

Economic Violence and the Subaltern Reality of Indian Women in Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs

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Abstract

This study investigates the economic violence and poverty endured by Indian women in Malaya, as portrayed in Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Drawing on 29 selected songs from documented collections, the research highlights two major dimensions of economic subjugation: economic violence within the family and economic marginalization within plantation society. Indian women, despite their vital contributions to the labor economy, were subjected to exploitation by husbands, parents, and in-laws, and faced systemic barriers in public life. Their struggles were compounded by severe poverty, forcing them into begging, borrowing, and morally compromising situations for survival. The study employed a combination of historical, descriptive, and explanatory research designs. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, was used alongside narrative and discourse analysis to uncover deeper meanings embedded in the songs. This methodological triangulation strengthened the validity and depth of the findings. The songs reveal the cumulative emotional, financial, and psychological burdens faced by Indian women, often pushing them toward contemplating death as an escape from relentless suffering. Through these folk narratives, the research exposes the intersection of patriarchy, colonial exploitation, and systemic poverty, preserving the subaltern voices of Indian women and shedding light on their lived experiences in historical Malaya.

Keywords: Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs, Indian Women, Economic Violence, Poverty, Subalternity, Colonial Malaya, Gendered Exploitation

Introduction

Indian women in Malaysian Tamil folk songs are often portrayed as enduring significant economic abuse, highlighting their marginalized position within both familial and societal structures. This analysis critically examines their economic vulnerability by categorizing it into two primary dimensions: economic violence within domestic and public contexts and economic deprivation in the context of poverty. Through these lenses, the songs reveal the multifaceted ways in which economic subjugation impacts the lives of Indian women, underscoring systemic inequities and their resultant hardships.

Background and Purpose of the Study

The British encouraged the migration of Indian laborers to Peninsular Malaysia as the region's economy expanded and local labor supply could not meet the growing demands of the rubber industry, infrastructure projects, and agricultural exports (Makeswari, 2007). The takeover of Penang and Malacca led to the establishment of plantations, but a shortage of workers prompted landowners to pressure the colonial government for more laborers. Most migrants were South Indians, recruited under the kangani system, although early recruitment faced challenges such as language barriers, leading to the involvement of landlords and zamindars who used deceptive practices to secure workers through ports like Nagapattinam and Madras. Male laborers were preferred, and between 1844 and 1910, nearly 250,000 Indians were brought to Malaya under contract, with males continuing to dominate the workforce even after 1920 (Dancz, 1987).

Meanwhile, few women migrated because cultural norms restricted them from working abroad. However, by the 1890s, estate managers encouraged family migration to reduce production costs and stabilize the workforce (Syamala and Ganesan, 2021; Datta, 2016). Indian women in plantations were mainly seen as reproducers of labor and domestic service providers, often earning lower wages without bonuses and being excluded from food rations, reflecting their marginalized status (Datta, 2016). As a result, the economic position of Indian women in plantations remained severely weakened. In addition to systemic exploitation by estate employers, many women also faced financial exploitation within their own families. These compounded hardships rendered their lives exceedingly difficult, with the poverty they experienced following separation from their husbands further intensifying their suffering. This study investigated it briefly.

Primary Sources of the Study

The primary materials for this study were drawn from “Malēciya Nāṭṭuppuṟap Pāṭalkaḷ!” by Thandayutham, “Malēciya Nāṭṭuppuṟappāṭalkaḷil Eṇ Payaṇam” by Mutthammal Palanisamy, “Malēciyat Tamiḷk Kavitaik Kaḷañciyam” by Murasu Nedumaran, and Shantini Pillai's “Transnational Collaboration and Media Industry in South India: Case of the Malaysian–Indian Diaspora”. In addition, three folk songs from a previous study and three songs documented by Logeswari Arumugan (2017) during her research on Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs were incorporated. Out of the 531 documented Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs, 29 were selectively analyzed to gather relevant data.

Significance of the Study

Among all ethnic groups in colonial Malaya, Indian women experienced the most compounded forms of marginalization due to entrenched structural, cultural, and economic barriers. They were frequently discouraged from seeking employment, subjected to patriarchal control over financial and personal decisions, and confined to low-wage labor that reinforced their economic dependency. Unlike their Malay and Chinese counterparts, Indian women lacked access to ethnic-based support systems or institutional protections, which further diminished their visibility within colonial discourse (Param, 2015).

