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**BONDAGE IN FREEDOM**  
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## ABSTRACT

Opposing views persist with regard to the emergence of plantations in southern India and the transfer of slave labour to these plantations: the abolition of slavery as an end in itself and, second, as a means to an end. In spite of the fact that slavery had been abolished by the mid-nineteenth century, workers on plantations found themselves no better off than slaves and bondsmen - so intensive and painful was the ill treatment meted out to them. The workers with their newly realised freedom from the feudal relations spared no means to revolt against the new Masters. Yet, a truly systemic transformation failed to materialise. The present paper attempts to unravel the constituents of changing forms of bondage and the coercive/disciplinary strategies adopted by the planters which in effect gave rise to a new labour regime. It also attempts to unravel the way in which the reborn 'slaves' unleashed their resistance at the capitalist work sites.

**JEL Classification:** B25, N30, N50, N55

**Key Words:** slavery, plantations, colonial state, punishment, labour, outbursts.

Slavery and its abolition in India were quite distinct from that in other parts of the world. First, it was a centuries-old institution internal to the feudal caste system in India. Second, its abolition signalled not the end of the Empire but its beginning in terms of certain imperial assets such as plantations. While the similarities between the plantations in colonized India in the nineteenth century and the much older Atlantic plantations are confined to their nature of commodity production and ownership of foreign capital, they differ in that the former did not have a legacy of slave-based production save in a few instances. When capitalist plantation production made in-roads on a massive scale into colonized southern India in the middle of the 19th century, it necessitated a mass of labour which had been made 'free' in a double sense: free of any means of subsistence, and free to sell their labour power. Yet, the bondage - bondage in freedom - remained for decades; with respect to the feudal Masters in the countryside first, and later the planter patriarchs in the high ranges. The present paper attempts to unravel the constituents of changing forms of bondage and the coercive strategies adopted by the planters to discipline the newly liberated agrestic slaves and in effect to ensnare them in a new form of bondage. It also attempts to reveal the way in which the bonded workers unleashed their power of resistance at the capitalist work sites.

## **Abolition of Slavery: Divergent Views**

Radically opposing views exist in academic circles with regard to the emergence of plantations and the transfer of slave labour - the historically disadvantaged social section of the Indian caste system currently termed as *dalits* - to these plantations: the abolition of slavery as an end in itself, and, second, as a mean to an end, namely the setting up of capitalist plantations.

The first interpretation figures prominently in studies by social anthropologists (Srinivas, 1965; Heijeje, 1967:71-126). While dismissing the possibility that slavery had been abolished with the intention of providing cheap labour to the newly emerging plantations, they treat it rather as a sequence in social evolution which lent meaning to the abolition of slavery. Heijeje, for instance, does not mean to say that slavery was abolished with a view to serve the planters' interests; on the contrary she argues 'that the emancipation of slaves became significant in the context of the emerging plantations which provided the freed labour with an alternative means of livelihood'. In his study of the 'Coorgs', Srinivas raises essentially the same point, maintaining that doing away with slavery had had but little effect until the opening of the coffee plantations. Once these plantations had been established, the cash paid by the planters cut the bonds binding the slaves to their traditional masters. By attributing a purely religious humanism to the activities of the missionaries, Robin Jeffrey too, in effect, appears to subscribe to the above perspective (Jeffrey, 1976:44-57).

The second interpretation holds that Christian and humanitarian efforts in favour of the abolition of slavery were, in fact, primarily meant to create the free labour market that was required by the European capitalist planters. Though not explicitly stated, most of the proponents of this perspective (Kurup, 1984:187-99); Uma Devi, 1989:70-79;

Houstart & Lemercinier, 1978:25-43) treat the abolition of slavery as a mere piece of legislation with the hidden intention of providing cheap labour to the plantations. Other studies on slavery and slave castes in Kerala, however, hold the view that the abolition of slavery was hardly motivated by economic gains, but rather by a religious moralism on the part of the missionaries and political pressure from the British Government (Saradamony, 1980; Kusuman, 1973; also see Banaji, 1933:80-131; Barbosa, 1865). Striking a balance between the two major streams of thought, Kooiman stated that “for the LMS missionaries there was nothing more humanitarian than to enable the people of Travancore to share the blessings of a capital development” (Kooiman, 1991:63, 1989).

It has to be noted that from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, movements had been afoot in England calling for the abolition of slavery, largely in response to a series of slave rebellions taking place in the colonies. Its ramifications came to be seen in India as well in the influential methods adopted by the Evangelists to combat the evils of slavery and to convert the out-castes into Christianity. When the British Parliament yielded to the abolishment move, it amounted to a near-calamity in colonies like British Guyana where the British authority had to pay a compensation to the planters for the loss of their slaves (Reno, 1964:5) To claim that the move for the abolition of slavery was mooted with the far-sighted and highly calculated motive of a creation of labour for a not-yet established industry would be a little too far-fetched. However, the colonial State and global capital were shrewd enough to detect a beneficial element in terms of economic interests in the activities of the missionaries which in turn made them support the religious moralism of the latter.

The only large-scale plantation in southern India on which the slaves as such were to work was that of the Anjarakandy spices plantation

set up by the East India Company in 1797. After assuming charge as overseer of the plantation, Murdoch Brown, in an application to the President and Commissioner of Malabar, stated that in consequence of the inadequacy of labour supplied to the plantation by the *Tehsildar*, he was constrained by many a problem. Accordingly, Brown had purchased about 45 *Pulayar* women and children whom he had found 'very useful' on his estate. From the evidence collected by T.H. Baber, the Judge and Magistrate of north Malabar, it appears that the children employed on Brown's plantations were in fact kidnapped: they were forcibly taken from their relatives at midnight, clothes were thrust into their mouths, and they were carried to Alappuzha where Assin Ally, the agent secretly employed by Brown resided; from there they were taken to Mayyazhi. In order to avoid any chances of identification, they were removed of their *kudumas* or such other distinguishing marks of their respective castes, and were disguised as *Mappila* children and given *Mappila* names (Banaji, 1993:60-61).

Slavery was legally abolished by the mid-nineteenth century - in Madras Presidency, where it appeared in its cruellest form, in 1843 to be specific, along with the abolition in other colonies; in Thiruvithamkur it was abolished in 1853; soil slaves were thus theoretically liberated to become 'free m/women'. However, neither did this lead to the emergence of a free labour market nor were these ex-slaves employed in the plantations. Quite a few of them continued to be attached to the land and entered another phase of slavery in indentured form with their old masters, with little departure from the old *adima* relationships (Logan, 1951: 149-153; Tremenheere, 1892);<sup>1</sup> some had settled on land provided

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1 Even after the legal abolition of slavery, slaves were 'bought, and sold and hired out', see William Logan, *Malabar (1887)*, Vol.1 p.153. As late as 1892, H.Tremenheere, the Revenue Collector had recommended to the Government that the 'Untouchables' called the *panchamar* should be freed

by the State, and it was largely the remainder that was recruited for work on the emerging coffee and tea plantations from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, and on the rubber plantations by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Griffith, 1967; Speer, 1953; Ravi Raman, 1999a; Baak, 1997; Lovatt, 1972; Tharian & Tharakan, 1986:199-229). Women were employed in maximum numbers in tea and to a lesser extent in coffee, and even lesser in rubber; the gender division was in tune with the colonial interests (Ravi Raman, 1999 b).

