

The Author



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Oil Palm Plantations, Migration and Indian Youth Culture in Contemporary Malaysia

Our* research — conducted the summer of 2014 with Malaysian Indian youth living in plantations and the nearby *teloks* (towns) that many have migrated to — investigates the emotional responses of young Malaysian Indians who have left/are leaving Malaysia's oil palm plantation estates.

Indian families have, since colonization, been working together on plantation estates. This mode of family-based production, however, is becoming difficult to sustain in a globalizing Malaysia. Current plantation employment practices in Malaysia favour single male migrants who are mostly from Indonesia. “The work here,” Rena (female, 24) states, “doesn't go to Indian families anymore; it goes to the Indonesians.” This has become a source of tension on the estates where Indians and Indonesians engage in state-supported segregation.

The undertones of Malaysian state- and local-level discussions of the movement away from family-based production to the casualization of labour indicate that the changes are racially motivated. For many young Indians, prejudice against family-based employment is read as ‘anti-Indian,’ and racism is a familiar discourse in Indian youth culture where Bhumiputra policies that maintain Malay privilege are keenly felt. “There is little estate work for us youth,” Rena (female, 24) explains, “so I went to look for a job when the resort opened up. But they said the work was for Malays only.”

In a globalizing Malaysia, the oil palm plantations are seen by their young Indian inhabitants as the bastion of “traditional” Tamil culture. Plantations are a site of intense emotional connection — feelings that only grow stronger in the face of state-sponsored policies of racial discrimination. Youth culture in the estate is dominated by conflicting discussions: the young Malaysian Indians talk about employment and a future beyond the plantation while being simultaneously aware that they are vanguards of a “pure” Tamil culture — a culture that is being threatened from both within and without — that is rooted in the site of the Malaysian plantation.

In addition to the decrease of family-based employment, poor infrastructure is also contributing to young people's migration out of the plantations. “We

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left because there was nothing left," Shaguni (female, 16) says of her departure from the estate. "Water was expensive, there was no lights, schooling was only arts-based. Because of this my uncle has moved out first into [a] *telok*; we joined him to complete our schooling there." In spite of poor infrastructure, schooling, and employment opportunities, however, some young people have chosen to migrate back from a *telok* to the estates for schooling. Pandy (male, 16) says,

"The teachers in estates have love for the students, they care about them. Even the Malay teachers, they have more love for the students because it is a smaller school and it is mostly for Indians, and they are the majority. I know people think it is strange to go from *telok* science stream into estate arts stream, but I came back because it is peaceful here, I feel I belong and I feel I can be myself and am accepted. I can't even explain to you the pull back to the estate, Idhu Aduh-Madari Illa (this thing/the estate is different than that thing/*telok*) sure, there isn't any entertainment value in the estate, but I can just be free here".

While Pandy acknowledges the estate's poor educational standards and infrastructure as a disadvantage for him in a technology-driven Malaysia, he suggests that it is a feeling of place — an emotional pull that he can only describe as "this thing" — that draws him back to the estates.

Young Malaysian Indians' inclination to migrate towards, rather than away from, marginalized and isolated plantation communities is at odds with a "modern" Malaysian youth culture, and contrary to state-sponsored nationalist ideologies of development and success. This inclination can best be understood through a mapping of young people's emotional narratives of belonging, identity and Tamil culture. Ongoing research, in an effort to gain a more nuanced view of Malaysian Indian youth movements within and throughout plantations, will focus on young people's emotional responses to migration and transnational affect.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

We interviewed five migrant youth who have left oil palm plantations and reside in a nearby *telok*, and five estate youth who are on the path to migration out of the plantations. Young people were between 14 and 24, with an even number of boys and girls. Using a variety of qualitative research methods, the preliminary data reviews what young people think about plantation life, the push-pull factors out of the plantations, and a changing youth culture amongst estate kids.