

URBAN INDIAN WORKING CLASS HOUSEHOLDS

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Introduction

The growth of Indian working class households in urban Malaysia, is a process which can no longer be ignored. In the past, the concept of the Indian working class was inextricably bound with the position of Indian workers within a plantation environment. This is because the history of Indians in Malaysia is so closely linked to the history of the plantation economy. However, over the last decade, the participation of Indians in the urban sector has increased considerably, particularly with the steady rise of industrialization in Malaysia. The majority of these Indians participate largely as manual workers in the government and industrial sectors. This period has also witnessed the increased participation of Indian women in the urban labour force. These Indian workers encounter the same socio-economic problems faced by the other workers in the urban setting, like low incomes, low occupational mobility, unsuitable working hours and lack of proper housing facilities. To fully comprehend the constraints and complexities of the urban working class environment, the individual worker and the other members of his/her household have to be studied within a common framework. This paper will include not only a historical sketch of the development of this class of Indian workers but also an analysis of the manner in which the worker's household functions within the urban economy.

Research Methodology

The data for this paper originates from historical sources and from a field study on Indian labour in urban areas in Malaysia, conducted mainly in 1980 and 1981. The field study was carried out using a combination of survey type and participant observation techniques. A total of fifty Indian workers each in the public and industrial sectors were first interviewed using a structured questionnaire, which comprised a variety of socio-economic issues. The workers were selected from two states with a high rate of urbanization, namely Penang and Selangor. The sample selected from the public sector was balanced in terms of four major divisions. The Indian workers selected from the public sector were attached to the railway services, telecommunications department, the electricity board and the public works department. These four divisions constitute the traditional strongholds of Indian labour in urban areas. This sample consisted only of

male respondents, because the participation of women in this sector is negligible. The actual sample was selected from the worker's area of residence, based on systematic sampling. In the industrial sector, thirty men and twenty women were selected from two electronic industries, in the two states. The actual factories involved were selected randomly from a list of factories, in two major industrial sites in Penang and Selangor. In these factories certain shifts of workers, were randomly selected and interviewed. Most of these interviews were conducted in an unofficial manner since the managements were unfavourably inclined towards such interviews. Women workers were included in the industrial sample since their rate of participation in this sector has increased significantly. The total sample size for the field study was 200 respondents for the two states. No attempt was made to control for variances in age or ethnolinguistic composition of these Indian workers. They were considered within the general framework of urban working class Indians. In addition to the structured questionnaire a total of about 40 workers were selected for in-depth interviews. Much time was also spent in the homes of these workers to get an insight into the actual day to day running of the household.

Basic Definitions

(a) Working Class

For the field study, skilled and semiskilled regular workers were selected from the mainstream of the labour force in urban areas. There was no specific selection of workers from the informal sector but many of these workers in the formal sector were also found to be involved in the informal sector, either directly or indirectly through household members. In the urban areas in Malaysia, the Indian workers can be divided into two major categories of the older traditional work force and the more recent urban workers. The older work force consists particularly of Indian male workers and their families who have been in the public sector for over two generations or more. The more recent work force is a relatively new phenomenon associated with the growth of the private sector, primarily the industrial sphere. The members of this latter group are made up of Indian youth both male and female who have either migrated from the plantation sector or are located within the traditional sector of urban areas, who have found employment in factories. This clarification is essential because it highlights the male-female trends in employment opportunities in Malaysia, within a historical perspective.

(b) 'Family' and 'Household'

In this paper, it is crucial that the concepts of 'family' and 'household' are explicitly defined. The concept of the family usually revolves around relationships based on blood ties or marriage, while that of the 'household' involves common residence for a group of people. In the study of urban Indian workers, these two concepts of 'family' and 'household' have to be studied in a combined manner. In the context of these urban Indian workers, the household unit often comprises a group of individuals with familial ties, who not only live together but also partake in the daily functioning of the household. Many of these household units are combinations of the nuclear, extended and modified extended family structure. However, what is crucial is not the labelling of the 'household unit' but rather to understand how these household units function with an urban economy.

