

Tamil Migration to Colonial Malay and Burma from 1880-1920: Analysing the Acculturation Process Through the Lens of Fashion

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the cultural repercussions of colonial labour migration, which emerged as one of the key characteristics of the 19th century as European nations set up colonies in parts of Africa, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia. The 'coolie' market consisted of indentured labourers and slaves and allowed the colonial rulers to supplement labour in new colonies. As the labourers migrated to new lands, they carried with them their culture in the form of religious, food and clothing practices. They underwent various degrees of acculturation that often resulted in integration, exchange or assimilation of ideas and practices between the host groups and the migrant communities. This study sheds light on the acculturation process between Tamil labourers and host groups from the British colonies of Malay and Burma from 1880-1920 as it took place through clothing practices. By making use of visual and textual evidence, it seeks to understand the cultural exchange between colonised communities in British territories and the dynamics of power that affected the acculturation process. It observed that there was significant mutual influence, however, the degree of such influence differed in both colonies owing to a variety of other political, social and economic factors. The nature of the host communities was a critical factor in determining the extent of acculturation as well as the political standing of key native players. The constitution of the migrants- their socio-economic background and their motivations for migration- also played a significant role in dictating the degree of acculturation between different groups.

Keywords: Colonial migration, south and southeast asia, post colonialism, clothing, acculturation.

INTRODUCTION

The Age of Exploration in Europe began in the 18th century and heralded an era of unrestrained territorial expansion. As a result of the abundant trade and transportation facilities, migration became a characteristic feature of the colonial period. This migration was both voluntary and involuntary in nature, partly assisted by the colonial state and partly restricted. It gave rise to diaspora communities which continue to be complex nexus of power and culture. Many diasporas slowly merged with local

communities- adopting their customs, language and practices to survive in their new conditions (Amrith, 2011) [1]. At the same time, they sought to retain parts of their home cultures, resulting in the emergence of hybrid cultural practices.

This study looks into the interplay between migrated diasporas in the context of South and Southeast Asia under the ambit of British colonial rule during the period 1880-1920. The Malay Archipelago came under British control after Straits Settlements. Under British rule, Tamil migrants were employed in rubber plantations and the tin

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industry and, in later years, in infrastructure projects. British plantation owners favoured Tamil labourers because many of them were already familiar with the social practices and makeup of Tamil communities, having interacted with them in British India. Additionally, Tamil labourers were seen to be much more docile and agreeable, especially in comparison to Chinese labourers, who were organised into 'brotherhoods' and defined their own terms of labour, making them more desirable.

The British gained control of Burma after the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886 (Tate, 1971) [2]. Indian migrants to Burma were much more diverse owing to the proximity between the two regions. Not only Tamil and Telugu communities but also Bengalis, Sikhs and Malayalis made their way to Burma under British rule. Tamil Chettiar merchants, in particular, became a part of the British agricultural system by lending money to native farmers in need of extra capital.

The Indians were seen as collaborators of the colonial oppressors, and the willingness of the Burmese to culturally integrate with them was limited. This was complimented by the existence of 'Little Indias', where Indian communities lived, separate from the native communities. The level of acculturation was significantly lower in the case of Burma, and most Indian diasporas were expelled as the Burmese Nationalistic Movement gained traction.

HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis proposed in this study was that the migration of indentured labour from South India to the British colonies of Malay and Burma led to cultural exchanges between the migratory Indian and native populations. This cultural exchange can be witnessed in the clothing of the two colonies, which was influenced by the Tamil migrants, and underwent a transformation during the period 1880-1920.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims to answer the following questions-

1. What were the factors that dictated Tamil migration to the colonies of Malay and Burma in the time period 1880-1920?
2. What was the extent of the acculturation process between the Tamil migrants and the native population?
3. What were the factors responsible for the acculturation process that took place in the clothing culture within these regions?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The complex nature of diasporas in Southeast Asia is discussed by Sunil Amrith in the book, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*. Amrith explored various facets of migratory communities in Southeast Asia, particularly the Chinese and the Indians, as they played a significant role during the colonial period. Kaur (2012) and Kaur (1998) [3,4] shed light on the role of labour brokers, who became essential components of the migration ecosystem and trace the evolution of labour brokers.

As per the "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation", acculturation essentially refers to that phenomenon that comes about when individuals of different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with each and this contact results in changes within the initial cultures of either or both groups. During the colonial era, migration resulted in prolonged contact between migrants and natives, altering the cultural patterns of both groups. These changes were realised in psychological aspects such as self-identity as well as material aspects such as cuisine, language and clothing. It also encompasses changes in norms, institutions and values. The degree of acculturation can vary across circumstances, and even individuals within community groups might experience different levels of acculturation.

