

Anti-Toddy Movement in Malaya, 1900-1957

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Abstract

Toddy drink is a newly acquired habit to many of the Indian labourers in Malaya. The temptation provided in estates at their very doors is the real reason for this. Many estates have as many toddy shops as there are Divisions on them. Toddy has become a daily routine with the Indian labourers. The affordability and availability of toddy in the estates led to unrestricted consumption of toddy among the estate Indians. Realising the ever-worsening condition of the Indian community was due to excessive toddy intake, various groups began to challenge the toddy habit. They called for the closing of all toddy shops in Malaya. Realising this situation, this study focuses a heated debate between two sides, between those who called for the retaining of toddy shops, and those who advocated the closing down of toddy shops. This study is carried out using primary sources not used by previous researchers.

Keywords: toddy, Indian labour, estates, Malaya, colonialism, *Thondar-Padai*

Introduction

It would be generally be accepted that in every period of political awakening in a society there are also less obstructive forces at work seeking to reform social abuses and infuse social consciousness. In any case, that this was true of the Indian people in modern times has been amply shown by the increasing number of studies of such social movements. It is natural that such factors operate among the Indian community settled in the Malay Peninsula. It is interesting to see in the modern history of this community the delayed effect of many the great movements that seized the Indian sub-continent.

The habit of drinking toddy was said to have increased along with the growth of rubber estates in Malaya, with rubber plantation employers supporting the opening of toddy shops. This is because labourers do not have any activity, social or work, after completing their work in the morning. According to the European employers, free time for labourers is a risky situation that could lead to social ills. In addition, the British realised it would be easier to rule the intoxicated than the sober educated. It would not be easy for the Indian labourers to opt-out of the plantation, as the estates are located in isolated areas in the hinterland. The inadequate communication and

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transportation system made that option more difficult to achieve. Outsiders could not even go into the estates. This was done by the British to prevent the labourers to leave the estates. To this end, the British realised that toddy was the best way to shackle the workers to the plantations.

Anti-Toddy Movement in Malaya

The open consumption and sale of toddy led to a many problems among the Indian community, especially the Indian labourers in the estates. Their involvement in toddy intake steadily increased due to the affordability and availability of toddy.

Realising the social situation, authorities and commoners voiced out against the toddy consumption habit. Numbered among this opposition groups were the Indian Government, a number of Indian organisations, estate management, labourers, and individuals, supported by the local press and publication. However, even within the opposition there existed a passionate debate involving two sides. The first side supported maintaining toddy shops, while the second side supported total prohibition. In total, this article is significant in answering the question of the reactions that emerged in lieu of the toddy issue, as well as the level of British role in tackling the problem.

Planters' Association of Malaya

The first people to take cognisance of the problem were the planters, who being in close proximity to the labourer, saw clearly the harm it was doing him. Soon after the planters had organized into the Planters' Association of Malaya (P.A.M.) in 1908, and thus acquired a platform to discuss common problems relating to the industry, the Association took up the question of the indiscriminate sale of liquor to labourers. In 1909 the governments established Licensing Boards to control the quality of liquor sold. In 1912, the P.A.M. asked the instructions to this effect in the same year. This made toddy the only liquor available to the Indians and its consumption increased. The planters now become aware of the fact that toddy also could be injurious to the health of the labourer. This was especially so if the toddy was adulterated and no control was exercised to prevent this. Evidence began to accumulate on the injurious effects of toddy. A number of cases of poisoning, diarrhoea, dysentery and even death were reported after consumption of toddy. Dr. M. Watson, a medical practitioner employed by the P.A.M., made a strong case against toddy on medical grounds. In 1916 the P.A.M. pressed governments to impose controls on the sale of toddy to Indian labourers.² The government was embarrassed by the P.A.M.'s pressures for action that would curtail a good source of revenue. It thought the P.A.M. was going too far in its anti-toddy campaign, and appointed a Commission 'to enquire into certain matters affecting the good government of the State of Selangor in relation to the alleged misuse and abuse of toddy in the coastal districts of Selangor'. The report of this Commission challenged the findings of Dr. Watson and declared that pure unadulterated toddy was not injurious to health. The P.A.M. felt that the report was a whitewash, and an attempt by the government to sweep the problem under the carpet.³

² *The Planters' Association of Malaya, Memorandum on the Toddy Committee and Commission, Singapore, 1917.*

However, some rules were introduced in the running of toddy shops to prevent adulteration. The estate management was given the authority to run shops in the estates, which had so far been done by contractors. Toddy was not to be sold to women and children. Out of the profits from the sale of toddy, two-fifths was to be paid as tax to the Government and the remainder was to be put in a special fund and used for the general welfare of the labourers. Sometimes managers would abuse their trust and use it to pay for expenses that were legitimately a charge on estate revenue. In these cases the Indian Agent would interfere by bringing them to the notice of the Labour Department. The Agent also criticized the tendency to 'waste' this fund on festivities and ceremonies and pleaded for its use on socially productive projects and amenities to labour.⁴

