Foothills Estate was a lovely place

Aneeta Sundararaj

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Submission date: 12 August 2022; Acceptance date: 31 January 2023; Publication date: 11 January 2024

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ABSTRACT
This photo essay chronicles the life of my grandfather, C. Rajah, who travelled from India to British Malaya in or around 1920. He eventually made his home in a rubber estate in the north of the Malay peninsula called Foothills Estate, Kulim. There, he grew his family and built a life that was, by all accounts, a good one. The story I tell is based on tales I heard about him and Foothills Estate, documents in my possession and some items I inherited. It is an attempt to counter the stereotype in modern Malaysia that those who come from the estates are to be regarded as ‘uncultured, illiterate and poor’.

KEYWORDS
indenture in South East Asia, indentured labourers of Malaya, indentured labourer in rubber plantations, legacy of indenture in Malaysia,

DOI: 10.13169/jofstudindentleg.3.2.0003
Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies 3.2 January 2024
Indian indenture in British Malaya, Indian migration to Malaya, descendants of indenture

Saturday, 9 March, 2019. The Commonwealth Writers hosted a Conversation on the legacy of indenture in contemporary times. I was part of this Conversation held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia because an excerpt from my novel was included in an anthology called *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from The Descendants of Indenture* (Dabydeen, et al. 2018).

At one point during the Conversation, an impromptu debate between two speakers became decidedly argumentative. On the one hand, there was a performance poet who insisted that the powers that be in Malaysia had done little to help alleviate the suffering of Malaysian Indians and, in particular, the current descendants of indentured labourers (more commonly called ‘estate people’). Their socio-economic conditions were deplorable and they were denied all opportunities to lead dignified lives. On the other, was a former Member of Parliament who stated that help had been given to the hardcore poor in Malaysia regardless of their ethnicity and race.

When this Conversation was over, some in the audience commented that I’d contributed nothing to it. It was true because as the debate progressed, all I heard was my father’s voice inside my head saying, ‘We didn’t know we were poor until these outsiders came and told us so.’ Indeed, the stories Daddy told me of life growing up in the estates didn’t resonate with much of what the speakers were saying. Certainly, it was necessary to endure the normal vicissitudes of life and the socio-economic issues of many estate people prevailed. However, there was also an overwhelming number of positives from Daddy’s experience of estate life that have overflowed into and impacted my life and career. Indeed, when Daddy read the draft of my novel, he said to me, ‘Don’t write awful things about the estates. Foothills Estate was a lovely place.’
I left the event that day not only with Daddy’s words in my head but a feeling that I must be robust in showing people that estate life wasn’t all bad. Merely pointing people to appropriate passages in my novel wasn’t enough. I resolved to undertake more research. Gradually, I became aware that it would be unwise to confine the narrative to Daddy’s story alone, but to plot the life story of my paternal grandfather, or as I called him ‘Tata’ (Tamil word for grandfather). Briefly, his name was C. Rajah and in the early part of the twentieth century, he travelled to what was then British Malaya. He made his home in Foothills Estate, Kulim, married my grandmother (whom I called ‘Amma’). Tata died in 1969 (before I was born), Amma in 1989, and Daddy in 2016.

My starting point was to get a feel of who Tata was and what prompted him to leave India in the first place. From a handwritten
copy of an application for citizenship dated 31 December 1950, Tata listed his date of birth as 23 March 1895. Born in George Town, Madras, India he was given the name Rajah. Tamil custom dictated that a person placed his father’s name before his. As such, his father was one ‘Cinnasamy’, thereby making Tata write his full name as Cinnasamy Rajah. He also listed his father as ‘M. Cinnasamy’, which naturally meant that my great, great grandfather’s initial was ‘M’. For reasons that will become clear, any inquiry into the identity of ‘M.’ and his ancestors was now impossible.

Figure 2 Certificate of employment for C. Rajah – 26 August 1918.