Brief History of Urban Indian Labour in Malaysia

The history of Indian labour in Malaysia is closely linked to the plantation sector. In 1931, the Indians formed more than 70 per cent of the total estate population of 424,000 and in 1957 they accounted for 52 per cent (Sandhu, 1969:25). The estate workers in 1931 also comprised more than 85 per cent of all the Indians engaged in manual work. (Sandhu, 1969:255). However, over the years the participation of Indians in this sector began to decline as a result of the Second World War, the fragmentation of estates, the diversification of the economy and other economic policies after Independence. It must be noted at this point too that many Indian workers were also employed in government services and located in urban areas. Since the early part of the twentieth century Indian labour has actively participated in the fields of transport, communication and civil administration. It was also noted that after the Second World War, the participation of Indians especially in the manufacturing industries was less than 15 per cent of the total numbers than engaged. In the past Indian industrial workers have been small-scale independent entrepreneurs. Metal work, dressmaking and tailoring, food processing and cigar rolling have been some of their more conspicuous occupations (Sandhu, 1969:282).

The period between the close of the Japanese Occupation and Independence in 1957, saw much internal migration from rural to urban centres. As a result of better economic and health conditions the population already located in urban areas also rose considerably. In 1957 more than 43 and 38 per cent of the total Indian population of the country was already living in urban centres of 2,000 and 5,000 or more inhabitants, respectively. (Sandhu, 1969:216). Majority of these were civil servants, businessmen, professionals and labourers in the public sector. Among all these categories the labourers were predominant.

After independence the growth of urbanization was subdued due to the emphasis on rural development policies. Early industries were linked to agricultural produce and other import substitution concerns, run on a small scale. The participation of Indian workers in these industries at this stage was fairly minimal. This pattern of industrialization continued until 1970, when there was a change towards export-oriented and labour-intensive concerns. Pioneer status, tax exemption opportunities, and cheap labour attracted much foreign capital. This change generated much employment in urban areas, resulting in the migration of youths from rural to urban centres. Many Indian youths migrated to these centres from the plantations. This shift together with the natural increase in the traditional form of Indian labour in the public sector, has indeed increased the percentage of Indian workers in urban areas. However, in terms of distribution of the labour force population in urban areas in 1979, the Indians only constituted 173,400 when compared to 430,000 Malays and 818,600 Chinese. In urban areas the total population employed is concentrated in the three major sectors of services, manufacturing and commerce. Indians in urban areas are closely linked to the service and manufacturing sectors, where the majority of them are manual workers.

In this brief historical framework it is essential to present separately the development of Indian women workers in general. In the early stages of Indian labour migration to plantations in the Malay States, women constituted less than 20 per cent. However, later the British administration soon urged for an increase in women workers.

“This was partly because, unlike in the case of the other and more distant colonies where the government of India, anxious to promote, normal family and minimize the evils associated with a large disproportion of the sexes, insisted on 25 – 50 per cent of the emigrants being females” (Gillion, 1962:55–56).

Thus we find that the British administration adopted a two prong strategy in linking the conjugal family unit and its corresponding values of morality, to the plantation economy. Stable conjugal units further meant a constant supply of labour for the economic sector. However, even with these measures, female participation was low in the labour market, as a result of early marriage and restrictions of the joint family; it was considered an effective mechanism to ensure the return of male members who emigrated and finally many employers considered female labour less efficient and productive. As a result Indian women workers did not become a phenomenon of consequence till the late 1920's. Even then women only made up 25 to 45 per cent of the total Indian labour force in the Malay States and of these 80 per cent were in the agricultural sector (Sandhu, 1969:245). The

participation of Indian women workers in other areas like the public and industrial sectors has indeed been negligible. Women were strategically excluded from these sectors of the economy.

After independence there was still no dramatic increase in the participation of Indian women workers in the urban sector. However, over the last ten years or so there has been an influx of female labour to the urban areas, in correspondence with export-oriented and labour intensive concerns, in the field of industrialization. Many young Indian women from the urban areas themselves have entered this sector. The majority of these Indian women workers are located in electronic and garment industries. It is obvious that while women workers are indeed part of the overall labour force, they have to be treated as a special category, rather than be dismissed as off-shoots of the male labour force.¹

Some Theoretical Considerations

There has been much speculation that the socio-economic position of Indian workers in urban areas is much better off when compared to their counter-parts in the plantation sector. However, much of the data discussed in this paper will give evidence to the fact that this is not true. There is much financial hardship confronting the urban working class Indians. These workers are trapped within a structural framework that provides very little room for socio-economic improvement. A number of explanations can be briefly outlined to account for the low socio-economic position of these workers. In addition, this paper will also highlight in some depth the relationships between the urban economy and the worker's household. The crucial issues discussed revolve around the strategies utilized by the workers' households in meeting the constraints of the urban economy.