Historically, their plight has received limited scholarly attention. Most academic studies have focused on the broader migration of Indian laborers and the functioning of plantation economies, often overlooking the specific economic hardships endured by Indian

women (Gopal and Musa, 2020). Their roles, contributions, and struggles were seldom documented, and this omission has contributed to their continued exclusion from both national narratives and academic discourse (Nithiya, 2020). This study addresses this critical gap by examining the economic violence inflicted upon Indian women as portrayed in Malaysian Tamil folk songs. These songs serve as a cultural archive that preserves the voices of marginalized communities. Through the analysis of selected folk lyrics, this research recovers the lived economic realities of Indian women during the colonial period and highlights patterns of gendered exploitation and structural oppression. The study contributes to feminist historiography, subaltern studies, and the cultural history of the Indian diaspora in Malaya.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a combination of historical, descriptive, and explanatory research designs to create a cohesive and comprehensive approach. Integrating multiple designs enhanced the authenticity and validity of the analysis, as emphasized by Martella (2013). The research design was selected based on the nature of the topic, following Vaus (2001), who stressed that a study's design must align with whether the inquiry is descriptive or explanatory. An explanatory approach was adopted to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts and phenomena within the folk songs (Mohd, Kazi, Rohaan, and Suhit, 2022).

The researcher examined the content and transmitted messages of the songs, identifying portrayals of women, analyzing their life struggles, and assessing the impacts of these hardships. Given the historical context embedded in the songs, a historical design was applied to uncover and interpret past experiences, an approach supported by Lok, Sonelal, Rabin, Umesh, and Teknath (2023). Howell (2001) similarly argued that historical research aims to collect, verify, and synthesize past evidence to establish factual understanding. A two-step process guided the analysis: first, exploring the relationship between historical events and the content of the folk songs, and second, analyzing figurative language, special terms, and symbols that reflected the lived realities of Indian women. Through this approach, the study achieved a deeper understanding of the social conditions faced by Indian women in Malaya during the colonial era.

Data Analysis

The information collected in this study was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Additionally, narrative and discourse analyses were employed to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the data.

Findings and Discussions

Economical Violence in Families

Women need economic empowerment to achieve gender equality and secure their rights (UN Women, 2024). It helps promote gender balance, reduce poverty, and boost economic growth by allowing women to access resources, make decisions, and contribute to development in all areas of life (Pushpam, 2024). In families, empowering women is especially important to strengthen their decision-making, particularly in male-dominated Indian societies

(Thanikaivel and Priya, 2018). However, in Malaysian Tamil folk songs, Indian women are shown as subaltern figures because economic violence within families restricts and exploits them. Economic violence is a type of gender-based violence where one partner limits the other's economic freedom, creating dependency and blocking rights. It includes actions like withholding money, stopping access to education or work, and controlling financial decisions or property ownership. This damages economic security and prevents self-sufficiency (Ishankhanova, 2024; Bruno, Strid, and Ekbrand, 2024; D'Agostino, Zacchia, and Corsi, 2024). To better understand this, the section is divided into two parts: economic violence by husbands and economic violence by family members.

Economic Violence by Husbands

Indian women in Malaysian Tamil folk songs are often portrayed as breadwinners, striving to secure their families' financial stability despite numerous challenges. However, these songs also highlight instances of exploitation and sabotage by their husbands, placing them in vulnerable positions. These women endure economic sabotage, involving actions that obstruct their ability to gain, retain, or advance in employment or education, contributing to their subaltern status, marked by a lack of autonomy and control over their lives (Sufyan, Ansor, Mawardi, and Ismail, 2022). In the song "Mīṇ Vir̥kac Ceṇṇavaḷ!" (Thandayutham, 206), an Indian woman faces challenges due to her husband's disregard for her efforts. Despite working long hours selling fish to support her family, her sacrifices are unappreciated, and her husband accuses her of returning home late. His dismissive behavior exemplifies economic abuse, as explained by Postmus, Hoge, Breckenridge, Sharp-Jeffs, and Chung (2020), and aligns with the Economic Abuse Wheel developed by Sharp (2008).