It was stated in the certificate of employment issued by the Asiatic Petroleum (India) Company Limited dated 23 August 1918, that Tata worked as a ‘Record Clerk’ beginning 1 February 1914 (aged nineteen years). Some four and a half years later, on 24 August 1918, he resigned because he wanted ‘to proceed to Singapore’.
The overriding question was this: In what capacity did he proceed to Singapore? As an indentured labourer or did he venture there of his own volition?

To answer this necessitated an understanding of the terminology in use at the time. In his doctoral thesis called ‘Indian Indenture in The Straits Settlements, 1872–1910: Policy And Practice In Province Wellesley’, Chanderbali set the scene for emigration to British Malaya. For the most part, Chanderbali’s thesis and research makes for depressing reading, and chronicles stories of human beings who were overworked, underpaid (in most cases not paid at all), starved, beaten and treated no better than animals. The process of recruiting them was riddled with abuse and only reinforced the recurring stories I was told that many of the indentured labourers didn’t come to Malaya voluntarily. In fact, as my mother once said, ‘Many were picked up from the roadside in Madras and put on boats to come here.’ Chanderbali quoted (1983: 87) from the following published account:

… Many cases have come to notice which show that there is a regularly organised system in this district of kidnapping men and children and taking them down to coolie godowns in Negapatam, to be shipped from there to Pinang and other places which are thus regularly supplied with men as coolies and girls as prostitutes.

To paraphrase Chanderbali (1983: 314), this abuse-riddled system of recruitment was overhauled in 1910 and coincided with the introduction of a new industry to British Malaya – rubber production. Having learned the lessons of the past, the labourers recruited from South India to work in rubber plantations had better working conditions, their wages were considerably higher and there was a much better level of protection and supervision.

Delving deeper into this topic, there was a more precise definition for ‘indentured labourer in Malaya’. Chanderbali set out the meaning of the term ‘labourer’ by suggesting that there was a qualification to the term (1983: 68). Free labourers were those
who came to Malaya of their own account (such as goldsmiths, fishermen, barbers, etc.) as opposed to those who were recruited through the inducement of a cash advance, after which they entered into a contractual agreement not only to labour, but to pay back all the expenses incurred. It was against this backdrop that my grandfather made his way to British Malaya.

By the time of his marriage on 23 March 1928 Tata was already a clerk in Foothills Estate, Kulim. This suggested that Tata wasn’t recruited to be an indentured labourer, but probably came as free one. That said, the fact that he was a Tamil man who came from Madras and chose to live and grow his family in the Foothills Estate lumped him and all his descendants under the umbrella of ‘estate people’. Indeed, I was once told, to my face, ‘Oh, your father is a doctor? He’s one of the lucky few who managed to get out of the estates.’ What was implied here was that it was impossible for those born and brought up in the estates to ever escape the horrors of life there.

In modern Malaysia, such assumptions are common place and the resulting and indirect insult is institutionalized. Take something as simple as filling in a form in any government department. While it’s common to ask for details like name, address, etc, an added requirement will be for the applicant to choose their race and religion. Where I list my race as ‘Indian’ (meaning ‘of Indian origin’) and religion as ‘Hindu’, those who identify as Ceylonese (Tamils whose origins are from Sri Lanka) are more likely to list their race as ‘Others’, but still maintain their religion as ‘Hindu’. It is a similar case with Malayalees and Telegus who are native or indigenous to the Indian states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh respectively. The rationale for so doing, as Daddy once explained to me, was that ‘Others’ set these people apart from the descendants of the Tamilians who came from Madras and worked as indentured labourers in the rubber estates. Indirectly, it also placed ‘Others’ on a higher social stratum because their forefathers came to British Malaya to work in the Civil Service, as the managers of rubber estates, etc. This distinction, as Daddy once
bluntly pointed out, was because estate people were thought to be ‘poor, uneducated or illiterate, and uncultured.’

A curious point made by one of my uncles was that Tata never returned to India, not even for a visit. Indeed, from the said Application for Citizenship, Tata declared that he’d been in British Malaya for thirty-two years. There is no account of his whereabouts from the time he left his job in India (1918) and when he arrived in British Malaya (1920). He also stated that except for a short spell of eight months in 1922, Tata remained in Malaya for the rest of his life.