At the general level a number of factors are basically responsible for the low socio-economic development. First if we consider the historical factor, Indian workers were brought in by the British primarily to service working class occupations, both in the plantations and urban centres. The contemporary group of Indian workers achieved little inter-generational occupational mobility because they had minimal economic and social resources to begin with. Secondly the British administration in pre-independent Malaya organized the labour force along ethnic lines, whereby certain ethnic groups were identified with specific sectors of the economy. This multi-ethnic social structure gave rise to much conflict and inequalities. In this respect cross

¹ [More detailed discussion of these historical factors have been presented by the writer in two earlier articles. (Oorjitham, 1983 and Oorjitham, 1984)]

comparisons can be made with reference to the socio-economic position of Malay, Chinese and Indian workers. However, this would be a futile exercise as manual workers who form the bulk of all ethnic groups face common socio-economic problems. Suffice it is to observe that certain discriminatory policies have been utilized by ruling groups throughout Malaysia's history. Such policies have created inequalities in opportunities based not only on ethnic factors but also sexual and religious ones, where certain social groups have capitalized on them, at the expense of others. Finally, the most crucial explanation is linked to the manner in which the economy of the Malay states was incorporated into the world economy, during the British rule in preindependent Malaya. The dominance of foreign capital and ownership in a number of key sectors, together with the associated social structures and relations, have been the major constraints to the socio-economic interests of labour in Malaysia. This phenomenon can be tied particularly to the plantation and industrial sectors of the economy. In both these sectors the principle is to keep production costs at a minimum level, in order to ensure substantial profits, to attract foreign capital. The ultimate result has been that wages for workers has been kept at the lowest level possible. While all wage workers are badly affected, the urban workers are worst off, due to a higher cost of living, inflationary tendencies, lack of proper accomodation and other basic ammenities. In the public sector, wages of workers have been kept in line with the wages in the plantation and industrial sectors. The government being the largest employer of labour in the public sector receives pressure to keep wages low, so as not to provide competition for the other two sectors. Since the basic economic policies of the government support this pattern of development which is highly dependent on foreign capital, there is no alternative to compromise. All these factors contribute to the maintenance of low socio-economic conditions among the working class in Malaysia. The position or urban working class Indians is inseparable from this framework.

Within this kind of a framework it also becomes essential to comment that women workers have to be considered specially, because their socio-economic position is even lower when compared with those of the men. Historically we have seen how women have been excluded from the field of employment especially in urban areas. The participation of women in the mainstream of economic production is indeed still minimal when compared with men, in contemporary Malaysia. While more Indian women are now participating in the urban industrial economy when compared to the past, there is still much discrimination in the job market and also within the househod. In the job market women are recruited in greater numbers to fill certain jobs which are often stereotyped and identified as

being 'feminine'. The growth of industrialization has forced the recruitment of women workers in greater numbers. This has now led to the stereotype identification of factory workers with women. Patriarchal values of traditional society have been adapted to fit the needs of an urban economy, where women participate in the mainstream economic production and also function within a male dominated household. Majority of these women workers still give predominance to their role of wife and mother when compared to their worker role. What is crucial here is that women workers have the dual responsibility of balancing work within and outside the household. Many of the strategies adopted within the household to cope with the socio-economic problems are the responses devised by these burdened women.

Having accepted that the urban Indian workers are located within an economic structure that does not permit much socio-economic development, the next step is to examine how these workers cope with this constraint, on a day to day basis. This involves a discussion of the organizational techniques utilized by the worker and his family members, to facilitate the functioning of the household. Majority of the urban Indian working class household members are also members of the nuclear and extended families. It is crucial to understand that even when the structure of the family is obviously nuclear, many elements of extended family living still prevail.

There exist some earlier theoretical notions that the household organized along the 'conjugal family' lines is the most conducive for survival within an urban economy, where the demands of occupational and geographic mobility are indeed high. However, later conceptions emphasize the merits of maintaining households organized on the basis of 'extended families' and/or 'modified extended families' where there is much mutual support and interaction within an otherwise harsh and insecure economic environment. There is much speculation here that these kin members of a household come together for common interests and expectations of reciprocity, rather than moral, obligation to kin members. These working class households within an urban framework have devised a number of such strategies. First, those who have migrated from rural to urban areas maintain ties with their kin members in the rural sector. There is much flow of money, goods and services among these kin members. Secondly within the urban areas, there is a preference for a number of working family members to share a household, in order to facilitate the 'pooling' of their incomes. In addition to money, there is also exchange of companionship, care in times of illness, childbirth and advice on various matters like education and marriage. Thirdly many household members participate actively in the informal sector of the urban

economy to help meet their financial burden, either in a permanent or part time manner. Finally single members benefit by co-residing with a family since much of the household work is carried out by the married women in the households. Thus this unpaid labour of women within the households not only aids family members who are single but is also functional to the capitalist mode of production. The household therefore can be seen as the supportive agent which nurtures and sustains the workers in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

