



*Spatial and Occupational Mobility of Plantation Labour in Malaysia:
Rentrenchments, Outmigration and Closure of Plantations, 1951-2012*
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SUMMARY

The plantation was the only place known as home and workplace to the inhabiting Indian families since their migration from the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period several generations ago. The plantation living was akin to a village community living, and the labour families had no other ‘village’ to return to. Nevertheless, since the post-1970s, a massive spatial and occupational mobilisation occurred amongst plantation families, whereby a mix of voluntary and forced migration gradually displaced tens of thousands of families from plantation work and living. We begin this study with the question of “why the impoverished plantation families moved out of the plantations in the post-1970s period after working and living in plantations for several generations?”

This study is predicated on the mechanism of the response of human agency under adverse structural changes affecting their work and living order, of which outmigration was an outcome. Migration cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader social and economic transformation. We argue that explanation provided by New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) that migration among the agricultural families to urban employment as part of the family strategy to diversify household income as flawed. We argue that it was not income or differential distribution of other opportunities between plantation and non-plantation employment, or the poor working and living conditions in plantations that triggered the migration. As an alternative, we introduced a multi-dimensional concept – ‘the risk of plantation work and living’ based on the notion of ‘commodification of land and labour’ developed by Karl Polanyi. In short, we argued that commodification of plantation lands give rise to the notion of ‘the risk of plantation work and living’ and to mitigate that risk, the plantation families carried out migration.

It was the rise of the risk of sudden mass retrenchments and evictions of the entire family unit from plantations as witnessed or experienced by the labour families during the ‘subdivision of plantations’ and the ‘Employment (Restrictions) Act, 1968’ that gave rise to the risk of plantation work and living. Tens of thousands of labourers were retrenched and what the plantation families thought was their villages were abruptly and rudely taken away, leaving the plantation labour and their families in the lurch without employment and shelter. This, we argue, developed and provided the impetus for moving-out of the plantations. Plantation settlements that were long conceived as their ‘village’ where generations of labourers worked, lived and died, was later transformed into a transitory settlement with the looming possibility of retrenchments and evictions. By now, the remaining families in plantation work and settlements were aware that sudden retrenchments and evictions were a new reality awaiting them.

Nevertheless, the risk of plantation work and living did not result in haphazard outmigration from the plantations. We introduced the concept of ‘organisation of exit’ to capture the entire planning of the plantation families to exit the plantation based on the ‘migration decisions’ made. The whole process of outmigration at the agency level, we argue, was complex and highly differentiated among the labour families. The complexity and differentiation can be best explained by narrowing the focus on the family unit as a catalyst to organise outmigration. How the labour families strived to consolidate their material positions and struggled to organise their resources – material and non-material – was critical in understanding the outmigration process. We showed that outmigration from plantation could not be viewed as individual efforts seeking

employment or better opportunities, but, instead, as part of the concerted effort by the family units to gradually move-out of the plantations.

In subsequent generations, the notion of the risk of plantation work and living was renewed by the continuous process of commodification that sporadically occurred in plantations. Every generation witnessed mass retrenchments and closure of plantations and the eviction of the plantation workforce. The narratives of the unfortunate families that fell victim to the sudden retrenchments enlivened the notion of risk. However, much later the notion that the plantation was only a transitory settlement became deeply entrenched in the collective minds of the remaining plantation labourers, where outmigration was seen as an inevitable fact. All families were aware that they needed to move-out of plantation eventually.

In short, we answered the central question of this study by pointing out that it was the risks of plantation work and living that prompted the mass outmigration of the plantation families. The labour families in the post 1970s period had conceived the prospect of outmigration as an inevitable reality, and through the 'organisation of exit' the labour families planned their exit as part of their risk mitigating effort. Underlying is the fear of being stranded homeless with their families in the event of sudden retrenchments as they had witnessed during the mass retrenchments since the mid-1960s. Commodification continued unabatedly, and in every generation of plantation families since, the notion of the risk of plantation work and living was renewed. By and large, it was the structural factors beyond the control of the plantation labour that shaped and eventually led to the mass outmigration. This process can be understood by observing the function and transformation of the structures from a historical perspective. The families nevertheless responded to these transformations within the constraints of the structures, by organising their exit in the safest ways possible.