In this modern world where people travel at the drop of a hat, someone staying put in one place for life seems inconceivable. In Tata’s world, it was quite the opposite. In line with Chanderbali’s conclusion (1983: 75), Tata, like previous emigrants, probably didn’t return to India because he’d acquired land, friends and family in Malaya.

Chanderbali’s other suggestion that emigrants feared being ridiculed and shamed because they were unable to demonstrate material progress gave rise to another thought. Not only did Tata never return to India, no one living today seems to know anything about his family India. My relatives have no knowledge of Tata’s siblings, his mother’s name or even the address of his house in Madras. In fact, Daddy never made an effort to meet his paternal grandparents in spite of having spent close to eight years in Madras in the late 1950s.

Daddy also said that Tata was informed by an astrologer that if he did return to India, he’d suffer from a premature death. It seems a contrived reason, but Daddy made it clear that Tata demanded obedience and no further inquiry into Tata’s past would have been appreciated or entertained.

The conclusion I came to was that something drastic must have happened for the relationship between Tata and his family to be irretrievably broken. Meaning, what reason did Tata have to completely cut off ties with his family in India? This is a question that I’m afraid I will never be able to properly answer. Furthermore, without
knowing the identity of ‘M.’, it will now be close to impossible to trace Tata’s family in India.

Figure 3  Family tree of Gopal Das by his first wife (Sundri).

Where Tata’s side of the family was lost to history, Amma’s side of the family more than made up for any perceived vacuum. From the family tree that Daddy created, it is stated that Amma’s aunt was one Sundri. Sundri died soon after the delivery of her second child and Gopal Das married Amaniammal. Between his two wives, Gopal Das had a sum total of eighteen children (not in the family tree).

Figure 4  Wedding invitation of C. Rajah and Nagarathnammal – 23 March 1928
Sundri and Gopal Das’s second son, Rajaram, would play an important role in Tata’s life. For one, it is Rajaram who is listed as the host on the wedding invitation of Tata and Amma. There was a bump in the road to marriage though for Daddy says that Tata was annoyed to learn that before the marriage could proceed, someone was dispatched to Madras to enquire about the groom’s background. What seems to have irked Tata the most was that of all the questions asked, it was the one about his caste that was the final determinant of whether this marriage could proceed. Since it was confirmed that he was from the Mudaliar caste, all was good and the marriage could proceed.

As the Chief Clerk, Tata was provided living quarters that were called the ‘Foothills Estate House’. There was no one photo to show what the house looked like. Instead, I had several photos which, when pieced together, gave an overview of the house and its surroundings. The first was a photo that showed part of the house with what seems to be a hill in the background. Then, there was a photo of a family friend, Mrs Gomathi Pillay, and Amma
seated on the steps of the house. She would play an instrumental role in Daddy’s life once he returned from his medical studies in India. Finally, there’s the one taken of Daddy in the 1930s. I asked him why he was dressed in winter clothing when we lived in the tropics. His answer was that it was often cool in the day and cold at night in Foothills Estate.

I found this description accurate when I visited Foothills Estate in the 1980s. When I came to write my novel, *The Age of Smiling Secrets*, I tried to capture what was in these photos and my memories of the actual Foothills Estate when describing the fictional one (Sundararaj 2018:255–256):

At the main entrance to Foothills Estate, the police officers parked their jeep next to a Volvo. It was past midnight and the rain made it impossible to drive further. Forced to go on foot the rest of the way, they trudged through boot-sucking mud.

From time to time, they swished their torch lights from side to side. They walked past ferns with water-logged spores on the back of each leaf. Past two mating snakes. The Chinese police officer wondered about this. Where did the male snake keep its thing? Where did the female snake have her hole? How?

Half-drowned, fat and furry rats with long tails raced to safety as they crossed the path of the police officers. The Tamil police officer wondered if it was a sign of good luck. In Hindu mythology, rats are said to be the vehicle of Lord Ganesh.