Those who had entered a second phase of slavery as attached labour continued to remain thus for many years, pledging themselves to cater to the needs of the prevailing wet-rice cultivation under their former masters. In the last part of the nineteenth century, the major slave castes (*Pallar, Pariayar, Cherumar, Malar, Holeyar* etc) constituted 12-20 per cent of the total population in the Madras Presidency (Kumar, 1965:49-63), and continued to exist as agricultural labourers in the decades to come, thus displaying the perpetuation of the congruence between caste and class with caste remaining the 'very part of the material reality' of the society (Omvedt, 1994; Illaiah, 1996). However, they were not free to leave their landlords during the off-seasons in the plains. The workers could move up the hills and work there for a specific period only after paying back their debts to their masters and money-lenders. For this and for meeting other expenses they would make use of the advances received from the *kanganies*, the institutionalised intermediaries. In certain regions, however, the ex-slaves

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from serfdom through the provision of land and educational facilities. The new relationships that emerged after legal abolition came to exist in various arrangements under different names, for instance, *pannai* in the Kaveri delta and *padial, suvasi, sirurvedu* and *koottuppayir* in Chingleput. On Chingleput, see Sundari 1985); van Schendel, 1991:117-18). For the continuation of the *Padiyalar* system in the early 20th century, Thomas and Ramakrishnan, 1940; for recent literature see Temperley, 2000; Brass 2000).

even resorted to desertion in their bid to work for cash wages on the plantations (Srinivas, 1965:19). The landlords however, were adamant in their efforts to retain their hold on these ex-slaves, not wanting to lose control over them permanently (Ford, 1896). In certain cases, the landlords simply did not allow the wives to accompany their husbands going to the estates as they might have feared that if the wives went along, the men would never return. In Malabar, for instance, the landlords provided the women with huts and allowed their men to go to work on plantations on condition that they return in time for rice cultivation (Logan, 1951:149). In Thiruvithamkur the caste-Hindu landlords complained against the planters taking away their *Pulayar* - the hitherto *rice-slaves* - without their consent.<sup>2</sup> With respect to one such case - concerning the *Cherumar* of Malabar who were geographically closer to the Wayanad plantations, one European planter wrote:

these men practically paedial slaves, they are attached to the soil and are completely in the power of these landlords. Without his permission the *Cherumar* dare not leave their squalid estate, for the Malabar land owner fears that if once he loses a hold over them, he will never regain it (Ford, p.56).

The spread of plantations precipitated the process of pauperisation with the adivasis being evicted from their own homelands and the peasantry buckling under the pressure of adverse government legislations such as an increase in land revenue; they were then inevitably drawn to the plantations which seemed to promise them a better life. The adivasis, violently detached from their communal property, formed a major source of labour supply for the early plantations. Various adivasis - the *Kanikkar*

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2. When rubber cultivation began in the early 20th century, in turn leading to an increase in demand for more *Pulaya* labour, the landlords as also the local press began to voice such complaints. See *Planters' Chronicle*, 1907:38.

and *Muthuvar* of Thiruvithamkur, the *Badagar* and *Thodar* of Nilagiri, and the *Naicker*, *Paniyar* and *Kurumbar* of Wayanad - whose rights over the primaeval forests had been recognised for ages, were the first to be threatened by the upcoming plantations. As Samuel Mateer would have us believe, these indigenous people simply could not resist the 'onward march of a superior race' (Mateer, 1883)<sup>3</sup>. Though a few of these adivasis even sought employment on plantations of their own accord they were largely disinclined to work for the Europeans (Thurston, 1909:63-64, 67; Mateer, p.66). Those who were either unwilling to work for the planters or could not be accommodated in the plantation work force, were driven further and further away. As we closely follow them we see that the planters, backed by the state, were ultimately successful in creating a work-force out of even these groups who had been initially averse to such employment. The *KDHP*, the largest plantation not only in southern India but also in the whole world was built by banishing the local tribal community, *the Muthuvas*, from their traditional pasture. Some of the *Muthuvas* strongly resented this. As in the case of Thiruvithamkur in the early 1840's, one of the pioneering planters in Nilagiri suggested that the movement of the *Thodas* be restricted and that the shifting cultivation of various other tribes be curbed. While the *Badagas* were reduced to becoming potato cultivators, the condition of the *Thodas* further deteriorated. The process of encroachment and usurpation of the entire Nilagiri region by the Europeans in general and the penetration of foreign capital in plantations in particular, destroyed

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3 We do not intend to reduce the importance of the lead taken by their brethren in their struggle against the Europeans in the Wayanad forests, popularly known as the Pazhassi rebellion or the *kurichiar lahala* and other innumerable instances of tribal revolts from other regions of the world. The *kurichiar* and *kurumber* of Wayanad revolted against the British policy of collecting land revenue in cash instead of in kind. This was in fact the beginning of the peasant revolt in Malabar in 1812. (Chopra, Ravindran, Subrahmanyam, 1979, 132-5). As their situation steadily worsened, so also has their struggle become endemic. For a recent resumé, see Ravi Raman (2002).

the socio-economic fabric of all these adivasis, to the extent that they were dispossessed of their communal property and deprived of even a means of bare subsistence (Ravi Raman, 1998). The depeasantisation and dispossession of tenants by the landlords and the State through a series of pro-Imperial policies added to the ranks of the landless agricultural labourers ready to be recruited to the plantations. As caste hierarchy coincided with economic power, with the lands being in the hands of the caste-Hindus, the Dalits and such other backward-caste people who laboured on these lands invariably came under threat of eviction.<sup>4</sup>

The many riots among the people, particularly the clashes between the upper castes and the oppressed also forced the latter to move up the hills. By the mid-nineteenth century there was an outpouring of depressed-caste migrants from the “labour catchment areas” in various parts of Tamil country, Bihar, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and the Konkan Coast: the threat to subsistence was the major reason behind this push (Chakravarty, 1978:249-328). The breaking out of famine and pestilence, and their utter poverty pushed the *Paraiyar* and other depressed-castes out of their villages into the hills (Manickam, 1977:87; Lovatt, 1978:12); many of them who had been converted to Christianity secured employment in the hills with the help of missionaries (Bhowmik, 1981:58); others, encouraged and supported by the missionaries migrated both within the country as well as to overseas plantations. The movement of Mysore-based labour to the plantation belt gradually waned with the end of the famine causing a shortage of labour even in Mysore. The planters were then compelled to recruit workers from the already