So far, the planters and the Government encouraged vigorously by the Indian Agent 1924, were concerned with schemes to control and restrict the drinking of toddy by Indian labourers. In the 1930s there arose a popular prohibition movement, part of the reformist movement of this period. From 1928, the reports of the Indian Agent drew attention to this popular movement among articulate sections of Indian opinion. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, an Indian moderate nationalist leader, who reported on Indian Labour in 1937 recommended that the government adopt a policy of prohibition in the estates. The planters opposed prohibition, because they thought it would only drive the labour outside the estate for his drink. It was also feared that prohibition might increase the popularity of illegal brews like *samsu* more injurious to health.⁵

The Second World War was a traumatic experience to the Malayan Indian community, particularly its plantation proletariat. In a country which as a whole underwent a great deal of hardship, their lot was exceptionally bitter. The best of its men folk was spirited away to the Siamese 'death' railway project. Those who stayed behind suffered from hunger and malnutrition. All controls on brewing of liquor were removed by the Japanese. A half-starved population took avidly to making and consuming these brews in large quantities. When the Japanese left what had once existed as a social problem had widened into a recognisable social evil. The image of the Indian labourer as an inveterate toddy drinker became established throughout Malaya.

The Government of India

One of the first items of reform that captured the attention of the reformers of India was prohibition. The Social Conference, which was organised parallel to the Indian National Congress and held its annual sessions at the same time, took up this issue with enthusiasm. From 1900 prohibition appeared on the agenda of every one of its annual sessions. Provisional reform associations were formed to conduct this agitation and both Christian missionary and Hindu reformists elements came

³ *Proceedings and Reports of the Commission, appointed to inquire into certain matters affecting the good government of the state of Selangor in relation to the alleged misuse and abuse of toddy in the coast district of Selangor - 1917*, Kuala Lumpur: Federated Malay States Government Press, 1917.

⁴ *Annual Report of The Agent of The Government of India In British Malaya For The Year 1929*, Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1930.

⁵ V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, *Report On The Conditions of Indian Labour In Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: The F.M.S. Government Press, 1937.

together to put pressure on the excise policy of the British Indian Government. All these elements came together in the National Prohibition Association of India in 1924. Prohibition and agitation to achieve it was a cause close to Ghandhiji's heart and merits an equal place with the movement to boycott foreign cloth and the salt satyagraha. Very soon Ghandhian Techniques of agitation were applied to gain the ends of prohibition. Picketing of liquor shops, especially by women, became an important part of nationalist political agitation. Resolutions were passed in State Legislatures and finally in the Central Legislature in 1925 favouring prohibition. When Congress Governments accepted office under the 1935 Constitution prohibition had high priority in their legislative programme. This was particularly so in Madras State where the Chief Minister C. Rajagopalachari was closely connected with the prohibition movement throughout his political career. By stages legislation was introduced in this state and by 1948 the entire state was declared dry.⁶

The first group that voiced disapproval of toddy was the Government of India, and action was taken with the intention to save the Indian labourer from their deplorable living condition in Malaya and their ignorance of their surroundings.⁷ The reaction of the Indian Government towards the toddy problem was evident before and after the Second World War, and was more a spontaneous reaction, combined with a feeling of concern and responsibility towards their people. Though the Government of India still viewed the toddy issue among Indian labourers in Malaya as a domestic issue, as toddy affected the lives of its citizens, the Indian Government did not hesitate to voice out its displeasure.

The Government of India fully recognized that this (the toddy question) was a matter of domestic policy but toddy consumption is confined to Indians and Indian public opinion is strongly inclined to prohibition.⁸

The Government of India religiously followed the development and conditions of the Indians in Malaya. To ensure the problem could be understood in detail, they appointed an agent of the government of India with authority to help the Indian community in trouble. The Agent's reports on the condition of the Indian community in Malaya would then be sent to the government of India, and the report would contain, among other things, matters pertaining to toddy. Besides the Federal Government, regional governments in India also monitored the situation of the Indians in Malaya, including the government of Madras. The Madras government has a larger 'share' and interest in the situation, as a large number of Indians in Malaya originated from the region. For that reason, in tackling the toddy issue, the Madras government was among the first and loudest to voice out this issue. The Madras Government, for example, supported any effort of total prohibition of toddy shops, this idea taken from the same prohibition imposed throughout India. On the Madras Government involvement in the issue, the basic idea was the elimination of the toddy habit must be carried out in Malaya, not only for the personal benefit of the labourers, but also to prevent them from bringing back the habit when they return to India.

⁶ S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, London, 1959, pp. 162-168.

⁷ CO 273/405, Letter from K. Nagamuthu, Kapar, 30th April 1913.

⁸ Memorandum Re Toddy, in Government Toddy Shops – Scheme for – Peraturan Bagi Kedai-kedai Tuak Kerajaan (Versi Melayu-Jawi), Kedah Secretariat File 2058/1348, p. 1.

The Indian Government stance was clear, judging from a dispatch sent from the Secretary of the Government of India to the British Government in Malaya dated 28 March 1939, on the Indian government policy regarding toddy.

The attitude of the Madras Government to the toddy question was fully explained to the Malayan delegates. The Government are aiming at total prohibition and naturally do not want labourers from the presidency to acquire the drink habit in other countries and bring the habit back with them to Madras. They do not wish to force their ideas upon any other Government, all that ask for is as much assistance as possible. The practical suggestion is that toddy shops on estates should be closed and Government toddy and liquor shops sited as far as possible from places where Indian labour is employed.⁹

It is clear that the Government of Madras did not want the toddy-drinking habit of the labourers to continue when they return to their villages. The Government of India was concerned and well aware of the condition of the Indian labourers in Malaya, and their addiction due to the uncontrolled intake of mixed toddy. If the toddy consumption habit picked up in Malaya was brought back to India, in most likelihood the Government of India would face serious problems as faced by their Malayan counterpart.