The sleeping mongoose, full from its recent meal of an abandoned nest of eggs belonging to a ‘Queen’ Cobra, lay snoozing by a rock. For no apparent reason, it had left the last egg which was about to hatch.

The Chief Inspector’s deputy walked past a Heliconia in full bloom. The deeper they went into this place, the stranger it became. Maybe it was true what people said about Foothills Estate: breathing in the air made people lose their minds.
A lotus leaf floated on the surface of the water collected inside a broken pot; ants on top of the leaf, uncertain where to go, scurried to and fro.

Rows of rubber trees with mottled trunks, planted in straight lines, no matter which way the police officers chose to look.

The hungry, jug-like leaves of the pitcher plant were waiting to trap insects.

All three police officers heard the mating-call of toads.

Deep, dark and cool – this was Foothills Estate.

It was in the actual Foothills Estate House that Amma gave birth to her only child, Daddy. Officially, Daddy was born on 23 November 1929. Unofficially, no one knows the exact date of birth for a very good reason.

‘For the first three months, my mother said that I was carried on a pillow because my skin was delicate,’ Daddy explained. This was a side effect of being administered quinine because both mother and child suffered from malaria. No one was certain, at the time, that the baby would survive. By the time it came to registering the child’s birth, everyone had forgotten the exact date of birth and an approximate one was used.

When it came to the décor of the ‘Foothills Estate House’ Daddy observed three habits about Tata that set him apart from others and suggested that he was both cultured and learned. The first is the most obvious of all and that was Tata’s penmanship (see Figure 9). To this day, many admire his beautiful cursive writing. He must have had a good education or tutors who taught him to write so beautifully. Second, it amused many that Tata didn’t like to carry his own bags and always had a ‘chota’ (assistant) to carry it for him. These two, said Daddy, made people surmise that Tata’s family in India probably belonged to a higher social stratum. Tata also had a more refined taste in the pieces of décor he chose, as I’ve listed below.
1. Pure silver items.

Tata acquired many stunning pieces to decorate the house in Foothills Estate. This practice seems to have started from as early as 1933. From a document by ‘Veecumsee Chabildoss & Sons’ of Madras, who are manufacturing jewellers and precious stones merchants, Tata bought pure silver items and had them shipped to Foothills Estate.

2. In a letter to Daddy dated 8 October 1963, Tata writes:

Figure 8 Order for silver ice tumbler – 9 May 1933.

Figure 9 Letter from C. Rajah to Sundararaj (copy) dated 8 October 1963.
Please find out the price of a good and thick carpet in red colour like ‘Persians’ to fit out front hall. You must select your design to your taste. [a rectangular drawing of 9 x 6 feet] ... I am not in a hurry to buy at once. Take your own sweet time and keep in mind. Also, if you happen to see a large size tray, double the size ours with wooden fancy stand and a few small brass trays fitted with wooden stands for serving tea or betelnut [sic.], sweets etc, sometimes we can sit on that [sic.] stools. The stand fitted with the brass tops with designs. I think these designs are coming from Kashmir or Delhi. I think you can try at Bombay shops in Madras. Whenever you find the chance, you can buy.

3. Here are photos of some decorative items that I have inherited, which Daddy said Tata brought with him from Foothills Estate:

![A brass tray fitted with a wooden stand.](image)

Figure 10   A brass tray fitted with a wooden stand.
Technically, Daddy was an only child. However, I grew up thinking that he was the eldest of five because Rajaram’s children (one
boy and three girls) stayed in Foothills Estate and became Daddy’s childhood playmates. Indeed, whenever there was a family photo taken at the studio, all of them ventured to take one. More often than not, this was at the same studio, using the same props in a creative manner.

For example, take the photos of Tata and Amma that were taken in 1949. A year later, a photo of my uncle and aunts was taken in the same studio. The side table where Amma leaned her elbow served as the seat for one of my aunts.

Like many parents, Daddy told me stories from his childhood to entertain me when I was a child. The first was that because he could see ghosts, he always asked his cousins to accompany him to the outhouse toilet, especially at night. There was also the story about thieves who, for no apparent reason, ran for their lives after attempting to steal the jewels adorning the idol in the temple of
Foothills Estate, leaving a crowbar behind. A man who cheated the temple committee went blind three months later. During religious festivals, many devotees would go into a trance and writhe about like a snake.