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4 The land owning castes included the *Brahmanar*, *Vellar*, *Reddy*, *Kapu* etc of the Madras Presidency and the *Nairs* and *Syrian Christians* in Thiruvithamkur. For a discussion on the concentration of lands in the hands of caste-Hindus and Hindu temples in Thiruvithamkur, Kochi and Malabar, see Varghese, 1970:185-98.

emerged 'labour catchment areas' of Salem, Madurai, Ramanad, Tirunelveli, Tiruchirappalli, Tanjavur and Coimbatore. They were recruited - largely on a family basis by the kanganyes. The complexities of the caste structure in the plains thus do not seem to have been reflected as such in the caste-class reality in the plantations. This common background ought to have helped them forge a common class identity but this was not to be, for obvious reasons. However, the fact that the lives of the *Dalits* and the other Backward communities in the plains had been full of hardships and utter misery brooks no argument - so intense was the degree of oppression they had had to suffer at the hands of the caste-Hindus. But did the shift to the plantation work sites really improve the lot of these masses? Judging from the experiences they underwent at the hands of the European planter, it would seem that what had actually transpired was only a change of Masters.

Once the workers reached the estates, they were confronted with a system of hierarchy, with the 'planter' at the top and themselves at the bottom. This hierarchy may be placed in three broad categories, viz., the white Superintendent and the Visiting Agent as the representative of the absentee owner at the top (Macfadyen, 1954:270); the supervisory staff consisting of a group of functionaries such as factory assistants, clerks, the watch and ward and the *kangany* in the middle; and the mass of workers, the ones directly involved in the process of production, at the bottom. While the capitalist-managerial class in plantations was composed of European estate owners, Anglo-Indians or local *savarna* administrators and foremen of intermediary castes, the workers were almost entirely dalits thus exhibiting a strong resemblance to the larger social milieu that they existed in. Thus the plantations represented a system of hierarchical control where labouring women (and men too) were hegemonised by the patriarchs of class, caste and gender. This represents a situation in which caste and class converged, the

overwhelming majority of the workers belonging to the depressed castes.

Once mobilized from their place to the work-place, the large bodies of workers had to be segmented and organised. First, the workers, the adult males and females, and children even at the age of seven to eight were divided into three groups: permanent labour in the estates, permanent labour outside the estates and temporary labour. Secondly, the work pattern was segmented. For instance, in tea, the operations comprised plucking, pruning, weeding, forking, draining, processing and so on. The work of plucking leaves was largely assigned to women; men were also involved in plucking, particularly in times of shortage of women labourers. However, men were generally given those types of work which required 'physical exertion'. This included the maintenance and upkeep of the estate viz. pruning, draining, forking, and the like. Children were given light work such as hoeing, removing creepers and parasites from the bushes, and so on. The labour process on the plantations was arduous and exhausting. Work was extracted from the labourers with a machine-like precision, any fault detected being dealt with severely. The most exacting of these rules was related to time: the estate gong/siren signalled the time for everything that the workers did. They rose from bed at 4.30 or 5 a.m., gathered for their daily roll-call and inspection<sup>5</sup> at 6 to 6.30 a.m., and then it was a hard day's toil upto 5 p.m. in the evening. Women workers were put to work, each of them being allotted lines of bushes to be plucked. These lines were straight and continuous up and down, and were specially designed to ensure that no bush in the field was missed. It was a "ready method of apportioning

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5. In the words of Foucault, "an ostentatious form of examination", Foucault (1977): 188. For an interesting analysis of agronomic discipline on Sri Lankan tea plantations using Foucaultian methodology, see Valentine (1993): 568-600.

tasks”: a pruner was assigned a task of pruning a certain number of bushes, 80-100 bushes in Nilagiri and 120-140 bushes in Annaimalai for example. Moreover, this system of tea planting facilitated the immediate detection of culprits whenever bad work was done (Pinches, 1924:32). It was the planters’ contention that only “close control over plucking” would ensure the production of quality tea (Kothari, 1952:68). Father, mother and children working together in the very same fields was not an uncommon sight; they worked barefoot, defenseless against the elements, not even the children being exempted from work in times of bad weather.

Work thus proceeded with clock-work regularity, any instance of default being punished with the awarding of half-name - meaning half-pay for the day’s work or even total pay-cuts (Rege, 1950:140). However, time limits were often stretched to suit the planter, and workers were generally forced to work beyond the stipulated hours, often on empty stomachs. Even at the end of such an exhausting day, the labourers were not free to relax as they wished - they were denied all access to country liquor - even toddy - and they thus went without either a smoke or a drink, all in the name of discipline. Even the children were not spared and were often subjected to ‘corporal punishment’ in this drive to extract maximum work, the Kanan Devan Plantations being notorious for such practices.

### **Punishments: Hard as Nails**

In spite of the fact that slavery had been abolished by the mid-eighteenth century, workers on plantations found themselves no better off than slaves and bondsmen. The distinction drawn between slavery and the actual conditions of work that existed on plantations was so subtle as to escape the comprehension of the harassed workers - so intensive and painful was the ill-treatment meted out to them. The

planters went to great lengths to keep such incidents under covers. It took some socially concerned individuals and the vernacular press to bring these dark secrets out into the open;<sup>6</sup> stories related by those who had actually experienced such travails provides shocking confirmation of such early reports as in the case of their north-eastern counterparts. However, the planters could not drive the workers too hard as they formed the very pillars of their newly-made fortunes. This led the plantation-owner to adopt a unique mode of labour control which comprised diametrically opposed tactics - coercion and paternalism, the proverbial carrot and stick policy.

The European planters were 'inhuman and cruel' in their punishment. Even tying the workers up and brutally thrashing them, a practice akin to the punishment meted out in the Assam Plantations and in other colonies was not beyond them. When one worker died, another would appear in the same name (Krishnan, 1952:6). This was chiefly due to the fact that plantation workers under colonialism were not expected to have names, but were meant to act as 'depersonalised agents' for capital accumulation (Post, 1989:29). Cases against workers if at all 'registered' were never proved. When one such case was reported to the District Magistrate in Munnar in 1903, the verdict given went in favour of the planter concerned (*Manorama*, 1905:2). Other coercive punishments were equally barbaric; the European planters themselves confessed to such ruthless punishments. Offending workers were punished by lowering them into shallow, muddy water while they choked and struggled for breath. This form of punishment called 'ducking' was

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6. The Madras based *Swadesamitran*, the Mysore-based *Nadegannadi* and Kerala-based *Kerala Mitran*, *Manorama* etc. were some of the local journals and newspapers which articulated these issues. Whenever the press came out with the truth, a public withdrawal of the same was insisted upon by the planters. See *Madras Mail*, Aug. 20, 1925, p.11.

viewed as the masterpiece of plantation craft (Elliot, 1871:288-89) in dealing with troublesome workers.