Lyrics:

Mīṇu vikkappōṇa cirukki
Fish selling woman
vīṭu tirumpala!
Hasn't returned home yet!
Viḷakku vaikkira nēramāccu
It's already time to light the lamp,
viṣayam puriyala!
I don't understand!
Inta vīṭṭila āmpila irukkiraṇṇu payam'miruntākkā
If she were afraid of the men in this house,
veḷiyē pōyi vekunēramā tāmatippāḷō?
Would she be so late outside?
Varaṭṭum iṇṇaikku
Once she comes home today,
iraṇṭula oṇṇu pāṭṭiṭuvēmnā
I will question her
Anta varaṇṭa cirukki nittup puṭuvēnnā!
That girl will get beaten today!
Eṇṇa poṇṇa innēramā
Oh woman, until this hour,
eṅkiṭṭukkā pōyiruntē
Where did you go?

oṅṅum puriyala! oṅṅum puriyala!
 I don't understand anything! I don't understand anything!
 Pūcai eṅṅaikku vāṅkap pōrīyō teriyala!
 I don't know when I'll have to beat you!

“Fish selling woman,
 Hasn't returned home yet!
 It's already time to light the lamp,
 I don't understand!
 If she were afraid of the men in this house,
 Would she be so late outside?
 Once she comes home today,
 I will question her—
 That girl will get beaten today!
 Oh woman, until this hour,
 Where did you go?
 I don't understand anything! I don't understand anything!
 I don't know when I'll have to beat you!”

This emotional and economic sabotage reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that marginalize women's contributions in both domestic and economic spheres. Moreover, women are also portrayed as victims of sexual exploitation by their husbands for financial gain. In the song “Keṭṭup Pōna Maccān” (Thandayutham, 78), an intoxicated husband forces his wife into prostitution to obtain money for more toddy:

Lyrics:

“Kuṭṭimārkaḷaiyum kūṭṭikiṭṭu- ennaik
 young women bring along me
 kunta veccu vuṭṭupiṭṭu
 squat left
 paṅam vāṅkkiṭṭu
 money taken
 aṭa kūru keṭṭa māmā
 characterless husband
 kuṅamiḷanta māmā
 quality lost
 ninaiviḷantu pōkalāmā
 unconsciousness”

“You came with young women,
 Leaving me squatted, helpless,
 You took the money, my husband—
 Honor lost, virtues gone,
 And even your consciousness has slipped away...”

This reflects the harrowing economic and sexual exploitation fueled by alcoholism and male dominance (Katigason and Dali, 2022). Furthermore, women are forced to borrow small

amounts, like fifty cents from neighbors, to survive, as portrayed in “Kuṭi Keṭukkum Kuṭi” (Thandayutham, 234):

Lyrics:

Aṭutta vīṭṭukkāraṇ kiṭṭa
Neighbour from
ampatu paicā vāṅkikiṭṭu
Fifty cents borrow

“Borrow fifty cents from the neighbor.”

Economic Violence by Family Members

Economic violence also manifests through family members, notably parents, sisters-in-law, and grandmothers.

Economic Violence by Parents

In songs such as Toḷilāḷi (Thandayutham, 19) and Es Nos Kirāṇi (Thandayutham, 19), the absence of paternal financial support is lamented:

Lyrics:

“Añcu veḷḷi koṭukka
Five ringgit giving
kāṇōm appa kāraṇ!
Missing father”
“To give five ringgit
Father is nowhere to be seen!”

Similarly, in Puriyalaiyē...! (Thandayutham, 141), a daughter expresses sorrow over her mother's failure to hand over her savings:

Lyrics:

“Uṇṇōṭa ciṟuvāṭu kāca
Your small saving money
eṅka vaiccaṇṇu
Where you kept
em'mā nī collāma pōṛatu
Oh my mother you without saying going
eṅakku oṇṇum puriyalayē...
I do not understand...”
“Your small saving money,
Where have you kept it?
Oh my mother, you are going without saying,
I do not understand...”