At the same time, as a follow up to ensure the success of toddy prohibition in Malaya, the government of India announced that admission of Indian labourers to Malaya would only be opened if there was a positive trend in the reduction of toddy consumption among Indian labourers.¹⁰ The Government in Malaya noticed the strong Indian government sentiment on the toddy issue, and strove to mend the toddy problem or at least alleviate the pressure placed by the Indian government on them. To the British, Indian labour was important to ensure the success of their economic plan in Malaya especially in the plantation sector. If this labour source dried up, the British would suffer great losses. As a precaution, the British pledged to India that measures would be taken to reduce toddy intake among Indian labourers.

Malayan Indian Congress

It was now time for the problem to be attacked in a concerted way by social reformers and through their pressure, by Government. The stage was set for a mass movement towards temperance and if possible, prohibition, directed on both ends, as it were, of the toddy trade: the consumer labourer and the licensing authority, the government. This was among the earliest of the movements to reform Malayan Indian Society and was to bring in its wake many similar attempts at social reform. It was widely recognised that unless the urge for temperance came from among the sector of society which was most addicted to drinking, it could not be considered a genuine movement of reform. If the aim of prohibition was to meet any degree of success it must move the government to action and this could only be done if the government was conscious that there was an overwhelming demand from those whom piece of reform was intended to benefit. Even if attempts at pressuring the government

⁹ Toddy Policy, in Labour Department of Malaysia File, 1945-1947, LDM 78/45. Letter from N. Jones, Commissioner of Labour Malaya, to The Chief Secretary, HQ. BMA. (M), Kuala Lumpur, 7th March 1946.

¹⁰ Toddy, in Labour Department of Malaysia File, 1945-1947, LDM 78/45, p. 2. Report from Deputy Commissioner For Labour, Malayan Union, 1st May 1946.

were a failure, if temperance caught on as a mass movement in the estates its aims could be achieved by a voluntary abstention and thus eradicate the problem at the consumer end. In this way society could reform itself from within and not depend on an external imposition for its purification.

Towards this end, soon after the resumption of British control, various bodies began to work. Trade Unionists were the first in the field. Because of their intimate contact with estate labour, they were the first to come directly against this problem. They found drunkenness and the general apathy it produced a great obstacle in their path to instil a working class consciousness into their likely membership. It was also a hindrance to organising the leisure of the labourer more faithfully and to providing various welfare measures from voluntary contribution. Some time after the foundation for a mass campaign had been laid by the trade unionists, the middle class exponents of temperance, too, joined in. The Malayan Indian Congress (M.I.C.) inaugurated in August 1946 was for its first few years like the preceding Indian political associations, urban oriented and middle-class led. It soon made attempts to broaden itself and get a foothold in the plantations. One of its major thrusts in this direction was when it decided to enter the prohibition agitation and officially inaugurated its campaign in October 1946. Thereafter resolutions against the sale of toddy in estates featured in every annual session of the Congress. In all its branch organizations volunteers worked towards this end.

The important prohibition movement was the direct action campaign inaugurated in 1946 by both trade unions, the M.I.C. and *ad hoc* groups volunteers who felt strongly about this reform. It is of tremendous significance in the social history of the Indians in Malaya. It was the first major sustained campaign of direct action in the plantations and served to politically educate the Indian labourers. As a movement with healthy social aims, not politically subversive, it could be freely adhered to by people who would have been too scared to join other movements with broader political or economic ends. The campaign which struck at the heart of the estate family was simple and direct. It consisted first of organizing meetings where the evils of drinking and the corresponding benefits of abstention would be explained by volunteer social workers in simple language. At their meetings the assembled crowd would be encouraged to take vows that they would not henceforth take any form of liquor. As these meetings were usually held in the temple hall, vows were taken in the name of the temple deity and thus had some religious force. This practice in the Salem district in India preceded legislative prohibition in this district in 1937.¹¹

The campaign was taken a step further with the decision to picket peacefully the shops where toddy was sold. In the estates, these shops were strategically situated in the various divisions. Sometimes if the estate was a small one the shops would be located in the township adjoining the estates. Picketing of liquor shops was an essential part of the prohibition campaign that Gandhiji initiated in various parts of India. He has observed that this was an aspect of the Satyagraha Campaign in which women and children could join as they were the most affected by the spread of drunkenness in society. The campaigners in Malaya, too, addressed themselves primarily to women and children and evidence shows that these took part in large

¹¹ Baliga, *Tanjore District Handbook*, Madras, 1957, p. 230.

numbers to man the picket. The direct action for prohibition was part of a social ferment that seized the labouring classes of the Indian population in the years 1946-1949. Sometimes it merged with other forces, not generally desirable and in this aspect it incurred the hostility of the management and even the Colonial Government.