The workers were “herded like cattle into ill-constructed ramshackle buildings” (Daniel, 1991) and the planters often kept them under constant watch and ward, thwarting any attempt at escaping by night. Rods and whips were freely used on those who dared to run away and were unlucky enough to be caught in this attempt. They were often captured and brought back, at times with the help of trained dogs. The *kanganies/maistris* too played their role in keeping the workers in bondage. In the words of an European planter based in Annaimalai, the workers, to quote:

were in fact slaves, and were treated as such by their *maistris*, whose only concern was how much money they could pocket before they died on them. It is a fact that this type of *maistry* used to lock his coolies in the lines in the evening and only let them out to work next morning, irrespective of whether they were sick or well. Mohammedian *maistris* with Hindu coolies were the worst in this respect (Griffiths, p.404).

Those workers who dared to question their employers or to claim their rights were severely chastised. Any worker who left the plantation premises without prior permission was invariably labelled an absconder: this included any attempt on the part of the workers to seek better employment elsewhere. If such workers were caught working in other estates, it was the workers themselves who were held liable for punishment (Daniel, 1991; Rajamony, 1995), not the *kanganis* nor the planters, whose intolerable practices had been responsible for driving them away in the first place. That bondage remained a harsh reality is evident from the ‘Slavery case in the Travancore Highlands’ wherein one of the workers kidnapped the child of another worker in a bid to free

himself from bondage. In delivering his judgement in this case, the Sessions Judge, P Raman Tampi spared no words to expose the labour regime in the European plantations. To quote:

..... the evidence in the case lends colour to the impression that slave traffic is carried on with helpless children and credulous adults to their doom. The boy Avutha, for instance, was treated to a cup of coffee and sweet meats and decoyed from Manakumam (his village) without the consent and permission of his mother and elderly brother. Once attached to an Estate as coolies, the defenseless creatures are deprived of all individuality and freedom and looked upon as chattels. It is a pity that such conditions should prevail in modern days when we hear so much of philanthropic endeavors to elevate the depressed classes. The arms of the law are unfortunately not strong enough or long enough to reach the worst offenders. It is permissible to doubt whether the encouragement of the labour contract system by statute is not mainly responsible for this regrettable state of affairs<sup>7</sup>.

However, the Sessions Judge Raman Tampi was strongly rebuked by the British Resident through the Dewan and the Supreme Judge and was forced to make a promise that he would henceforth exercise greater care in the pronouncements of his judgements.

The estates themselves were situated in splendid isolation. This helped the planters to keep the workers in even greater isolation; punishments and cruelties were perpetuated with casual ease under such conditions. Even outside their work-place, for instance in the weekly markets, the workers remained under the watchful eye of their employers,

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7 For a detailed description, see Crown Representative's Records, R/2/882/108; Baak 1999:145-6; *Planters' Chronicle* 1913:579)

not even being allowed the luxury of a smoke after a hard day's toil. Often, on their way back home, they were blackmailed into parting with whatever little money they might have earned.<sup>8</sup> And, what is more, they were stopped from attending even the funeral rites of their near and dear ones.<sup>9</sup> In such an atmosphere of intense segregation where the workers were totally cut off from the outside world, the development of trade unionism was greatly hampered..The maltreatment of the women workers who constituted more than half of the total work force on the plantations in southern India was in no measure lesser than that towards the men folk; at times they were subjected to 'secret punishments' (*RCL*, Written Evidence, p.201).

### **Chain of Anti-labour Rules**

In colonial India, 'administration and exploitation went hand-in-hand' and the plantation sector was no exception to this rule. The coercive apparatus of the colonial State was extensively used to keep labour under control and to exploit the workers mercilessly. The State was all the time willing to remove any practical difficulties faced by the planting community, even to the extent of modifying some of the existing rules and regulations in its haste to weigh in on the authority of capital. The judiciary, backed by a series of Acts and Regulations, and the police backed by the colonial bureaucracy were the two major means through which the planters sustained their hegemony. As is well known, in the wider context, the British established a powerful colonial

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8 In the General Body Meeting of the *Wynad Planters' Association* held on 1 March 1899, it was reported that the *cherumar* from Malabar "had asked for cheques payable at Kozhikode rather than take cash, as they had been blackmailed on the road", as reported in *Planting Opinion*, 'Wyanad', March. Vol.VI, No.10, March 1,1899, p.184.

9 Royal Commission on Labour (hereafter *RCL*) Report, pp.402-03. Restrictions were imposed on those attending the funeral of the workers even in the 1950s. See Minutes, *GBM of KDPA*, Aug.3, 1955, p.178.

bureaucracy and a uniform Indian Penal code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Evidence Act to bring the entire civilian society under the Imperial legal system.

### **The Breach of Contract Act, 1859**

As the workers were indentured to a particular estate for a fixed period of time for specified wages, breaches of contract were punishable by criminal law. The earliest instance of the exercise of coercive power by the European master class came in the form of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act VIII passed in 1859. This was in response to the demands of the Calcutta Traders' Association and similar business interests. It was first proposed to limit the Act to Presidency towns alone but it was later extended to other districts of the Presidency as well. The Act made any breach of contract - including all contracts and agreements whether by deed, in writing or by word - a criminal offence, punishable with imprisonment (Das, 1941:11-41).

The employers were allowed to choose between the options of either demanding fulfillment of the said contract or of repayment of the money advanced. Besides the power embodied in the Breach of Contract Act, other provisions for enforcing labour contracts were contained in the Indian Penal Code, and the Madras Act V of 1866 (*Planters' Enquiry Committee*, 1894:24-33). Though the Act was for the benefit of employers in general, it was the European planter class all over the country which used it to the greatest advantage. The planters in the Princely States also made use of the provisions of the Indian Penal Code and other rules corresponding to the Breach of Contract Act. Besides the power exercised through the Breach of Contract Act, the planters also made use of the Civil Courts to discipline labour. The *kanganis*, too, filed cases against workers through the Civil Courts. In Nilagiri and Thiruvithamkur, where tea dominated, the number of such cases

instituted successfully was considerably high (*Planters' Enquiry Committee*, p.41) and it was under the Criminal Breach of Contract Act (Regulation 1 of 1040) – largely modelled on the labour legislation in British India<sup>10</sup> - that the planters in the latter region exercised their hegemony leading to a situation in which 'free and unfree labour alternated each other'(Baak, 1999).