In Kalkattā Paṭṭu Varum (Thandayutham, 143), the daughter grieves over her lack of inheritance:

Lyrics:

“Eṇṇai petta am'mā
My mother
kāppu varum cīppu varum
Bangle come, comb come
kaṇakkā cīru varum
Precise dowry come
kalkattā paṭṭu varum
Calcutta silk come
kālai māṭu reṇṭu varum
Two bulls come
kaṭṭi vaikka vaṇṭi varum
Tie keep cart come
eṇakkuk kāppu valla cīppum valla
For me no bangle, no comb
pūṭṭi ilukka vaṇṭi illa
No cart to tie and pull
kālai māṭu reṇṭum illa
No two bulls
nā pāvi poṇṇā
Me as sinned girl
kaṇ kalaṅki vāḷaraṇō...
Living with eyes drenched...”

“My mother
Bangles come, comb come,
Precise dowry comes,
Calcutta silk comes,
Two bulls come,
A cart to tie comes,
For me, no bangle, no comb,
No cart to tie and pull,
No two bulls,
I, the sinful girl,
Living with eyes drenched in tears...”

Economic Violence by Sisters-in-law

Sisters-in-law are portrayed as hostile to daughters' rights to property, fearing loss of family wealth. This is captured in “Tāli Aḷukkāccu; Talaimayirum Cikkāccu!” (Thandayutham, 176):

Lyrics:

“Nā cīrukku varṇēṇṇu periyāṇṇaṇ poṇṭāṭṭi
Me dowry come to get Elder Brother's Wife
pāṇṭitturai kāvaliṭṭā!
Placed guard
Nā paṅkukku varṇēṇṇu

Me share come to get
eṅ ciṅṅa aṅṅaṅ poṅṅāṅṅi
My Younger Elder Brother's Wife
kavaru kāvaliṅṅā!
Placed guard!"

".....
Elder brother's wife
Placed a guard, thinking
I've come to claim my dowry.
.....
My younger elder brother's wife
Placed a guard, suspecting
I've come to claim my share.
....."

Economic Violence by Grandmothers

In Paiyaik Kāṅṅu (Thandayutham, 89), grandmothers exploit grandchildren through prostitution for survival:

Lyrics:

"Rōcāppū ravikkaik kārī
Rose flower blouse lady
vīṅṅukkuṅṅa varaṅṅumāṅṅi
May I come inside?
ciṅṅakkuṅṅi!
Small lady
Eṅka pāṅṅiyak kēṅṅu
Asking my Grandmother
Uṅṅa vārumayyā
And come inside."

"Rose flower blouse lady,
May I come inside your home?
Small lady,
.....
Asking my Grandmother,
And come inside."

Economic Violence in Society

Malaysian Tamil folk songs often reflect societal dynamics, highlighting the economic and social struggles faced by Indian women in plantation communities. Women faced significant challenges in attempting to succeed in business, particularly within the plantation context. Their very identity as women served as a substantial obstacle in a male-dominated societal structure (Pareek & Bagrecha, 2018). An illustrative example appears in the song "Pūppōṅṅa Kiṅṅācilē Pōṅṅam'mā Oṅṅu" (Thandayutham, 84), which captures the economic exploitation

endured by a woman operating a toddy shop. The woman firmly insists on the exact price for a glass of toddy to protect herself from being cheated by male customers:

Lyrics:

“
 Mūṇu paṇam vaiccu kumpiṭuṅka
 Three coins put and salute
”
 "Put three coins and offer your salute."

Despite her clear insistence, male customers attempt to negotiate the price down to two coins:

Lyrics:

“
 Reṇṭu kācu jillutāṅ
 Two coins jingling
”
 "Two coins jingling."

This negotiation highlights how male customers sought to exploit the woman’s economic vulnerability, assuming her bargaining power was weak (Aravamudhan, Sivakumar, Vishnu, & Mohanasundaram, 2024). Additionally, the broader portrayal of women as weaker in all respects (Mahesh, 2020) further emphasizes the subaltern status of Indian women in plantation communities. This song vividly portrays how Indian women endured economic exploitation, navigating both societal bias and financial hardship.