There is also some evidence that over-enthusiastic trade union officials taking a serious view of their responsibilities as social reformers used intimidation to dissuade habitual drunkards in the community. There is the case of a labourer who was summoned by the local trade union officials to be dealt with on a charge of drinking *samsu*. He refused to go and was there upon seized from his home by the agents of the trade union, beaten up and carried forcibly to the union meeting. There have been other instances of trade union officials fining labourers for drinking toddy and imposing other forms of punishment. It appears that these unions held a regular court and tried those who were accused of drinking.¹² Sometimes union officials, after their election, would take a solemn oath to abstain from liquor while in office. Generally who those took the lead in the trade union movement were young men with idealism who felt genuinely the need to clear Indian working class society from this major social evil. For these reasons the management became growingly unfriendly to the prohibition movement as indeed it looked upon the growth of the trade unionism itself as undesirable. From this point of view the activities of the temperance campaigners were likely to result in serious breaches of peace leading to police intervention and violence.

Thondar padai

The reaction of the government of India was a significant development in the toddy question in Malaya. Even though they have the power to pressure and halt the labour traffic, in general, this reaction was mainly an 'outsider' reaction. Not much could be done by the Indian Government other than sending memoranda, protests, or reports to the government in Malaya, as well as pressure them to handle this issue better. The most important reaction came from the *Thondar Padai* movement.

The anti-toddy movement entered a significant stage after the end of the war. One of the most important anti-toddy groups was the *Thondar Padai*,¹³ founded in Kedah after the Second World War.¹⁴ *Thondar Padai* members consisted of labourers and Tamil schoolteachers. This movement was founded by A. M. Samy, an estate and vehicle-driver and part-time grocer at the Harvard estate in Bedong. His goal was to help estate labourers overcome their socio-economic condition. He received strong support from the youths of Harvard estate.¹⁵ The movement that began in Harvard estate then inspired other estates to follow suit. Most estates in Kedah established their own *Thondar Padai* organisations following the plantations of Sungai Toh

¹² C. Gamba, *The Origin of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest*, Singapore, 1962, p. 261.

¹³ K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', in Richard Mason and Abu Talib Ahmad (editor), *Reflections On Southeast Asian History Since 1945*, Pulau Pinang: University of Science Malaysia Publishers, 2006, p. 55.

¹⁴ Azharudin Mohd Dali, *Sejarah Masyarakat India Di Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Publications, 2012, p. 239.

¹⁵ Report of Commissioner For Labour, Malayan Union, in Malayan Union Secretariat, MU 93/47. Report on 6th August 1947, Kuala Lumpur. Also see, Rajeswary Ampalavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya, 1945-1957*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 49; K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', *Malaysia in History*, No. 24, 1981, p. 97.

Pawang, United Patani, Kuala Ketil, Badenock, Scarborough, Bukit Sembilan, Sungai Tawar, Victoria, Padang Meiha, Henrietta, Kuala Sedim, and Dublin. There was an estimated 1000 *Thondar Padai* members in Kedah.¹⁶ Even though there was no central body to coordinate *Thondar Padai* activities in the various plantations, there were frequent discussions and interactions among members, especially during estate temple festivals when they would provide volunteer service.¹⁷ Samy was the leader and coordinator for these teams.¹⁸ The *Thondar Padai* activities introduced a level of awareness among the labourers on the harms of toddy.¹⁹

Thondar Padai's main focus was the toddy-drinking habit among plantation labourers.²⁰ The youths realised the main factor holding back the Indian labourer's socio-economic progress was toddy addiction. Indian workers spent a large sum of their income on the drink. This habit plunged them into poverty, and the *Thondar Padai* saw it as a duty to abolish the toddy shops and restore the dignity of the estate labourers.²¹ Based on the statement of M. N. Nair.

The Agent's Report for the year 1933 estimates the amount spent by labourers on toddy alone at 3 million dollars...By maintaining the estate toddy shops what the employers give by one hand to the labourers, they take back by the other hand much to the economic and moral detriment of the labourers. In order to improve the moral and material well being of the labourers, it is necessary to abolish all estate toddy shops. This will go a long way in bettering the economic position of the labourers.²²

Furthermore, the toddy-drinking habit gave rise to the 'drunkard' slur imposed on the Indians by people of other races. The *Thondar Padai* opined this habit must be eradicated in order to bring progress to the Indian labourers.²³ As a preliminary effort, youths older than 15 years of age were encouraged to join this movement. Lectures and motivational courses were carried out as often as possible to change the mind-set of the youths. The focus of this movement was on education, hygiene, self-development, and community service. This movement reminded them that the elderly's submission to authorities and the dangers of consuming toddy and *samsu* drove many estate workers into poverty, deterioration, and wretchedness. They were advised to abhor toddy and *samsu* and to encourage others, especially their elders, to abandon the bottle. In order to strengthen their resolve, youths were trained in exercise and physical activity by ex-members of the Indian National Army.²⁴

What was the reaction of the public to the reform introduced by *Thondar Padai* and its leaders? Generally, the estate community was welcoming of the ideas and actions of *Thondar Padai*. This was mainly due to the core of the movement itself, as its members were also members of the estate community, which well understood the

¹⁶ K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', pp. 95-108.

¹⁷ K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', p. 58.

¹⁸ K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', p. 97.