The planters continued to press for further amendments in the existing Acts in their quest for greater power over labour; they particularly sought the introduction of an extradition procedure to get around the constraints put forth by the political geography of the land. The necessity for either radical changes in the existing Acts or the passing of a fresh Act was strongly put forward by the planter class, and the colonial State responded positively. In 1877, for example, the Government of Madras had stated:

...planting industry in Wayanad is suffering from a substantial grievance in the absence of a simple and complete remedy as regards breaches of contract caused by desertion of labourers or fraudulent practices on the part of the *maistrimar*. Government are therefore now disposed to give the planters all the assistance in their power consistent with adequate protection to their employees (*Planters' Enquiry Committee*, p.39) .

In 1894, the Planting Member of the Madras Legislative Council prepared a Draft Estates Labour Bill which aimed at a further subjugation of the workers. The colonial authorities did not press for the passing of the Bill; however, an Enquiry Committee was appointed in 1896 with the consent of the Viceroy. The Committee comprised wholly of

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10 For an examination of the varied trajectories of labour legislations in British India and princely state, see Rammohan (1996)

Europeans with specifically the Resident in Mysore as Chairman and two members, one nominated by the Madras Government and the other nominated by the planters' associations. The Committee highlighted the necessity of persisting with the prevailing systems, and emphasised the importance of the services rendered by the *maistris*. It also pressed the State for further amendments in the existing rules and regulations; the various planters' associations continued to emphasise the relevance of such regulations, particularly with respect to extradition.<sup>11</sup> The final outcome was the passing of an Act in 1903, namely the Madras Planters' Labour Act, largely based on the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901. By this time, the already existing Coffee Stealing Prevention Act (1878) was in force, making workers and *maistris* found in possession of freshly picked coffee liable to punishment.

The Madras Planters' Labour Act was anti-labour to the core. Ignoring the plight of the workers, it actually undermined the interests of the working class. This naturally aroused public indignation. Typical of this was the banner of protest raised by various local newspapers - *Swadesamitran* from Madras, *Kerala Patrika* from Malabar and *Nadegannady* from Mysore - which exposed the misdeeds of the planters and the *kanganigal*. According to the Kottayam-based *Manorama*, the Act 'has made the position of the labourers worse than that of slaves' (*Manorama*, 1903).

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11 In the General Body Meeting of the KDPA (Feb. 16, 1899), it was decided to apply pressure on the Government on the question of extradition. To quote one planter:

... extradition into native states is of the first importance to us, it should be made as direct and single as possible, and the controls round about procedure in force in criminal cases avoided - a Labour Act would be of little or no use to us unless extradition is also given.

Quoted in *Planting Opinion*, 'Kanan Devans', Vol.IV, No.10, March 1, 1899, pp.184-85.

To quote *Nadegannady* in 1903:

From the time the cooly signs the contract of services to the time of the expiry of the term, he is completely at the mercy of his rich and powerful master who may have him sentenced to three months imprisonment on the charges of negligence in work or of absconding from it. Another hardship is that the months spent in jail are not included in the term of the contract. The European masters, if guilty, are on the other hand given only nominal punishment. The officers who are to enforce the provisions of the Act, the planters, the persons who drafted the Bill and those who revised it are all Europeans” (*Nadegannady*, February 10, 1903).

More than 150 amendments to the Bill were proposed in the Madras Legislative Assembly; none in favour of labour was approved. Even the reciprocal obligation that labourers should also be given the right to recover from the planter the wages wrongfully withheld was rejected by the planting community.<sup>12</sup> Prosecutions under the Madras Planters’ Labour Act became widespread. In Nilagiri, more than 1,000 cases were being filed against the workers every year; in 1919 the number was as high as 3,228. The number of cases filed against the workers in Wayanad was also quite high- around 2,000 in the year 1919.<sup>13</sup> When the Labour Department of *UPASI* began assisting in the settling of cases against workers from the year 1914, the number of cases rose at an alarming rate. This central agency helped to unify the planters through

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12 For such details, see *Planters’ Chronicle*, March 1907, Vol.2, No.2.

13 In fact, three years after the implementation of the Act, the cases filed in the court of the sub-Magistrate of Vaithiri alone were 191, of which 125 cases were complaints against *maistris* and the remaining against the workers, see *Planters’ Chronicle*, March 1907: 60-61.

a monopolistic structure of control, enabling them to get labour at cheap rates and also to control it effectively. It also precluded the possibility of a competitive determination of wage rates in the labour market.

### **Planters, Police and Workers**

From the year 1904 onwards, the planters resorted to the maintenance of cavalry units in almost all the planting regions. The Southern Provinces Mounted Rifles with its headquarters at Munnar, Kozhikode, Thirunelveli and Bezwada functioned as the planters' own private army and helped in the maintenance of law and order and internal security; it also served the Imperial power as and when required as in the quelling of revolts such as the *Mappilla* rebellion of 1921. As time passed they were equipped with better weapons and artillery only to help further terrorize the planting regions.<sup>14</sup> The State too, actively participated in enforcing the various rules by establishing a wide network of police and armed forces, a system which was then centralised by the British Government; the police in turn dutifully followed the instructions of the colonial bureaucracy. The setting up of police stations at the request of the planters, increased deployment of police in planting regions, providing for the personal services of planters and so on were some of the means by which a such a network was established; this was over and above the organising of the judiciary in various centres.

The workers were punished by illegal policing and whipping not only by their former employees, but also by their new

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14 It would be foolish on our part to assume that these private armies went out of existence along with direct colonialism. A resurrection of this practice is now evident in the Assam plantations of the 1990s with the formation of the Plantation Protection Forces. As in the colonial times, these repressive measures receive full state backing in a manner that puts independent India to shame.

masters.<sup>15</sup> The police was largely occupied with pursuing runaway workers who were duly arrested and produced before the Magistrate. As early as the 1860s, the Inspector General of Police suggested that the police be either freed from this irksome duty or that the planters be made to pay for their services, but neither demand was heeded (Arnold, 1989:156). A considerable number of warrants continued to be issued and workers were continually brought back by the police to be tried. Not less than 1,400 such cases were executed in Mysore State alone in the period 1891-1895. For a smooth functioning of this system, an extensive network of police stations and outposts were set up in the planting regions as well as in places from where the labour was sourced. Consequent upon this, the planting regions, though thinly populated, came to be amongst the most heavily policed in rural Madras. The Nilagiri district was a particular case in point. With a total area of less than a thousand square miles, it had 13 police stations for 1,00,000 people by the year 1880. By 1910, Nilagiri had 436 policemen in a ratio of one for every 259 inhabitants and for every 2.2 square miles (Ibid.). As against this in the plains district of Tiruchirappalli, there was only one policeman to every 1,604 inhabitants and every four square miles. The other planting regions such as Wayanad and Annaimalai were also 'disproportionately heavily policed', the former with a substantial share of European policemen.