Poverty

The poverty experienced by Indian women in Malaya often began with the separation from their husbands during the Japanese occupation, primarily due to war and the deadly construction of the Siam-Burma railway. Left alone with their children, wives faced an uncertain and precarious future. These women, rooted in traditional values associating them with their husbands (Satyen, Bourke-Ibbs, and Rowland, 2024), found themselves directionless without their male companions. This separation and grief are poignantly captured in multiple folk song verses:

Lyrics:

“
 Malāy nāṭṭilē - peṅka!
 In Malay country – women
 kaṭṭiya puruṣaṅai viṭṭu pirintu kalaṅkiṛār
 Married husbands separated and grieving
 maṅmēṭṭilē...
 On the mound
”

“In Malay country – Ladies
Separated from their married husbands, they grieve
On the mound...”

“.....

Malāy nāṭṭil peṅka!
Women of Malaya

.....

Kaṭṭuṇa puruṣaṇai viṭṭuviṭṭu
Married husbands separated
kaṅkalaṅkiṛār malāy nāṭṭilē!
Grieving in the Malay country!

.....”

”.....

Ladies of the Malay land,

.....

Separated from their married husbands,
Grieve and are uprooted in the Malay country!

.....”

“.....

Intap pālakaṇaip petteṭutta
This boy gave birth
pāṅṭiyaṇām cayām kāṭṭilē
Father is in Siam forest

.....”

“The father who gave birth to this boy
Is in the Siam forest”

“.....

Peṅka! kaṭṭiya puruṣaṇai viṭṭup pirikirār
Women separated from their married husbands
kalaṅkiṛār malāy nāṭṭilē..
Crying in the Malay country

.....”

“Women are separating from their husbands,
Crying in the Malay country”

“.....

Peṅṭu piḷḷaika! tāṅaḷuka- nippan
While women and children are crying – Japanese soldier
koṅṭu pōrāṅ avan vaṅṭiyētti
Took them away by vehicle

.....”

“While the wife’s children are crying,
The Japanese soldier
Took them away in a vehicle”

The economic consequences of this separation were devastating. Indian families, where husbands traditionally served as primary breadwinners (Megha, Thomas, Kanth, Navaneetham, & Dilsha, 2024), suddenly faced financial ruin. Women, thrust into labor-intensive work such as rubber tapping and agriculture (Gopal & Musa, 2020), earned significantly less than men and suffered extreme economic deprivation. This poverty even stripped them of basic dignity, as described in the verse:

Lyrics:

“.....
Malāy nāṭṭila peṅkaḷ
Women of Malaya
kaṭṭuna tuṇiyōṭu kaṇ kalaṅkiṛār
Clad only in cloth, brimming with tears
.....”

“...Women of Malaya land brimming with tears, clad only in their garments...”

In 1925, Indian laborers received a meager clothing allowance of only 61 cents monthly (Manickam, 2012), sufficient for just three garments. Severe rice shortages also intensified their hardship, driven by the 1918–1919 droughts (Mishra, Tiwari, Aadhar, Shah, Xiao, Pai, & Lettenmaier, 2019). Franklin Gimson and Edward Gent’s colonial administration further reduced rice rations in 1946, forcing women to beg from family members. Songs such as “Aṛiyum Malai” (Thandayutham, 264) and “Nallataṅkāḷ Cīṛram” (Thandayutham, 224) capture the heartbreaking reality:

Lyrics:

“.....
Uṅkiṭṭa aṇṇāvē
To you, elder brother
kaṅcīkēṭṭa aṛiyumaḷai
Asking for rice porridge
.....”

"To you, elder brother,
Asking for rice porridge,
I have come for rice."

".....
Aṇṇiyārē! Aṇṇiyārē!

Oh, Elder Sister-in Law! Oh, Elder Sister-In-Law!

എ - അന്നാങ്കാരാ മാനായിയേ!

My – Elder Brother’s Wife

.....

Nīkatavait tirappāyē aṇṇi!

You open the door Elder Sister-In-Law!

Aṇṇi! Eṇakkuk kālum

Elder Sister-In-Law! My legs

kaṭukkuttaṇṇi- eṇakkuk

are paining- Me

kaṭumpaci ākutu aṇṇi!