In *The Age of Smiling Secrets*, I fused these tales, let my imagination run wild and created a highly popular character, the ghost Nagakanna. Incidentally, it’s this story that’s included in the anthology showcased during the Conversation in March 2018. *The Legend of Nagakanna* reads as follows (Sundararaj 2018: 171–174):

Once upon a time, early in the twentieth century, the colonial managers of Foothills Estate picked up about fifty Tamil indentured labourers from Madras and brought them to tap rubber in the estate. They were given homes and, as their numbers grew, a community developed. In need of a place of worship, the Estate Elders commissioned a Hindu priest from Penang to help them locate a suitable place to build a temple. A party of six rubber tappers and the priest spent a month in June roaming the very depths of Foothills Estate.

On the day the Tamils call pournami, the day of the full moon, the exhausted priest decided to have a rest. He crouched down by the banks of a river, cupped his hands and scooped up some water to drink. His thirst quenched, he looked up and saw a jasmine tree in full bloom on the islet across the river. Next to the tree, a cobra raised its head and dilated the muscles of its neck to form a hood with a double chevron pattern. The snake was dancing.

The priest decided that this was a propitious moment and declared the spot a holy one. Everyone agreed that this would be the site of the new temple in Foothills Estate. Once the bridge was constructed, a temple with living quarters for the priest was built on that islet.

The kumbavishaygam, a consecration ceremony, was held soon after and repeated every twelve years. During the ceremony, the priests removed the idol from its platform and cleaned it. People entered the temple's inner
sanctum to place their hopes, prayers, dreams and offerings — gold coins, diamonds or precious stones — in the hollow below the platform. Before they put the idol back, there were continuous recitations of Sanskrit mantras for three days. Once the hollow was sealed, only the temple priest entered the inner sanctum.

In the late 1920s, on a cold August morning, the priest heard a loud clanging sound coming from inside the temple. He rushed in to see a man squatting in the middle of the hall clutching his eyes and screaming. A crowbar lay next to him. The priest pulled the man’s hands away. What the priest saw, in the light of the kerosene lamp, horrified him: there was blood streaming down the man’s cheeks and the sockets of his eyes were empty.

The priest treated his wounds and made him rest. Then, he summoned the Estate Elders. When they arrived, the man confessed that he wanted to steal the jewellery and gold in the temple. He had raised the crowbar to strike. Before he could bring it down on the idol, he had heard a hissing sound. The last words the man uttered were, ‘I saw the cobra’s fangs.’

There was worse to come because he began to run in circles, clutching his ears. He could no longer hear. No one knew his name or where he came from.

The Estate Elders gave the thief a Tamil name, Nagakanna: ‘Naga’ meaning ‘Cobra’ and ‘Kanna’ meaning ‘Eyes’. He spent the remainder of his days in the temple grounds, and the people of Foothills Estate brought him milk and eggs to eat. Within a year, Nagakanna was dead. In spirit form, Nagakanna’s sight and hearing were fully restored.

During the next kumbavishyagam ceremony, the temple priests had a fright when they discovered a cobra inside the hollow. Two intact eyeballs lay in the centre of its deadly coil. At that moment, a woman in the crowd lay face down on the floor and slithered from side to side, hissing. She was in this trance for no more than five minutes. When it was over, the temple priests looked inside
the hollow, the snake and the eyeballs had disappeared. No one knew how the snake got there and no one dared to find out. Henceforth, due reverence was given to this creature and every time there was a religious ceremony in the temple, at least one person in the crowd entered into a trance, slithered and hissed for five minutes.

In time, the children of Foothills Estate grew up, left Sungai Petani and the temple crumbled. The priest’s quarters remained, but became dilapidated. And the story of Nagakanna became a frightful legend.