*UPASI* made a representation to the Madras Government seeking a change in the existing procedure followed for the execution of warrants. The immediate reason behind such a move by *UPASI* was the large

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15 It goes without saying that the condition of the workers from southern India and their inhuman subsistence in overseas plantations such as those in the West Indies, north-eastern Sumatra, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Mauritius were deplorable to the extreme (Guha, 1954; Bose, 1954; Gupta, 1994; Breman, 1989; Stoler, 1985; Naipual, 1969).

number of warrants that remained unserved.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a consensus of opinion was reached among the colonial administrators, obviously, in favour of the planter class: it was decided that warrants should thenceforth be 'issued and endorsed to the police through the Labour Department', the latter undertaking to furnish correct information to the police about the whereabouts of the warranties. This was intended to enable the police to execute the cases without delay or missing and thus the proportion of cases settled increased enormously: it rose from 45 per cent in 1916 to as high as 89 per cent in 1922 (UPASI Proceedings, 1922:40). Occasionally, the services of the police were provided for individual planters by the State for which the former was required to pay a prescribed amount. The payment was often prompt. In one incident in Thiruvithamkur, the police was sent to a Scottish Indian company in Agasthyamudi, which owed the State a sum of Rs. 240. With respect to such dues outstanding the *Dewan* suggested that in future, payment in advance might be insisted upon. In spite of such slackness on the part of the planters, the colonial authorities introduced fresh measures in their favour. For instance, in Mysore it was agreed that an Inspector of Police would visit the house of each of the European planters once a month to hear complaints, if any (*Madras Mail*, 199:7). The planters' associations even offered rewards to the police for the detection of culprits and thefts of plantation produce (*Madras Mail*, 1895:5) and the police in their turn happily acknowledged the receipt of such rewards though they had been earlier subjected to the wrath of the planters for their

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16 Non-service of warrants was a major subject of discussion in the general body meeting of the various planters' associations. With respect to the *Wynad Planters' Association*, see the Minutes, *GBM of WPA* (dt.Nov.8, 1911) as reported in *Planters' Chronicle*, Vol.VI, No.47, Nov.25, 1911, p.723; GBM dt. Oct.16, 1907 in *Planters' Chronicle*, Vol.II, No.18, Nov.19, 1907, p.660; GBM dt. June 10, 1908 in *Planters' Chronicle*, Vol.III, No.6, June 6, 1908, p.137; GBM dt. Oct.8, 1913 in *Planters' Chronicle*, Vol. VIII, No.44, Nov.1, 1913, p.562. For a similar situation in Annaimalai, 1913:405.

‘neglect, torpidity and misconduct’. The rewards, either in cash or as ornaments, for their ‘meritorious services’ (Maaclean, 1985:204) were attractive enough to induce the police to arrest innocents on false charges of desertion. In Madurai district in 1926, for instance, the Police arrested a *dalit* woman and sent her for trial to Gudalore. When she was found to be the wrong person, she was sent home at the expense of the State.<sup>17</sup> When the ‘criminal tribes’ began to be employed by the estates, the UPASI insisted on a “cut and dried” scheme which would include the establishment of police outposts and police help for the supervision of workers.

The Breach of Contract Act was not repealed until 1926, neither was the Madras Planters’ Labour Act until 1929, nor the Coorg Labour Act until 1931 (Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, 1927:359; RCL, p.355). The vestiges of penal contracts finally ceased to exist, that too without much of a protest from the planter class. This apparent lack of concern on the part of the planters clearly indicates the advantageous position realised by them through the many internal changes that they had brought about over the years. By that time the process of disengagement of modes of production and the transformation of

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17 The workers might have been further handicapped by the very caste composition of the police force, it being heavily biased against them, as in the case of their underrepresentation in the other public services. The *paraiyar* who constituted a major portion of the Tamil populace as well as a significant chunk of plantation labour, for instance, were grossly under-represented in the police force which was dominated by the caste-Hindus; the former constituted only 1.32 per cent of the police force in 1875, which dwindled down to 1 per cent in 1880; the State justified its attempt to keep out these low-castes maintaining that they were less ‘efficient’. For more details, see Maclean, *Madras Manual*, pp.190-91; Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*, pp.230-44; In one instance, it was reported that, even without an extradition warrant, a local sergeant of the Sri Lankan police arrested three workers on the pretext that they had decamped from an estate in Sri Lanka, see TNA, Judl. GO No.623-4,1917: Deputy Magistrate of Ramanad to the Secretary to the Govt. of Madras, dt. Feb.11, 1917.

temporary workers into a permanent captive work force was fast taking place and the planters were sanguine in the knowledge that the workers were now directly under the sway of capital. The workers also lost their dual existence or what may be termed their amphibian character - with one foot on the hills and the other foot on the plains - once they became resident. As the workers settled down on the estates with their families in the wake of an increased centralisation of capital, the relationship between the two modes of production in terms of labour market and levels of living snapped. i.e. the workers' earnings from the outside non-capitalist sector, where from they used to meet part of their cost of reproduction, were either reduced or wiped out. Besides, with the workers captive and resident, the planters could easily abstain from the market forces determining wages, thus enabling them to continue with their low-wage policy; wages on the plantations remained lower than in the plains where the open market intervened. One of the reasons why the planters were able to keep the wages on plantations stagnant at a low level for a considerably longer period could be attributed to this.

Yet the question remains: Has the repealing of the penal code and its related colonial code of relations ever given rise to an era satisfactory to labour? Has it ever resulted in the creation of a free labour? Absolutely not. The colonial system of production and the larger political structure within which the worker had to function remained undisturbed. On the one hand, the workers, by and large, remained unaware of the fact that they could no longer be subjugated by such oppressive Acts; neither did the authorities care to keep the workers informed of their changed situation.<sup>18</sup> On the other, the planters in certain regions continued to

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18 Thomas, Collector and District Magistrate, Coimbatore admitted to the RCL that he was unaware of any attempt to convey the message to the workers that such Acts no longer existed, RCL, p.415..

assign the work of apprehending workers who deserted the estates. To quote one woman worker, who testified before the *Royal Commission on Labour* in 1931:

If I ran away before the completion of my term of agreement a warrant would be issued and the police would come and collect the money. Many people have come to the tea garden from my village and they all say so. I have seen the police come to the village and take back people. That was one or two years ago (*RCL, Oral Evidence, p.374*).

What was more important was that by this time the workers had been made captive at the capitalist work sites as part of the centralisation of capital (Ravi Raman, 1991:243-67). The continuity in the labour process and its reproduction was fully assured, and the planters wielded a greater control over the workforce - particularly patriarchal authority over women, who were also subjected to various forms of sexual abuse. During the great depression of the 1930s, the workers were widely retrenched, wages were cut, and new forms of exploitative practices were introduced. As the plantations fast began to revive, workers were re-employed but without any improvement in wages. During the second world war, plantations prospered further and though formal trade unions made their entry, exploitative and disciplinary regime continued.