The degree of Tamil acculturation in the Malay Archipelago is considerable. Tamils maintained their cultural identity through their clothing, food and religious practices (Sandhu, 1969) [5]. However, they also understood the importance of integrating into the Malay community. Many Tamil migrants knew

and spoke both Malay and Chinese. Their children were educated in their native Tamil, Malay and English to ensure social mobility. Many Muslim Tamils, referred to as the Jawi Peranakans, gained higher education and worked as administrators under British rule. Tamil is one of the four widely spoken languages in modern Malaysia and Singapore and can be taken up as an official second language by students under the Education Act of 1996. Thus, Tamil migrants to Malay experienced a high degree of acculturation.

In Burma, however, acculturation was highly limited in the realms of both cuisine and language. In the eyes of the natives, the migrants were aiding colonial subjugation and were agents of the colonial masters who were committing atrocities on native populations (Singh, 1980) [6]. Chettiyar merchants, in particular, were seen in an unfavourable light as they acted as money-lenders and participated in the impoverishment of the Burmese farmers. Thus, there was no significant integration between the migrants and the native in Burma.

MALAY TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

The original attire of Malay men consisted of a *baju* or jacket, *sluar* or a pair of short pants and the sarong or *kain pelikat*, a wrap-around garment that was gathered around the waist and reached to the knee (Cameron, 1865) [7]. The sarong was also the name of the primary garment for women which they wore with a *kabia*- a loose robe that reached to the ground. They wore two types of skirts- one that acted as a wrap-around skirt or the *kain sarung* and a tubular garment that was called *kain Panjang*. The Malay women also wore headdresses, some made of plaid checkered cotton, while others were made of delicate lace.

BURMESE TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

The Burmese dress for women was the *htamein* (Denison Museum, 2008) [8], a lower-body garment often made of silk or cotton which was tucked at the waist. It consisted of three separate panels of cloth- the waistband, the central panel and a striped panel. It extended till the ankle, giving way to a slit in the front from where the leg would peek out. On top of the *htamein*, women wore a breast cloth and a tight jacket called *ein-gyi*.

Occasionally, scarves were added to the neck and chest for modesty purposes. The Burmese men wore a similar wrap-around uncut garment called *pahso* made of cotton or silk. The excess fabric was either folded in the front or draped over the shoulder. For working men, the excess fabric was passed through the knees and tucked in at the waist to create knee-length pants that were easy to move around in and did not hinder work. The *pahso* was worn with a close-fitted *ein-gyi* jacket made of quilted cotton or silk. A *sild* or cotton scarf was wound around the head “folded in various ways according to the age and inclination of the wearer”.

TAMIL TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

The primary garment of Tamil men was the ‘*lungi*’ or the ‘*veshti*’, a cotton or silk cloth wrapped around the waist and tucked at the sides. A border often ran along the hem of the *lungi*. Most labourers have their top halves bare, presumably as they worked in fields or mills, while upper-class men wear a loose tunic, the *kurta*, again made of cotton for daily wear and silk for ceremonial purposes. Working men also had cotton turbans that they wore as headgear to protect themselves from the harsh tropical sun. In colder months, men would also drape another piece of fabric over their upper body- this was the *chadar* (Cohn, 1997) [9].

Tamil women, on the other hand, wore the sari. However, in pre-colonial times, the use of a blouse was severely restricted in southern India attributing to factors of caste so they would have instead wound the excess fabric of the sari around themselves to protect their bodies from heat and sweat. Some women did begin wearing blouses due to the influence of Christian missionaries and British officials.

Dress culture in all three regions evolved under a distinct British influence. Elites in all three cultures took to British clothing as a way of emphasising their wealth and status. At the same time, British clothing was used by lower classes to assert themselves and reorganise the social order. Thus, clothes became a vital site for understanding material culture and sociocultural landscapes during the colonial period.

RESEARCH METHODS

The hypothesis proposed in this thesis is that the migration of indentured labour from South India to the two British colonies of Malay and Burma (especially Lower Burma) led to cultural exchanges between the migratory Indian and native populations. Through the lens of fashion, it seeks to examine the indirect impact of colonialism on the two Southeast Asian colonies of Malay and Burma, as it took place via Indian migrants. The thesis will take an interdisciplinary approach, combining aspects of migration studies and fashion studies under the larger ambit of anthropological research to look into various factors and processes that did or did not facilitate the aforementioned exchange of culture. The study derives from historiographical methods of enquiry using qualitative methods and is based on the works of the Annales School of Historiography, which sought to highlight social and economic histories. It also looks at the Orient/Occident divide that was present in British and European writings of the time and uses the postcolonial tradition to analyse these works.