¹⁹ Report on the South Kedah Disturbances, in Malayan Union Secretariat File, MU 207/47, Vol. II. See also, Telegram from Governor, Malayan Union to Colonial Office, in Malayan Union Secretariat File, MU 207/47, Vol. I.

²⁰ M. R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: A Prelude To The Communist Revolt of 1948*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 118.

²¹ *Malaysia Nanban*, 15th October 1997.

²² M. N. Nair, *Indians in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: M.N. Nair, 1935, p. 52.

²³ K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India Di Malaysia*, Pulau Pinang: University of Science Malaysia Publications, 2008, p. 55.

²⁴ K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', pp. 57-58.

While the *Thondar Padai* moved in vigour to settle the toddy problem, the government established a committee to tackle the issue. The Estate Toddy Committee or more commonly known as the Ross Committee was established to investigate and prepare a report on toddy consumption among the Indian community. This committee conducted various activities, including discussion, receiving 75 memoranda and letters regarding toddy, and receiving reports from 30 medical doctors on the harms of toddy. However, the report of the Ross Committee did not reflect the views of the majority of Indians, which wanted the closure and prohibition of all toddy shops. This report did not suggest total prohibition of toddy shops, but was of the opinion that this should be done voluntarily, without pressure from the law. In fact, the report requested the government to ensure that estate management properly supervise toddy shops before allowing one to open.²⁶ Further discussion on the Committee is in the following section.

At its peak, around 100-150 *Thondar Padai* members,³¹ picketed in front of toddy shop in Bedong on 28 February 1947, around 3pm. Almost 1,000 labourers, including

²⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁷ C. Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Malaya* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1964), pp. 98-99.

28 K. Nadaraja, 'The Thondar Padai Movement of Kedah, 1948-1951', p. 11.

28 K. Nadaraja, 'The Thondar Padai Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', pp. 38-39.

women and children from Harvard estate and other adjoining estates in Kedah, marched from Bedong and picketed in front of the toddy shop. They demanded for the closing down of the shop. This picketing was the first mass gathering sponsored and led by estate labourers. It was the largest anti-toddy campaign in Kedah. *Thondar Padai* members protested and advised the men to abandon the beverage.³² Before picketing and protest begun, there was a scuffle in the toddy shop, involving toddy drinkers and *Thondar Padai* members. This event was reported in the *Straits Echo* and the *Times of Malaya*, which reported that one of the *Thondar Padai* members hit an Indian Muslim man found drinking toddy, and this led to a brawl.³³ However, this was denied by the *Thondar Padai*, stating the protest had nothing to do with the morning brawl. There were claims that some parties were not too fond of A. M. Samy, the leader of the Harvard Estate Association and *Thondar Padai*, and that the fight was orchestrated to show the movement as the source of the problem.³⁴ Even though the protest was done to protect the interests of the labourers, the employers saw it as a challenge to their authority and called the police to disperse the crowd.³⁵

The Bedong Incident saw a clash between the *Thondar Padai* and the police, leading to the death of a *Thondar Padai* member.³⁶ The violent action of the police led to further radicalisation of the labourers. At Harvard estate, a protest was held demanding the freeing of 12 *Thondar Padai* members. The police and employers did not budge, and A.M. Samy called on all labourers in all European-owned estates in Kedah to hold a strike in protest against the toddy shops. Samy's call was well-received. Labourers in Harvard, Bukit Sembilan, Dublin, Scarboro, Sungai Tawar, and United Patani estates launched their strikes. Employers and police still ignored labour sentiment, and responded with more violence. The leaders of the *Thondar Padai* and scores of labourers were arrested. They were sentenced to prison and later fired. This action roused the spirit of the *Thondar Padai*. In March 1947, *Thondar Padai* helped the labourers in Bukit Sembilan estate organise a strike. The police arrested 66 labourers, who were later fired.³⁷ The following month saw the police launching a raid on a group of labourers at a meeting in Dublin estate, which led to the death of a labourer.³⁸

The incident in Kedah showed the employers and British government were not too fond of the change in attitude among the Indian labourers. They preferred the labourers as they were before the War. Any movement, even with the goal of socio-economic improvement, should be severely suppressed without compromise. This

²⁹ M. R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: A Prelude To The Communist Revolt of 1948*, p. 118.

³⁰ K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', p. 101.

³¹ The numbers quoted by *The Straits Echo* and *Times of Malaya* on 1 March 1947 was around 6,000 people.

³² The Findings of the Board of Inquiry into the Kedah Incidents, in Malayan Union Secretariat File, MU 407/A/1947. See also, *Report of Commission of Inquiry into Dublin Conflict*, Federal Legislative Council Paper, 24th February 1948; K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', p. 66.

³³ *The Straits Echo* and *Times of Malaya*, 1st March 1947.

³⁴ K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', pp. 66-67.

³⁵ K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', p. 101.

³⁶ *Report of Commission of Inquiry into Dublin Conflict*, Federal Legislative Council Paper, 24th February 1948. Also see, *Malaya Tribune*, 6th September 1947.

³⁷ Rajeswary Ampalavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya, 1945-1957*, p. 50. See also, *The Straits Times*, 5th March 1947; *Indian Daily Mail*, 20th March 1947.