By all accounts, my grandparents didn’t have the happiest of marriages. There were what I call ‘throwaway comments’ by relatives that Amma once left the house. When I asked why, no proper explanation was given and I understood that this wasn’t something people liked to talk about. From bits of information shared by my relatives, I gathered that, one day, utterly frustrated with how much water Amma used every day, Tata punished her by stopping the water supply to the Foothills Estate House. Amma left the house and when the people of the estate found her, she was standing next to well, ready to jump in. He never again said a word about this matter and she was allowed to use as much water as she wished.

It is only now, with the benefit of hindsight and compassion that I am able to guess that Amma was probably suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Without a diagnosis or available treatment at the time, it must have been very difficult for my grandparents to live with each other. Nonetheless, as was the norm, my grandparents kept up appearances and stayed married throughout their lives.

Throughout his adult life, Tata thought of Malaya (and subsequently, Malaysia) as home. As such, after the Second World War, it seemed natural for him to avail of the opportunity to become a citizen of the country where he’d now lived for close to half a century.
Figure 18  Certificate of citizenship for C. Rajah – 23 January 1951.

The handwritten copy of the Application for Citizenship (Figure 18) and the certificate of citizenship (Figure 19), mention the ‘Federation of Malaya’. This is an important phrase and provides a clue to the political backdrop of the country where Tata spent a good part of his life.

For one, when he left India in 1918, Tata ventured to what was then known as British Malaya. From 1896 to 1946, British Malaya included three polities: the protectorates of the Federated Malay States, five protected Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. The Federated Malay States (Negeri-negeri Melayu) included the four states of Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. The Unfederated Malay States (Negeri-negeri Melayu
Tidak Bersekutu) consisted of five states, namely: Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Terengganu. Incidentally, Kulim, being in the state of Kedah, came under the purview of the Unfederated Malay States. The Straits Settlements were Penang and Malacca.

After the Second World War, from 1946 to 1948, the Malayan Union was formed which combined all three polities and consisted of the nine states and two Straits Settlements.

When it was unveiled, the Malayan Union gave equal rights to people who wished to apply for citizenship. It was automatically granted to people who, among other things, ‘had lived in British Malaya or Singapore ten out of fifteen years before 15 February 1942. They also had to live in Singapore or British Malaya for five out of eight years preceding the application and be willing to take the oath of citizenship.

These were the very questions asked and the declaration made on Tata’s handwritten copy of the form for application for citizenship (Figure 1):

*Can you speak the Malay and English language with reasonable proficiency:* Yes

*Are you willing to take the citizenship oath if your application for a certificate of citizenship is approved?* Yes

*I, C. Rajah do solemnly and sincerely declare that I have resided in one or more of the territories now comprised in the Federation of Malaya for a period of not less than 31 years out of the 32 years.*

Incidentally, the citizenship proposal was never actually implemented. Due to opposition, it was postponed then modified which made it harder for many Chinese and Indian residents to obtain Malayan citizenship. Furthermore, due to opposition from Malay nationalists, the Malayan Union was disbanded in 1948 and replaced by the Federation of Malaya (Persekutuan Tanah Melayu), which restored the symbolic positions of the rulers of the
Malay states. This continued until the Federation of Malaya gained Independence from British rule in 1957.

Tata was granted citizenship on 23 January 1951. This was in time to apply to be an electorate in the only general elections before Independence in 1957. In Form A, Application to be Registered as an Elector in a State, even though decades have passed, one can sense the pride and confidence with which Tata entered the numbers ‘075654’ in the part that says, ‘*(d) I have been granted Certificate of ‘Citizenship/*State Nationality No …….;’

These elections were held in the Federation of Malaya in 1955 to elect members of the Federal Legislative Council. The members of this council would have previously been appointed by the British High Commissioner. Voting took place in fifty-two federal constituencies. State elections were also held in 136 constituencies of the nine states and two settlements.

Figure 19  Certificate of citizenship for Nagarathinam – 24 August 1958.
In 1958 (after Independence), a certificate of citizenship was issued for Amma as well, who was henceforth officially referred to as Nagarathinam; she was no longer officially known as Nagarathnammal.