### **To Neglect is to Illtreat**

The entire judiciary continued to be structured with a view to the creation of a situation wherein the Europeans 'should not have reason to complain of a difficulty in obtaining legal redress'. The various District Magistrates who had been authorised by the colonial State to report on the state of affairs of the workers rarely fulfilled their jobs; the occasional official who filed an honest report was invariably reprimanded from above as the Slavery case of Travancore cited earlier. For instance,

of the 19 registered factories in Nilagiri district only one in 1924, five in 1925 and two in 1926 had been inspected by the Divisional Magistrate, leaving the majority of factories without any official examination. In the case of Thiruvithamkur, it was reported that Magistrates `never came' into the picture at all. And whenever they were to send reports to their respective Governments, they invariably continued to project a wholly satisfactory treatment of the workers on the estates. Even when the *Royal Commission on Labour* was appointed to look into plantation matters, the workers found themselves unable to speak out, the planters having recruited the help of the police in their bid to silence the workers. Moreover, trade union organisers like Ramaswami Ayyangar were obstructed in their efforts to collect authentic information on the conditions of labour in plantations.<sup>19</sup> The Labour Commissioner was another authority who was expected to provide a true picture but he, too, proved to be no exception. As Shiv Rao, the then President of the Madras Labour Union evidenced before the *Royal Commission on Labour*, there had not been in his fifteen years of experience even a single instance of a government official visiting the estates and making an honest attempt to assess the living conditions of the plantation workers (RCL, Written Evidence, p.200).

However, the State blindly accepted the often fabricated reports of the colonial officialdom in spite of repeated attempts made by certain members of the Legislative Council to refute such claims. The latter maintained that the workers were ill-treated on the estates and declared that an enquiry was essential. The authorities turned a deaf ear to such pleas and thwarted attempts by the Legislative Members to set up any

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19 The *Royal Commission on Labour* expressed its displeasure over the whole question of the District Magistrate not allowing Ramaswami Ayyangar to convene a meeting of the workers and to collect information to be submitted, *RCL*, pp.419-20.

enquiries pertaining to conditions of labour on plantations. For instance, in 1915, Mr. Rao Bahadur Kesava Pillai raised the issue of the ill-treatment of workers on plantations in the Madras Legislative Council and asked the Government to appoint necessary bodies to protect their interests. The Government pointed out that the Magistrates of the various districts were to look after such matters and that they had not been informed of any such cases; the District Magistrate of Nilagiri, in fact stated that the workers were being treated well.<sup>20</sup> This was also the case when the question of the distressed workers came up in the Madras Legislative Council in 1924. Mr. Chidamber Nadar cited that a large number of workers who had left the Annaimalai plantations were in a desperate condition on the roads and requested the Government to appoint an Inquiry Committee to deal with the problem. However, the Home Minister was not desirous of appointing an authority as he was convinced that the planters' association itself had taken steps to take the coolies back to hospital. The member then reminded the Minister of the fact that leaving the issue to planting agents instead of employing Government officials, would not be of much use, as the former would only be 'too eager to turn back the distressed coolies to their depots rather than taking the trouble of hospitalising the workers'; planters all over the world have been uniformly guilty of disregarding the law (Gadgil, 1971:53-54; 286-87). In the larger context, the interests of the *Dalits* and backward communities also continued to be ignored, as made clear earlier by M.C.Raja, one of the most powerful *Dalit* representatives in the Madras Legislative Council. Though as part of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms the *Dalit* representatives were nominated to the Madras Legislative Council, they were too small in number to be able to influence legislation affecting the *Dalits* in the wider context, not to

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20 For details, see TNA, Judl. GO No.3081, 1915, *Despatch Abstract: Legislative Council Questions* - dt.Dec.9,1915.

speak of those on the plantations. Capturing the entire scenario, what the *Indian Patriot* stated with respect to the high ranges in Thiruvithamkur was equally true with regard to the other planting regions was:

there have been cases repeatedly of planters being accused of grave offences against natives of the country. The State Government is helpless to protect its own subjects against Europeans through its police and judiciary, and a large European population, not amenable to local authority and perfectly independent of it, must constitute a grave danger both politically and administratively. We have heard that no native can venture to hold up an umbrella, nor a native officer can go there on horseback, without fear of being molested (*Indian Patriot*, 1907).

The common social origins and the day to day material life and the subjugation of the workers ought to have helped them forge a common class identity, but this was not to be, for obvious reasons such as the conflicting identities of caste and religion, differential wages as part of the divide-and-rule strategy of the planters, the territoriality of the workers including the compound setting and so on. The workers spared no means to hit back against the new Masters - both individually and collectively.

### **Early Outbursts**

The earliest of these protests occurred on the very first plantation itself - the *Anjarakandy Cinnamon Plantation* set up in 1797 with the investment of the East India Company. The illegal usurpation of property involved made the local populace suspicious of the motives behind the attempts of Brown to raise the plantation. Brown was unable to collect the requisite amount of pepper vines to start his plantation even after offering an increased price owing to the lack of cooperation from the

local inhabitants (Haridas, 1980:20). To protect his property he had to engage a special watch and ward. In spite of this, during the Pazhassi revolts, a major portion of the estate was destroyed by the rebels to whom it was the very embodiment of colonialism. Francis Buchanan, after his visit to the estate in the first decade of the 19th century reported that “the plantation has been molested by *Nairs* and the eastern part of it has fallen in their hands so that for the protection of what remains, it has been necessary to station an European officer with a company of sepoys at Brown’s house” (Innes, 1915:418-19; Logan, 1989:529). The workers in the estate also fought against the discrimination in wage rates for local labour and labour from distant places. In 1799, they threatened to go on strike demanding an increase in wages, equal to that paid to the workers who came from Thalassery and Mayyazhi. Brown was forced to yield though he later succeeded in reducing the wages again with the support of the colonial administration.

There were many other instances of resistance/protests from among the workers owing to the combined reasons of material deprivation and the lack of a decent human treatment. In 1859, in Wayanad, an estate writer was stopped by a few *maistris* and workers, who asserted that his habit of preparing false accounts was improper. They threatened to strike him and break his head. A similar incident occurred in 1905.<sup>21</sup> Whether this was consequent on the workers getting drunk as alleged by the planters is not known, nor is it relevant. In one of the Kannan Devan estates, the workers found the behaviour of the European Manager so intolerable that they physically attacked him. On another occasion, rubber estate workers hurled their European Manager into a barrel of latex (Ravindran, 1972:116). As late as 1941, a European planter was attacked by a number of workers in his estate and was severely injured (*Fornightly Report*, 1941:5).

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21 For details see *UPASI Proceedings*, 1905:86.