³⁸ K. Nadaraja, 'The *Thondar Padai* Movement of Kedah, 1945-1947', pp. 95-102. See also, K. Nadaraja, 'The Role of *Thondar Padai* Reform Movement in 'The Kedah Riots' of 1947', p. 68; Rajeswary Ampalavanar, *The Indian Minority and Political Change in Malaya, 1945-1957*, p. 50.

route of action was taken to discourage the Indian worker from launching a mutiny. The employers, through these harsh measures, finally crippled the *Thondar Padai* in Kedah. A.M. Samy was arrested by the police in 1947 and exiled to India in 1949.³⁹

The decision to purge the *Thondar Padai* had stopped an early effort among the Indian worker to form associations and be self-reliant. This incident was the first whereby Indian youths in estates moved in a progressive association. It has the potential to bring about social change among labourers and restore their identity in this country. Anti-toddy campaigns were carried out to achieve this goal. Had the government provided support and cooperation to the *Thondar Padai*, they might have succeeded in eradicating the toddy habit among the Indian workers. Instead, the violent actions of the government on the movement discouraged others from conducting anti-toddy campaigns. Virtually none dared to rebuke any drinker after the government's actions. As a result, toddy addiction among Indian workers prevailed.

Estate Management

Estate management was closest to the workers, and the reaction of most managers on the toddy problem was mainly negative, as they were more concerned with profit from the toddy trade. According to Nagendralingan Ratnavadivel, "*Sometimes managers would abuse their trust and use it to pay for expenses that were legitimately a charge on estates revenue.*"⁴⁰ To the estate management, even more than profit, the opening of toddy shops and encouragement of workers to drink was their way of showing gratitude for the menial labour provided by the workers. In reality, estate management was only concerned with their economic interests, and used toddy to attract Indian workers.⁴¹ They opined the opening of toddy shops would 'save' the Indian workers from the *samsu*, and that labourers spent a smaller amount on toddy, instead of the more expensive beer or other intoxicants.⁴² This situation was reported by V. S. Srinivasa Sastri in his Report on the Conditions of Indian Labour in Malaya. According to him,

A certain number of managers are inclined to regard toddy as a harmless indulgence if within limits, and as a means of keeping their labour contented and happy. Others, on the other hand, perhaps forming the majority, agree that toddy is by no means a necessity and would not object to a suppression of the toddy drinking habit. Without it labourers would undoubtedly be in a position to save more money and their efficiency would at least not be impaired, while the managers themselves would be spared the trouble supervising the shop and its accounts and settling the occasional disputes which arise from drunkenness.⁴³

Other than strikes and protests against the opening of toddy shops, there were also separate meetings conducted among male and female labourers to obtain their views on the toddy shops. The majority of women support total prohibition of toddy shops, but allowed their husbands to partake in the beverage if they were near home.

³⁹ K. Anbalakan, *Identiti India di Malaysia*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ Nagendralingan Ratnavadivel, 'The History of Toddy and its impact on the socio-economic sphere of the Indian especially in Selangor with particular reference to the district of Kuala Langat 1900-1973', B.A. Thesis, School of Humanities, University of Science Malaysia, Penang, 1973/1974, p. 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴² *Federation of Malaya, Labour Department Monthly Report July 1950*, p. 12.

However, one interesting issue was found regarding women support on the toddy shops. A number of women were found to support the re-opening of toddy shops in their respective estates, as they viewed toddy as being good for physical health, and allowed them to carry out hard labour in their hilly estates.⁴⁴ This situation was also reported in the Labour Department Annual Report in 1938,

Meetings of men and women separately continued to be held to get an open expression of opinion when the Controller's permission for opening a toddy shop was sought. The results in all cases except one were the same. The men by a large majority always asked for a shop on the estate. The women would prefer to see toddy abolished but if their husbands had to drink preferred them to drink near home. In one case the women however, insisted that they too wanted a shop since they thought toddy was good for them on their hilly estate.⁴⁵

Even though many estate managers support the opening of estate toddy shops, some managers did oppose toddy shops, as they were concerned with problems in managing the shops. This situation was reported in detail in the Labour Department Annual Report in 1938. According to the Report, "*Estate Managers, except on the fringes of the dry area, are unanimously against the re-opening of toddy shops. They are glad to avoid the worry and trouble of managing Estate toddy shops.*"⁴⁶

It is clear that the reaction of most estate managers supporting the opening of toddy shops was mainly driven by exploitation of labourers for economic interests and profit. The management's assertion that toddy shops were opened as a form of labour welfare was quite untrue. C. Gamba argued that management support of toddy shops was because addicted and intoxicated labourers were easier to manage.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, there were some estate managers that fought to eradicate toddy among the workers in order to change their way of life in the foreboding estate.

British Government

The reactions of the Indian government, associations, individuals et cetera, should be considered as outside reactions. This was because power was still with the British in Malaya. On this issue, the British in Malaya did not keep quiet and reject every protest and complain submitted by these groups. In fact, all things were considered, and the British government did take action. The British realised that the toddy issue was growing more serious, based on the complaints and protests, as well as the rise of anti-toddy groups. Realising this, the British held three views, based on the various reactions, protests, and reports on toddy.