The thesis largely uses content analysis as it draws inferences from various visual and textual sources available, largely from the internet. It makes use of archival data from the National Archives of Singapore, Roots Collections, digital collections of the New York Public Library, and ArtStor in the form of photographs. It also looks at extant garments available in the digital collections of the V&A Museum and St Louis Art Museum. The Denison Museum catalogue on Burmese clothing provided enriching insights into the clothing culture of Burma. Photographs are corroborated with textual evidence from a variety of secondary material mentioned in the literature review. However, most of these sources, particularly contemporary sources, have been produced by British or European writers and not by either the migrants or the natives. Diary accounts of the natives or migrants could not be made available due to a shortage of time and resources. Therefore, these sources carry an Orientalist bias that must be considered.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The sources reveal that even though the level of cultural exchange and integration was higher for Tamil migrants to the Malay Archipelago, it is in Burma that we can see the cultural exchange in dress more prominently. Older garments were replaced by a newer and more practical piece of clothing- the *longyi*. In Malay, the acculturation process was heralded by the Jawi Peranakan community, referring to the descendants of Tamil Muslim men who married Malay women. The Jawi Peranakan were usually wealthy, educated and employed in government service. Many of the Jawi Peranakan descendants had sartorial practices similar to the 'babu' class in Bengal, where the 'public' life was characterised by Western attire and the 'private' life by native clothing. At the same time, Peranakan women who identified with the Malay nationalist cause took up the Malay costume, wearing the sarong with either baju jackets or Western blouses.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

In Burma, the coming of the Longyi signified a shift in the cultural paradigm. Longyi shares linguistic and constructive similarities to the Tamil lungi, with both of them being cotton wraps knotted around the waist. As the pahso and the htamein were seen to be too cumbersome, there was a need for a simpler garment that appealed to the growing middle class and inculcated a sense of unity among the scattered Burmese people. The longyi was often worn with a Chinese-style blouse jacket. This jacket came under fire from conservatives in the 1930s and the 40s due to its sheer and cropped nature, but Burmese women adopted it as a symbol of their modernity (Ikeya, 2008) [10]. As the Indian Nationalist Movement grew in the early twentieth century, similar sentiments were echoed in Burma, and steps were taken to unite

the country. A national costume became one of the means to resist Western influence. The longyi reflected the needs of the nationalist age, even as it was inspired by migrant workers.

In Malay, men shifted to Western suits and women to dresses or blouse-skirt combinations with only older individuals or young children adhering to Malay attire. This showcases a perceived bias in who was allowed to be dressed in Western clothing. Older individuals, particularly women and children, were considered less 'valuable' socially as they did not contribute to economic or public activities. Adult men, on the other hand, were 'valuable'; they had agency and worth. Their utility allowed them to wear Western garments. The equation of the 'masculine west' and the 'feminine orient' dictated the appropriate garments for both genders. At the same time, women were inspired by the fashion of colonial women, such as the wives of colonial officers who would have lived in the colonies. Many of the girls began using lace details on their clothing. They adopted elements of Malay and Western clothing to construct their new identity as 'modern' Peranakan women.

Tamil men, on the other hand, show a greater preference for British clothing over Malay ones. This could be because of two major factors- normatively, the Britishers represented a more aspirational figure, and thus, labourers who wanted to elevate their positions would have sought British styles over Malay ones, which would still have been 'working-class'. Practically speaking, the lungi and the sarong share constructive elements, so even as men would have taken the cloth used for the sarong, they could have just as easily used it for the lungi. To this end, many labourers chose to stick to their lungi and headdresses, while the more affluent ones adopted British clothing rather than Malay garments.

CONCLUSION

The study, therefore, reveals how different levels of sartorial exchange took place between different ethnic groups during this time period. In some cases, there was barely any assimilation of clothing among groups, while in others, clothing became an important signifier of cultural integration. The analysis presented utilises historiographical methods to understand the phenomenon of acculturation under the colonial paradigm. It uses the method of content and visual analysis to look at primarily qualitative data. The thesis makes ample use of photographic evidence taken from various digital archives and collections to trace the evolution of clothing in colonial Burma and the Straits. It then corroborates its inferences with textual material.

The paper adds to existing research on migratory communities in Asia, bringing forth aspects of culture and society. It synthesises ideas from a variety of fields and disciplines and presents a comprehensive overview of the cultural integration of the Tamil migrants to Burma and the Malay Archipelago during 1880-1920. By highlighting the experience of migrant communities, the study contributes to a multidisciplinary understanding of fashion, history and culture.

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