As Moore points out, “ throughout the centuries one of the common man’s most frequent and effective responses to oppression has been flight” (Moore, 1978:125). In plantations, the workers were fenced in within the compounds of the estates even after the repeal of the indenture system in 1915, and hence they were forced to resort to desertion, a hard and tortuous road to escape. Desertion was reported right from the beginning of the plantations in the mid-19th century.<sup>22</sup> Whenever the workers left the estates of their own will, the planters termed it ‘absconding’ and hence punishable by law. Desertion, which came to be one of the commonest forms of protests in the colonial enterprises, became rampant in the plantations in southern India in the early 20th century (Daniel, 1992). The reasons often cited were the ill-treatment of the workers by the employers, poor rationing, and the harsh weather in the hills. Once caught, they were driven back to the estates, or jailed.

Whenever such expressions of collective protest could not find a way out, the workers often let loose their anger through other means. One European Manager who had earlier taken disciplinary action against a skilled-worker was stabbed in the back by the latter by a hunting knife. Another case is also worth revealing: a worker in Dakshin Kanara cut his own left arm causing severe bleeding when his European employer, in spite of repeated requests, refused to pay him his wages. ‘Weapons of the Weak’ (Scott, 1985) thus took the form of blood-letting and self-immolation. This was in fact an individualised form of coercing the planters to respect workers’ rights. It was also a warning to the planters to be prompt in paying wages, at least in the future. But this small act of

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22 In Wayanad, the District Magistrate found it imperative to modify the Breach of Contract Act in the very same year of its passing in 1859 to contain desertion also, see RAK, The Magistrate to the Deputy Registrar (Court of Judiciary), dt. June 24, 1859, *Outward Letters written by the Collector of Malabar in the Magisterial Department for the year 1859*.

protest only brought more misfortune to the hapless worker who was arrested by the local police on the charge of attempted suicide (Madras Mai, 'Occasional Notes', 1896:4). One is led to suspect that scores of such sporadic incidents of labour protest must have occurred, but documentary evidence regarding this is scant. Of the 'principal strikes' that occurred in various parts of the Madras Presidency during the year 1921, none was on plantations.<sup>23</sup> With the outbreak of the imperialist World War in 1914, capitalist development in India was accelerated for further colonial exploitation, the major offshoot of this being the growth of industries such as cotton spinning and weaving mills, jute factories and railways besides plantations. An intensification of colonial exploitation was achieved through a process of speeding up of work and the lengthening of working hours. However, a proportionate increase in wages did not occur in any of the plantations until 1918. The post-War rise in prices, particularly those of foodstuffs and cloth, unleashed a wave of discontent among the workers. In India, the prices of food grains alone went up by more than 90 per cent; in the planting regions it was as high as 102 per cent. In the northern regions, tea-workers boycotted the markets run by the planters and instead formed an alternative market (Guha, 1976:135). This was also the time when the workers on the Assam tea plantations were engaged in riots and strikes; they were driven to it largely due to economic grievances and the inhuman treatment at the hands of their employers.<sup>24</sup> When the bazaar merchants in Annaimalai in southern India abruptly stopped the usual supply of rice and other items to the workers, probably in expectation of a further rise in prices, the labourers boycotted work on the estates itself.

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23 For details see TNA, Law (General), GO No.1848, 1921.

24 *The Hindu*, 'Assam Tea Gardens, Exodus of Labour: A Lurid Tale', dt. 4.9.1924; Also see TNA, Law (General), GO No.3205, 1924; Guha, 1976:129-33.

Not less than five hundred workers, including women, incensed at this denial of their basic 'right to food', struck work. They did not return to their jobs until the merchants resumed the supplies the next day: the workers were also beginning to get around their problems of conflicting identities, slowly but surely articulating their protests in one voice. History is replete with instances of such rural protests in market places during these years, which in turn reveal the gradual crystallisation of a spirit of resistance and the beginning of a continuous 'murmur of protests' among the deprived workers and peasants, particularly among the 'dalits'.<sup>25</sup> By this time workers at large had begun to organise themselves drawing inspiration from the working class movements that were beginning to grow all over the world, as also by the intensification of their exploitation during the period of Depression. With the kind of severe oppression and misery that the workers were being subjected to, the objective conditions for an awakening of the subaltern consciousness were ripe. Yet, any manifestation of this kind of a political arousal failed to materialise; nor did any systemic transformation occur even after the formation of formal trade unions under different political banners in the late 40s and 50s.

### **Conclusion**

The abolition of slavery in southern India had precious little impact until the opening up of plantations when the cash wages paid to the workers helped them to shrug off the ties binding them to their traditional masters. Yet, the unfreedom of bondage in 'freedom' remained for decades, with respect to the feudal Masters in the countryside first, and later with the planter patriarchs in the high ranges even after the

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25 With respect to south Indian countryside, see particularly, K.Gough, 'Caste in a Tanjore village' in Leach ed., *Aspects of Caste*, pp.11-60. Also see David Arnold, 'Looting Grain Riots and Government Policy in Southern India 1918', *Past and Present*, No.84, Aug.1979, pp.111-45.

workers were theoretically liberated from agrestic serfdom and simultaneously incorporated into the larger world economy through commodity production. As the plantations flourished and expanded, so did the processes of pauperisation and immiserisation gain root making cheap labour available for plantations. Though the workers came from regions different in caste, language and culture, most of them had a common social origin; they belonged to the depised sections of the rural masses, particularly the historically underprivileged dalit group whose ancestors had been slaves or the untouchables only a few decades back. Thus the plantations represented a system of hierarchical control wherein laboring women (and men too) were hegomonised by the patriarchs of class, caste and gender. The colonial code of relations maintained on plantations the world over was followed in every detail in southern India too. Once the workers reached their work-place, they soon found that the promises made by the *kanganies* were mere empty assurances; more over, they had to suffer the most horrific kinds of ill-treatment: they were often badly beaten up and run-away workers were caught by the police if not by trained dogs. A very systematic method of punishment and chastisement was practised on the estates to ensure discipline among workers, precision in work and the extraction of a maximal surplus. The state machinery was manipulated to suit colonial interests: atrocities perpetrated in the name of the Breach of Contract Act, 1859 and the Madras Planters' Labour Act, 1903 are telling evidence of the same. Labourers working against capitalist interests were subjected to rigorous punishment or had to forfeit their hard-earned wages or both. Planting regions came to be heavily policed, thus helping the planters to rule with a ruthless hand. Goaded by the incentives offered by the State, the police often resorted to unwarranted arrests and illegal detentions. The colonial State looked on in approval at these measures; the dissenting voices of the peoples's representatives were completely

ignored. Right from the beginning, plantation workers sought means of protest and defiance both individually and collectively, much before the formation of trade unions. Yet, any systemic transformation failed to materialise.

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