The first view was on the total prohibition of toddy shops. The British considered this issue in response to the strong stance of the Government of India on the prohibition of toddy shops. Immigration of Indian labour to Malaya would only be allowed if the government in Malaya compromised with the Indian government on the toddy issue. In addition, individual Indians opposed alcohol and the low

⁴³ V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, *Report On The Conditions of Indian Labour In Malaya For The Year 1937*, Kuala Lumpur: The F.M.S. Government Press, 1937, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Annual Report of The Labour Department of Malaya For The Year 1938*, Kuala Lumpur: The F.M.S. Government Press, 1939, p. 71.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.70.

⁴⁷ C. Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya: A Study in Colonial Labour Unrest*, p. 282.

nutritional content of toddy, and the majority of mothers and wives of labourers voiced their concern on the use of money on the bottle, as labourers were in fact unable to even purchase toddy.⁴⁸

The second view was on limiting the opening of toddy shops to estates, this view was based on the assumption that the opening of toddy shops meant labourers need not go to towns to obtain toddy, and that estate toddy shops could satisfy workers, as their needs were fulfilled. In addition, estate managers could ably manage toddy shops. Based on this view, total prohibition of toddy shops would drive labourers to Chinese *samsu*. In addition, toddy could be obtained at affordable prices, in line with the workers' small wages compared to other forms of intoxicants. If toddy shops were closed down, a 'black market' would emerge, driving the price of toddy up to \$1 a pint. Moreover, money donated from toddy sales via the 2/5 system could be used for estate labour welfare. Estate management supervision of toddy shops would allow workers to enjoy toddy in a controlled environment and potentially lead to reduction in cases of drunkenness.⁴⁹

The third view was on the general consumption of toddy. Toddy was said to contain vitamin B1 and good for the body. Fresh toddy contained low level of alcohol compared to beer. In addition, the toddy industry generated income for the government, and the labourers could have access to licensed toddy sales.⁵⁰ This view only discussed the benefits and cause for retention of toddy shops, without considering the harms of toddy on labourers.

Even though the British realised the seriousness of the toddy problem, they opted to retain toddy in Malaya for a number of reasons. Among them, the prohibition of toddy would drive the labourers to *samsu*, their low income could limit them only to the toddy option, and toddy allowed them to carry out hard labour. However, the real reason for the retention of toddy shops was the lucrative income generated from this sector. The government also recognised the importance of toddy in controlling the Indian worker.

Formation of the Estate Toddy Shops Committee / Ross Committee

As an initial action to tackle the toddy problem, the British government formed a team to investigate and examine the toddy question, and to provide suggestions to the government for their future policies regarding the toddy trade after the Second World War. This team was called *The Estate Toddy Shop Committee*, formed by the British on 27 September 1946 through the *Malayan Union Gazette Notification No. 2354*. This committee was chaired by E.A. Ross, and consisted of R.B. McGregor, M.L. Doraisamy Aiyer, V.M.N. Menon, G.W. Husband, and D.M. Pillai. This Committee was also known as the Ross Committee and responsible for providing suggestions on the toddy issue to the government.⁵¹ V.M.N. Menon, one of the more important figures in the toddy control effort, was also the first Indian to represent the Indian community in the committee. However, he opposed the rapid closing of all toddy shops in Malaya.⁵²

⁴⁸ Toddy Policy, in Labour Department of Malaysia File, 1945-1947, LDM 78/45, p. 1, No.52 in TECH/1/7.
Letter from C. S. Danby, 4th April 1946.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

In general, the committee did not suggest the closing down or even prohibition of toddy shops.⁵³ The committee suggested some conditions with the continuation of the toddy policy, which were the retention of toddy shops and the reduction of toddy use.⁵⁴ Among the conditions was the opening of a toddy shop should only be allowed if the estate had an adult male majority (toddy shops were prohibited if estate residents contained less than 75 adult males) and through a voting process,⁵⁵ and that the toddy shop was only allowed to open with written approval from the Commissioner of Labour. In addition, the seller must adhere to the rule that no other alcohol, such as *samsu*, was allowed in the shop. Labourers were not allowed to drink more than prescribed. Sellers have to adhere to opening time of toddy shops, namely from 3.30pm to 6.30pm.⁵⁶ Toddy price should be kept low, around five cents for one pint of toddy. Each estate must form a watchdog committee to monitor toddy sale, and one labour representative must be appointed to report shop development to the estate manager. The Committee also decided the Government should take a policy of reducing toddy intake. However, the labourers must do this by their own volition, without pressure from any group.⁵⁷ The government finally found a solution in 1950 when it decided to allow the re-opening of toddy shops in estates, in line with the suggestions of the Ross Committee.⁵⁸

Voting

One important matter mentioned by the Ross Committee was the voting aspect to determine the necessity of a toddy shop in any given estate. The voting method was done to ensure there was no fraud in application for a toddy shop. This step was a pro-active one by the government to control toddy intake among the labourers in Malaya.

The voting process would be carried out by providing two empty boxes that would be used as voting boxes. The boxes in two different colours would be used in each estate when voting commences. Different colours would be used in different estates. The two boxes, with different coloured labels on them, would be placed in front of a toddy shop. For example, the box with the white label was for the 'yes' vote, while the box with blue label was for the 'no' vote. Labourers would line up in front of the toddy shop and vote according to turn. The decision to open or close a toddy shop would be taken after tallying the total votes. If the 'yes' vote exceeded the 'no' vote, then the toddy shop would be open, and vice versa.⁵⁹

The Malacca Government announced that the re-opening of toddy shops in estates after the war depended on the decision made by toddy consumers through

⁵¹ Report of The Estate Toddy Shop Committee, in Adviser Office of Negeri Sembilan / Malacca, 1949-1950, DPPMS & M 66/1949, p. 1 & 14.