Background Features of the Public and Industrial Workers

While these two category of workers are similar in many ways, there are a few features which are basically different. In the public sector 65 per cent of the workers are originally from an urban environment, while the remaining 35 per cent come from a rural environment. The majority of these workers are between the ages of 35 and 55 years, and were employed much earlier when they were in their late teens and early twenties. In contrast to this the industrial sector is made up of a younger labour force, where the participation of women is a growing phenomenon. 73 per cent of these workers were between the ages of 18 and 35, and 40 per cent had migrated from a rural environment in search of better opportunities. The remaining workers in this category were from working class and middle class households in the urban areas. If we compare the public sector and industrial workers, we find that the latter are in a more disadvantaged and insecure position. Being an older work force the public sector workers are comparatively secure, with amenities like housing, loan facilities and stability of jobs. Set against this, the factory workers are faced with lower incomes, shift duties, no proper housing and greater occupational hazards. For many of these workers, the job is not permanent. However, it must be stated that other than these differentiating features, these two category of Indian workers share much in common, in terms of having low socio-economic development.

Household Composition of Urban Indian Workers

In the public sector about 48 per cent of the workers live in households organized on the basis of nuclear families. A further 40 per cent were found living in households based on extended family living. The concept of extended family for the Indian workers, actually involves a number of sub divisions. (i) The *stem households* consisting of parents, unmarried children and one married son and his family. (ii) *Fraternal joint households* made up of siblings and their spouses and children. (See Table 1) In the industrial sample about 40 per cent lived in nuclear households and 40 per cent in extended households. The remaining 20 per cent were single workers who lived in shared rented rooms.

Table 1

Household Structure	Public %	Factory %
Nuclear Households	48	40
Stem Households	32	36
• Fraternal Joint Households	8	4
Single Workers – Rented Rooms	12	20
	100	100

The data further established that 55 per cent of the public sector workers lived in households consisting of 6 to 15 members. The household size for 45 per cent of the factory workers was 8 to 15 members. Except for the single workers who lived separate from their kin, the rest of the workers' household size was less than 8 members. What emerges as the trend for this study is a combination of nuclear and extended organization of households, with a fairly large household size. One other interesting feature in the composition of households is that a number of factors influence the permanence of a particular household structure. The terms of employment, availability of accomodation, sibling order in the family and age at marriage often influence the structure of these households. For example eldest sons and their families are often found to be living together with their parents. If housing is a problem then these workers tend to live in larger households organized on extended lines. The same applies if the nature of employment is irregular or retrenchment is possible. Furthermore many newly married couples first live with the husband's family of origin, before eventually starting a new household when they are financially more stable. About 40 per cent of married workers in this sample claimed to having first lived with the husband's family of origin, before starting their own households. Thus there is often much internal change in the composition of households.

Socio-Economic Features of Urban Indian Workers

The data from the survey gives evidence to the following trends in the socio-economic positions of the Indian workers in the public and industrial sectors.

(a) Income and Expenditure:

Both the public and industrial workers earn low incomes. In the public sector 80 per cent of the workers (all men) earn incomes of \$200 to \$400

a month. In the industrial sector, 88 per cent earn incomes of \$150 to \$300 a month. However, if the average monthly income for the household is calculated, over 80 per cent in both samples is located within the \$400 to \$600 range. The average monthly expenditure for the households is usually \$700 for the public sector and \$750 for the industrial workers. Since household expenditures often exceed income, debts are a common occurrence. It was noted that only about 20 per cent of the male workers in both sectors participated in secondary occupations like gardening and electrical repairs to supplement their main incomes. However, the women workers proved more innovative and about 60 per cent were involved in secondary occupations like domestic servants, tailoring, sale of food like pickles, sale of sarees and cosmetics. In addition to this non-working household members also contributed towards these informal sector activities.

(b) Occupational Mobility:

For both workers in the public and industrial sectors, the chances for occupational mobility are limited. In the public sector the workers were attached to either the public works department, the railways, the telecommunications department or the national electricity board. In the occupational hierarchy they have occupied the bottommost rung with the lowest opportunities for upward mobility. 87 per cent of the fathers of these workers were also manual workers in the public and plantation sectors. In the industrial sector about 65 per cent of the workers' fathers were also manual workers. Thus inter-generational occupational mobility has been minimal for both categories. In addition to this, the industrial workers are in a weaker position when compared with the more established public sector workers. The problem of retrenchment is a frightening reality for the factory workers, particularly for the women workers.