Extreme hunger having Sister-In-Law!

Nī katavait tirappāyō!

You door open!

.....

Nī cāttik katavu aṭaicca!

You closed door!

.....

Nī pūṭṭik katavu aṭaicca!

You locked door closed!

.....”

“

Oh, Elder Sister-in-Law! Oh, Elder Sister-in-Law!

My Elder Brother’s Wife

.....

You open the door, Elder Sister-in-Law!

Elder Sister-in-Law! My legs

are paining—Me

suffering from extreme hunger, Elder Sister-in-Law!

You open the door!

.....

You closed the door!

.....

You locked the door!”

“

Uṇṇōṭa maṇaivi paciyā

Your wife (Elder Sister-In-Law) hungry

irukkum pōtu

when

intat taṅkāvukku

to this younger sister

ilai koṭuttu

Banana leaf giving

iṭamum illaiyaṅkiṛā

No place she says

.....”

(Thandayutham, Puriyalaiyē...!, 141)

“.....

While your younger sister is hungry,
your wife (elder sister-in-law) says
there is no space to give
even a banana leaf.

.....”

“.....

Ayya ciru peṇ ēlaiyeṇṇāl
Oh Sir! Small girl if poor
maṇam irāṅkāṭā
heart won't compassionate
nālaṅcu nāḷ nā paṭṭiṇiyāl
For five days me hunger
vāṭukirēṇ nāṇ
suffering me
vāṭukirēṇ
suffering

.....

kāl kaṭukka kaṇ aṭaikka
Leg paining eye shutting
kātu kēḷātā...Antak kākkavukkuk kavaḷam
Ears won't listen... For that crow a handful rice
kūṭap pōṭṭuk kūppiṭuvirē
will throw and call
keṭṭa nāyṅku eccil
for bad dog used
ilaiyai viṭṭerivirē!
Banana leaf will throw!

..... “

(Thandayutham, Cāvu vārātā, 174)

“Ah, won't your heart pity the poor little girl?
I've been starving for four days, worn and frail.
My legs ache, my eyes close, my ears are deaf.
Yet, you'll feed the crow, a morsel, with a call.
You'll throw a leaf of food to a wretched dog”

Despite their desperation, women were often turned away, while society extended kindness to crows and dogs instead, as depicted in “Cāvu Vārātā” (Thandayutham, 174). Besides borrowing rice, women prepared their own meals using the few available resources. In the song *Uṇavu* (Thandayutham, 299), a mother prepares “**acar**” using unripe papaya, tamarind, green chilies, and salt, following her child's suggestions. She also brews “**varakōppi**” (black coffee), a simple and accessible beverage. Acar, a traditional fruit pickle, holds cultural

significance across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, reflecting shared culinary traditions (Muir, 2024).

Lyrics:

“.....
Kāyā irukkutaṭā!
If unripe papaya is available
.....
Accāru pōṭam'mā!
Let us make acar!
.....
Puḷi koñcam pōṭam'mā
Add a little tamarind
moḷakā reṇṭu pōṭam'mā
Add two chilies
uppu reṇṭu pōṭam'mā
Add two pinches of salt
.....
varakkōppi pōṭam'mā!
Let us make black coffee!
.....”
“.....
If unripe,
.....
Make it into acar!
.....
Add a little tamarind,
Put in two chilies,
Add two pinches of salt,
.....
And pour black coffee!

In times of extreme scarcity, many Indian women also relied on **cassava** as a food source. Cassava, rich in carbohydrates and highly resilient to climatic stress, is often called the "poor man's savior crop" (Diallo, Souare, Diallo, Kadouno, Goualie & Bah, 2024; Immanuel, Jaganathan, Prakash, and Sivakumar, 2024). Gratitude toward cassava is powerfully expressed in the following songs:

Lyrics:

“.....
maṛutinna pōratu
Going to eat
mara vaḷḷik kiḷankayyā
Cassava
kiḷanka veṛukkalāmā?
How could anyone hate cassava?

.....”

“About to eat cassava,
How could anyone dislike it?”

“.....

Uyiraik koṭuttatu
Life-saving
maravaḷḷik kiḷaṅkayyā
Cassava

.....”