⁵² *Jananayakam*, 10th June 1947, p. 1.

⁵³ Azharudin Mohd Dali, *Sejarah Masyarakat India Di Malaysia*, p. 239.

⁵⁴ *Jananayakam*, 11th March 1947.

⁵⁵ CO 273/563, Letter from Governor's Deputy to Colonial Office, 29th April 1930, p. 2. See also, Customs Toddy Shops, in Labour File of Kuala Lumpur, 1948-1962, KBTRKL 103/53, p. No.257. Letter from Commissioner For Labour, 14th August 1950.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Toddy Evil and The Malayan Government, in Toddy Committee, in Labour Department of Malaysia File, 1945-1947, LDM 426/46, pp. 10-14.

⁵⁸ The Toddy Tapping Industry: Historical Survey in, Estates Toddy Shops In The State of Malacca, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 41/45, p. 1.

a secret ballot.⁶⁰ Secret ballots Malacca estates were very important, as there were cases whereby labourers forced employers to raise their wages in 1950. This was due to the high prices of beer and stout sold in estates, which labourers could not afford. The labourers formed the *Sanjidorai* (mandore) to order the estate manager to re-open estate toddy shops.⁶¹ This issue got the attention of the government, and a secret ballot was carried out in a number of estates in Malacca, which were in Sungai Bahru estate on 29 March 1953,⁶² Jasin Lalang estate on 17 May 1953⁶³ and Bukit Asahan estate in Division D and Air Tekah, respectively on 11 October 1954⁶⁴ and 16 April 1953.⁶⁵ The voting results in Bukit Asahan estate showed the majority of labourers were for the re-opening of toddy shops.⁶⁶

Secret ballots were also carried out in other states. In Perak, women in the estates were found to oppose the re-opening of toddy shops in the secret vote. However, male labourers and employers were in favour of re-opening the shops. Their rationale was the labourers spent a large sum of their income on expensive beer instead of toddy. The secret ballot result was evident when many estate managers, including two labourers without the support of their estate employers, applied for toddy shop licences in their respective estates.⁶⁷ A secret ballot was carried out in Ulu Bernam estate in 1953. The vote was directed at five toddy shops in Divisions 1, 2, 3, 4, and Tea. Every division supported the opening of toddy shops. There was also 99 ½% of Indian labourers supported the opening of toddy shops. There was also considerable support in Division 2 (93%), Division 3 (78%), Division 4 (90%), and in the Tea Division, all labourers, or 100% were in favour of opening a toddy shop.⁶⁸ In a secret ballot in estates in Selangor, labourers were unequivocally in support of the opening of toddy shops.⁶⁹ Analysis of the secret ballot showed that as long as the government did not prohibit or close down toddy shops, the problem of toddy consumption would continue.

Conclusion

In evaluating the level of success of the British in tackling the toddy problem, it was clear the British failed. This failure was evident judging from the continued implication on the labourer, even though actions were taken. Clearly, British control was carried out only to salvage the toddy industry, and not to free the estate labourers suffering from losses and hardship due to the bottle, sold cheaply and within their reach. To the British, toddy provided it a twofold interest, the first was profit and the second control over labour. The two elements were highly valued and the colonial

⁵⁹ Report on Secret Ballot conducted at Bukit Asahan Estate- D.Division, in Application for Toddy Shop – Bukit Asahan Estate D Division, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50 Annex-11.

⁶⁰ *Federation of Malaya, Labour Department Monthly Report For August 1950*, in Terengganu Secretariat File 71/1950, p. 13.

⁶¹ *Federation of Malaya, Labour Department Monthly Report For June 1950*, in Terengganu Secretariat File 71/1950, p. 18.

⁶² Application on for toddy shop (Sg. Bahru Estate), in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50 Annex-8.

⁶³ Application for toddy shop Jasin Lalang Estate, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50 Annex-10.

⁶⁴ Application on for toddy shop Bukit asahan Estate D Division, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50 Annex-11.

⁶⁵ Application on for toddy shop – Bukit Asahan Estate, Ayer Tekah, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50 Annex-9.

⁶⁶ Estate Toddy Shop, in Malacca Labour Department File, 1945-1954, JBM 34/50.

⁶⁷ *Federation of Malaya, Labour Department Monthly Report For August 1950*, in Terengganu Secretariat File 71/1950, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Toddy Employers Black List, in Department of Customs and Excise of Telok Anson, Perak, 1942-1956, JKEDP 152/52.

⁶⁹ *Federation of Malaya, Labour Department Monthly Report August 1950*, in Terengganu Secretariat File 71/1950, p. 12.

authorities could not relinquish them. Discussion proved that reactions to tackle the toddy problem might succeed if government did not hamper such efforts. The steps taken by the British were merely done to pacify complaints from certain sectors. The voting method used by the British to judge the closing or opening of a toddy shop was very unwise, as this showed the British still depended on the profits of the toddy trade.

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