(c) Education:

74 per cent of Indian workers in the public sector had obtained some secondary education, while 61 per cent in the industrial sample had completed lower secondary education. This relatively low educational attainment and lack of proper technical training, prevented these Indians from finding suitable occupational placements, in the urban sector, resulting in them being employed as manual workers. Their low educational level further prevented them from gaining opportunities for promotions within their various occupational hierarchies creating in turn a strong sense of futility.

(d) Housing:

While in the past, majority of public sector workers were provided cheap living quarters by their employment bodies, today 50 per cent of the sample have not been successful in obtaining these facilities. Thus together with the factory workers, a vast majority of them live in cheaply rented rooms and low cost houses, which are over crowded. Accomodation problems are more serious for the factory workers, where about 30 per cent were found living in squatter settlements, within the urban environment. Another feature is that a group of unmarried workers both males and females, often share cheaply rented rooms. Often these workers also share other expenses in the running of their day to day life.

Some Household Strategies

The brief presentation of the socio-economic features gives some evidence of the problems facing these urban Indian workers and their household members. Having accepted that the root causes of these problems are often based on historical factors, internal structure of groups and relations with the world economy, these worker households still have to cope in some way. Some in-depth interviews with the workers have brought to light, some of these strategies utilized by the household.

(a) Joint Income Management

In about 67 per cent of the households, all working members contribute a portion of their incomes towards the management of the household. One or more household members, usually men are appointed to take charge of the budgeting of household incomes. In about 23 per cent of households in the public sector and 17 per cent in the industrial sector, a formal monthly budget is drawn-up. However, in about 53 per cent of the households in both samples much borrowing of money is done particularly among relatives.

(b) Part-Time Jobs

About 67 per cent of the women workers claimed that they went to work in the factories out of sheer economic necessity. A fair number of unmarried women workers expressed the desire to stop working at the time of marriage. About 47 per cent of the women factory workers, were also involved in part-time jobs like the sale of food, sarees cosmetics and household items. In contrast to this the male workers were less actively involved in part-time jobs in the informal sector. Another interesting feature is that many wives of the male workers who were not employed formally, were

more actively involved in these part time jobs. Thus, women more than men participate in informal sector activities to augment the household income.

(c) Part-Time Residence with Parents

To help meet the financial strain of starting a new household, newly married couples often live temporarily with the parents of the groom. About 39 per cent of the married workers in the public sector and 38 per cent in the industrial sector claimed to have done this, before moving to a household of their own. In this manner they are able to share in the resources of more established households. This is more so if their age at marriage is low when compared to older couples who are financially more stable.

(d) Modified Extended Family Households

The study indicates that a large proportion of the households in both categories are structurally nuclear in nature. However, being structurally nuclear does not indicate a lack of inter-dependence on kin members. On the contrary there is much mutual exchange and dependence among groups of nuclear households. Many of these networks of extendedness appear among kin members in segregate household units, creating what maybe termed as 'modified extended family households'. In the first place there is segregation of nuclear units because of lack of living space in the quarters and constant spatial mobility. Many of these separate households often shift their area of residence in search of cheaper accomodations and also because there is a change in occupational location. These factors prevent the organization of larger extended households. About 72 per cent of the nuclear households in this study have shifted residence, at least three times. However, kin members have come up with a strategy, whereby they have created inter-dependent networks among these physically segregated households. About 43 per cent of the nuclear household in the public sector and 57 per cent in the industrial sector, utilize this strategy. There is much borrowing and lending of money and exchange of services like child and health care.

(e) Single Worker Strategies

In both the category of workers about 43 per cent of the single workers make monthly contributions towards their families of origin, wherever these are located. In addition to this about 21 per cent of those who live in shared rented rooms, make some attempts at sharing expenses and other services with their room-mates. Thus there is a utilization of friendship networks, not based on kin ties to overcome the socio-economic burden. A few of these single workers also try to participate in part-time activities like sale of cosmetics.

(f) **Kuttu**

The 'kuttu' or 'tontin' is a household strategy usually utilized by the women to acquire certain large household items like furniture, stoves and other electrical items. About 36 per cent in the public sector and 44 per cent in the industrial sector admit using this strategy.

Conclusion

This study has given evidence to the fact that urban working class Indians experience many socio-economic problems, over which they have little direct control. However, majority of the workers and their household members have tried to adopt some strategies for survival within the constraints of the urban economy.

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