"Life was given
By cassava."

“.....

Maravaḷḷi nalla vaḷḷi
Cassava, the good vine
māntarukku ēṟṟa vaḷḷi
Fit for human survival
maravaḷḷi illai eṇṟāl
Without cassava,
makkaḷ māṅṅiruppār
People would have died

.....”

"Cassava, the good cassava,
The cassava suitable for humans.
If there were no cassava,
People would have perished.
Cassava..."

Besides rice, women also struggled to afford **turmeric**, a basic household necessity in Indian culture, used in cooking, medicine, and cosmetics (Nguyen, Govindasamy & Mentreddy, 2024). In *Nam'mavaṅka Poḷappu* (Murasu Nedumaran, 341), the daughter laments the absence of turmeric in her life:

Lyrics:

“Māmāvūṭṭup poṅṅukku maṅcaḷukkum vitiyilla!”
The daughter of the maternal uncle has no turmeric either.

This scarcity underlines the deep economic deprivation faced by Indian women. To cope with severe poverty, women often **borrowed money from Chettiars**. Failure to repay frequently resulted in **physical abuse**, as reflected in the song *Ippaṭi Aṭikkalāmā?* (Thandayutham, 191):

Lyrics:

“

Ippaṭi aṭikkalāmā eṇ
How could you hit
ciṇṇap poṇṇa
My little girl

.....

Kuppuraṇ piṭittut taḷḷi
Grabbed and pushed face-down
ippaṭi aṭikkalāmā ceṭṭiyārē?
How could you beat her, Chettiar?
.....”

“How could you hit my little girl like this?
Grabbed and pushed her face-down
How could you hit her like this, Chettiar?”

In extreme cases, survival forced women into **morally compromising situations**. In *Vāḷviḷanta Vāḷkkai* (Thandayutham, 7), women, to save their families from starvation, offered shelter to young men who in turn financially supported them, often involving **sexual exploitation**:

Lyrics:

“Ōr ayntu pattu veḷḷi koṭuttuṭuvāṇ”
He gave five or ten ringgits.

This tragic reality highlights the extent of hardship faced by plantation women. Ultimately, these cumulative emotional and financial burdens pushed many women to **contemplate death** as a means of escape, as poignantly described in the following verses:

Lyrics:

“

Teyvam cāvu varātā
Oh God! Will death come?
.....”

Oh God! Will death ever come?
“

Eṇakku muppatu nālayilē
For me, within thirty days,
petta am'mā
Maternal mother
iṇṇaikku muṛai maruntu vāṅkit tiṇṇu
Bought medicine today and ate
kaṭaic carakka vāṅki
Bought toddy from the shop
kai maruntu pukaṭṭiruntā
Used home remedies

karuvaik kalaiccuruntā
If you had aborted me,
ippa kaṣṭamē tōṇātu
Today's suffering would not exist
Karuvai uruvākki inta malāy nāṭṭila
By creating this embryo, you made me toil in Malaya.
.....”

“For me, in thirty days,
Maternal mother,
If only fed with toddy from the shop,
And the remedy, if only aborted the child,
The suffering would never have come to thought.
The failure to abort
Is only to make us work hard in Malaya.”

This heart-wrenching imagery encapsulates the unbearable physical, emotional, and economic struggles endured by Indian women in Malayan plantations.

Conclusion

The analysis of Malaysian Tamil folk songs reveals the intense economic violence and poverty endured by Indian women within both family structures and broader plantation society. Women were subjected to economic sabotage by their husbands, denied financial support and inheritance by parents and in-laws, and faced systemic exploitation within a male-dominated community. Songs depict women struggling for survival through small-scale trade, facing humiliation while begging for food, and enduring extreme poverty that left them without basic necessities like rice, clothing, or turmeric. In many instances, survival forced women into morally compromising situations, highlighting the depth of their economic desperation. The emotional and psychological toll of these hardships often led women to contemplate death as an escape from relentless suffering. Through these vivid portrayals, Malaysian Tamil folk songs serve as critical historical records, exposing the intersection of patriarchy, colonial exploitation, and systemic poverty that defined the subaltern status of Indian women in Malaya.

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