest*” (Eastern Universities Press, Singapore, 1962); p.14. Gamba cites “*Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1946*” (Malayan Union, Kuala Lumpur, 1947) in Note 70; pp-32 & 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sinappah Arasaratnam: “*Indians in Malaysia & Singapore*” (Oxford University Press, 1970); pp.30 & 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. K.S. Sandhu: “*Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration Settlemen, 1786-1957”* (Cambridge University Press, 1969); p.184. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Michael Stenson: op.cit; p.90. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. P. Ramasamy: op.cit; p.93. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Major R. Campbell: op.cit; p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Major R. Campbell: op.cit; p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Footnote 9 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Appuron was the name by which British troops referred to the Burmese village at which the Japanese military headquarters for 83 Kilo Camp was located. The kilometre number represented the camp’s distance from the Burmese terminal at Thanbyuzayat in the direction of the Three Pagoda Pass. See “*Sketch Map of Main Camps mentioned along Thanbyuzayat-Ban Pong Railroad. 1942-45*” in Rohan D. Rivett: “*Behind Bamboo: An Inside Story of the Japanese Prison Camps*” (Angus & Robertson, 1946); p.297.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Michael Stenson: op.cit; p.91.   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This rough outline follows that of Michael Stenson: op.cit; pp.9I-l(X). Fuller information can be found in the following works:   
    Fujiwara Iwaichi: “F. Kikan: Japanese Army Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia during World War II”; (Heinemann Asia, 1983).   
    Leonard A. Gordon: *“Brothers Against the Raj: Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose; A Biography of Indian Nationalists”* (Columbia University Press, 1990).   
    Hugh Toye: “*Subhas Chandra Bose: the Springing Tiger: A Study of a Revolution*” (Jaico Publishing house, Bombay, 1959).   
    Joyce C. Lebra: “*Jungle Alliance: Japan & the Indian National Army*” (Asia Pacific Press, Singapore, 1971).   
    Peter Ward Fay: “*The Forgotten Army: India’s Struggle for Independence, 1942-1945*” (University of Michigan Press, 1993).   
    Gerard H. Corr: “*The War of the Springing**Tigers*” (Osprey, 1975).   
    Roger Beaumont: “*The Hidden Truth: A Tribute to the Indian Independence Movement in Thailand; Based on the Reflections of Mr. Darsham Singh Bajaj*” (Minerva Press, Bangkok, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Michael Stenson: op.cit; p.82. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. R.K. Jain: “*South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya*” (Yale University Press, 1970); p.301.Jainillustrates his point from the Pal Melayu Estate, the area of his own field research. When estate workers refused to report for work, due to the lack of basic necessities such as food and clothing in the Estate, ‘*the kirani ..., armed with sticks, would enter estate lines and force the labourers to report to work. During these raids women used to run out covering themselves with only gunnysacks*.”   
     [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. P. Ramasamy: op.cit; pp.92 & 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. P. Ramasamy: op.cit; p.94. The evidence for Ramasamy s conclusions was contained in interviews he conducted with estate workers in Perak, Selangor, Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca between 1987 and 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. R.K. Jain: op.cit; p.302. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Clifford Kinvig: op.cit; p.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. K.S. Sandhu: op.cil: p.184. Interestingly, the idea of a Tamil “*motherland*’ is still very much alive today. India’s predominantly Tamil state being named ‘*Tamil Nadu’*. The idea is not, perhaps, totally absent from the political programme of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), the leading Tamil insurgent group in contemporary Sri Lanka [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Major R. Campbell: op.cit; p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. P. Ramasamy: op.cit; p.99. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sinnappah Arasaratnam: op.cit; p.108. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Michael Stenson: op.cit; pp.93 & 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. P. Ramasamy: “*Plantation, Labour, Unions, Capital & the State in Peninsular Malaysia*” (Oxford University Press, 1994); p.60. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. R.K. Jain: op.cit; p.304. Jain’s negative impressions of the Tamil workers’ reasons for joining the INA need, however, to be put into perspective. He later goes on to elaborate; “A number of interviews I had with estate labourers conveyed a distinct impression of the widespread sympathies that existed between estate workers and anti-Japanese guerrillas. In this region, a large number of guerrillas were Indians, mostly ex-labourers from estates,” (pp.303 & 304). Further analysis of Indian workers, the IIL and INA with reference to the generally Chinese-led MPAJA (*Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army*) can be found in Hua Wu Yin: “*Class & Communalism in Malaysia*” (Zed Books, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)