For the sake of completeness, it’s prudent to add that in 1963, the independent Federation of Malaya united with the then British Crown Colonies of North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore to become Malaysia. What was previously British Malaya was henceforth known as Peninsular Malaysia. Today, Sabah and Sarawak (together with the Federal Territory of Labuan) are collectively called East Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore left to become an independent country.

Figure 20 Retirement party for C. Rajah – early 1960s.
No one knows the exact date of Tata’s retirement from his position as the Chief Clerk of Foothills Estate. Daddy said that, during the early years of his studies in India, he received a set of photographs showing the retirement party held for Tata and Amma in Foothills Estate. Since Tata would have celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday in 1960, it makes logical sense to assume that this was the date of his retirement.

Tata and Amma moved to a house in the nearby town of Bukit Mertajam. With an address of 1881, Jalan Bukit Satu, it was more commonly referred to as ‘the BM House’”. Other than the usual bedrooms and bathrooms, one of the curious things about this house – which many in the family called a cottage in the tropics – was that it had a chimney in the kitchen. I hardly ever saw this chimney being used because, as is the practice in the East, most of the cooking was done in the outdoor kitchen.
Life in retirement bumbled along pleasantly, as was clear from a particularly interesting exchange of correspondence in late 1964 between Mrs Pillay and Tata. The letter she wrote from ‘Borneo ABACA Ltd, Tawau, Sabah’ chronicles the vagaries of life
such as durians being stolen, queries as to whether or not a suitable bride has been found for ‘Thambi’ (Daddy) and the troubles caused by one Dr Chacko who took over Dr Pillay’s clinic. Tata’s reply included an account of Mrs Pillay’s son, Tamby Mani, who ‘seems to be very energetic and he is all out on planting and devoting most of his time on the estate. Now the manuring programme is going on the estate under his personal supervision’.

In 1961, Rajaram’s youngest daughter, Saroja got married and the ceremonies were held at the UMNO Hall in Penang. As a side note, UMNO is an acronym for United Malays National Organisation. Cheah (2007) writes that it was born out of the opposition by the Malays to the Malayan Union. UMNO is also the founding and the principal dominant member of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which was the main governing party of Malaysia from the time of Independence until its defeat in the general elections of 2018.

From the set of photos of Saroja’s wedding, the religious ceremony was held in the morning, with the couple dressed in traditional clothes. Their guests, friends and family who had stayed in Foothills Estate at some stage, were served lunch on
banana leaves. The reception in the evening, which was invariably held in the same place, saw the couple dressed in ‘modern’ attire with the groom wearing trousers-and-jacket. The guests, too, were now seated at tables dressed with tablecloths and there was crockery and cutlery.

Figure 26  My Parents on their wedding day (2 April 1966).

A similar thing happened when my parents got married in 1966. The photo of the religious ceremony shows Tata seated on the floor, taking part in the proceedings. Years later, after my parents had set up our home in Alor Setar, Daddy was going through his wedding photos when he pointed out a curious detail. He said that the same priest (dressed only in a veshti) who conducted the
ceremonies for his wedding, had also conducted the marriages of all three of Rajaram’s daughters that occurred from 1956 to 1966.

Tata died in 1969 and, to my surprise, was buried – most Hindus are cremated. With the passage of time, no one living now remembers the exact date or where he’s buried. Amma died in the BM House on 4 July 1989 and was cremated. For years, in spite of many offers to buy the house, Daddy refused to part with it because it didn’t seem right. Then, ten years after Amma died, a Chinese man asked to speak with him. After that conversation, Daddy readily agreed to the sale even though the price was far less than market value. As a small boy, this Chinese man grew up watching my grandparents live in the BM House and dreamed of owning it someday. When we left the BM House for the last time in 1998, together with all the tangible items, Daddy brought along all the wonderful memories of his youth and childhood spent in Foothills Estate, Kulim.

Ultimately, Tata’s legacy of life in a rubber estate in Malaya wasn’t all doom and gloom. My grandfather’s legacy was a simple one: A good and contented life included the pursuit of knowledge, cultivation and appreciation for the arts, and preservation of our culture.

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