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SOUTH INDIANS IN SARAWAK

T. Komarusamy

The articles on display in Sarawak Museum indicating the presence of Indians in Sarawak have been dated the earliest as from the 12th century A.D.. Tom Harrison in his essay "Indian Pioneers in Borneo (500 A.D.)" states (Quote) "It is thought that Indians came to Borneo at least as early as the 5th century A.D.; from a Sanskrit inscription in stone found in Kutei in the South-east (Indonesian Borneo) celebrating King Mulavarman. The ruler took part in what Professor Coedes calls "une recrudescence de l'hindouisation de l'Inde extérieure". Recent historians date of establishment of Indianized kingdoms in this part of the world as early as the first century B.C.. But today, in terms of actual people, their descendants have lost their separate identity by complete assimilation with the local population.

During the 19th century, during the Rajah's reign there were Indian immigrations into Sarawak and these fall into three distinct categories namely, the Tamil South Indian Muslims who came as merchants, the Punjabi Sikhs who came as members of Sarawak constabulary and the Tamil South Indian Hindus who came as workers to run the Matang tea estate. The subject matter of this paper is on this last group of people, who today form the majority group among the Sarawak Indian community.

This paper proposes a treatment on the following three aspects:—

1. History
2. Present situation
3. Future direction

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HISTORY

It would appear that the story of Hindu South Indian immigration proper into Sarawak began with a Supreme Council meeting on November 17th, 1888. (Ref. Sarawak Gazette — December 1st, 1888). (There were earlier migrations to Sarawak.)

Those present during the meeting were the following.

1. His Highness the Rajah GCMG
2. Honourable Resident of 1st Division Mr. F.O. Maxwell
3. Dato Bandar Haji Bua Hassan
4. Dato Emaum Haji Mataim
5. Abang Mohamed Kassim

His Highness the Rajah informed the members that he had lately made an application to His Excellency, the Governor of the Straits Settlements for Sarawak to be included while arranging for the import of labourers from India and he had received information, together with a letter from the Governor of Madras approving the import of labour from South India.

Sarawak Gazette dated February 1, 1898, reports the following:—

INDIAN IMMIGRATION

KUCHING, SARAWAK.
January, 17th 1898.

RAJAH, — I have the honour to submit my report on the Indian Immigration Department for the six months ending December 31st, 1897.

2. This Department was inaugurated in the month of June, 1897, and Your Highness was pleased to appoint me the first Indian Immigration Agent for Sarawak in the same month.

3. The first batch of Immigrant labourers arrived on the 29th of June, 1897 by s.s. Vorwarts but as this was only one day before the half year ending June 30th I considered it advisable to include them in my report for present half year, being the first half yearly report of this department submitted to Your Highness.

4. For a labourers' depot a large and roomy house was secured in Kling Street and answered admirably that purpose.

5. Three batches of Immigrants arrived here. 202 adults and 36 children in all, a detailed tabular statement concerning them is attached.

6. All these labourers with the exception of three who arrived sick and died in Hospital, signed their contracts in my presence and have been employed on Matang estate.

7. A few labourers absconded at intervals during this six months amounting to 27 in all, they were all arrested; on the first two occasions, the labourers were cautioned but later were punished by imprisonment in the gaol. The manager complained that among these were three ring leaders, Nairanasamy, Ramasamy and Vytæ, and on the expiration of their sentence these men were brought before me and they expressed a wish to annul their contracts. As the manager did not wish them back on the Estate I made them