

## Look around you in the classroom.

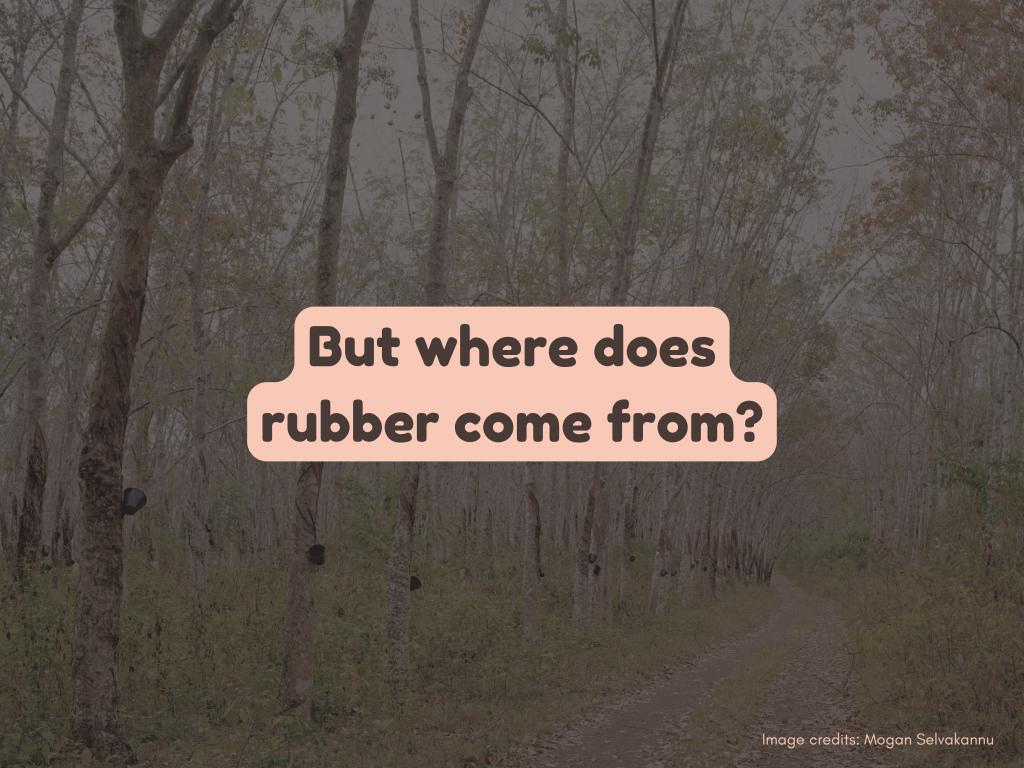
# Can you name 5 things that are made out of rubber?



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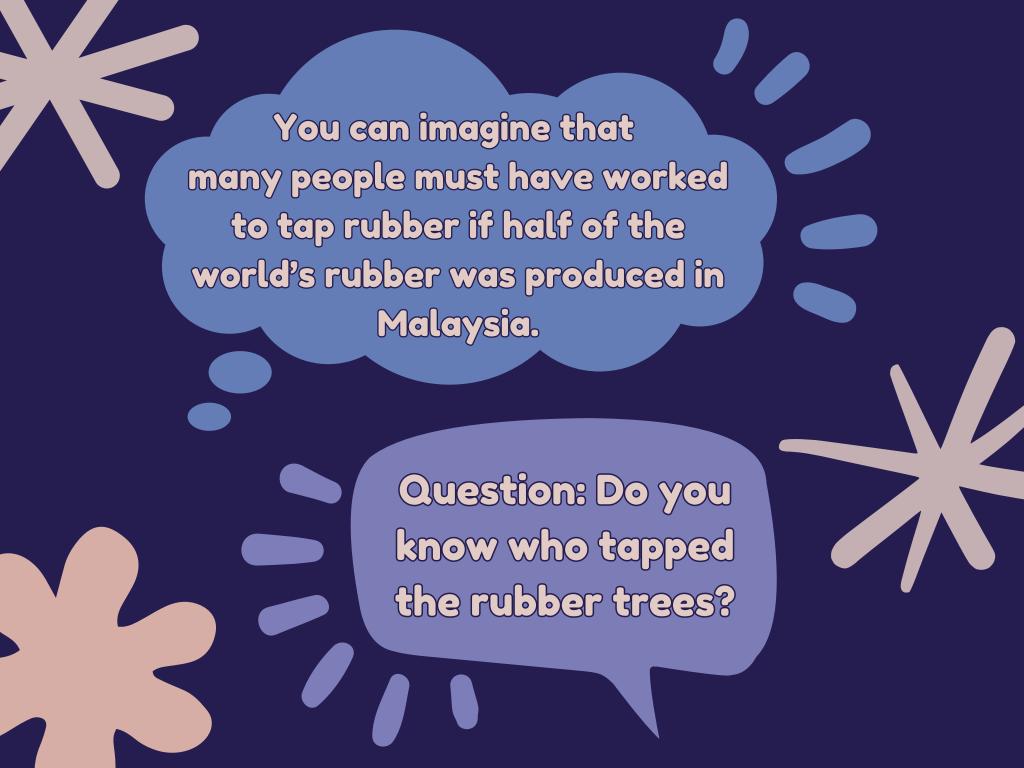
Malaysia used to be one of the main producers of rubber, with half of the world's rubber produced in the country.

But rubber is not native to Malaysia!

Question: Do you know which country rubber trees come from?

## Answer: Brazil











From the late 1700s, the British colonial government brought many people from South India to Malaysia (then called Malaya) to work as coolies on rubber plantations and in the ports.





These labourers were part of a system called indentured labour. The system was also called the kangani system. It was a violent system where people signed work contracts in exchange for travel to Malaya, food and shelter.

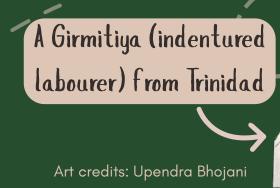
Many people who signed these contracts did so to escape poverty, which was a result of the British colonisation of India.



Life was hard for these people, both in India and in Malaya. They worked very long hours under the hot sun and pouring rain. They lived in simple houses with little comforts. They had very few rights and were treated unfairly.

Many never returned to India and stayed in Malaya, forming their own community and identity.

The same system of indentured labour was practiced in other parts of the world like Fiji, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Mauritius and Trinidad. These countries were also known as the British colonies. The people who made the difficult journeys to these countries worked on sugarcane plantations. Several people who travelled to these countries also worked as administrators in the British colonial offices and supported the British government in their rule of these colonies.



However, this was not the first time that Indians arrived on Malayan shores. South Indian rulers and traders first arrived in Malaya around the 10th century, more than 1000 years ago!



#### 10th Century

South Indian traders and rulers arrive in Malaya and engage in Indian Ocean trade



#### Chola Dynasty

Chola Empire
expands maritime
reach into
Southeast Asia



### 11th Century

Chola forces
establish political
control over parts of
the Malay Peninsula



### After 11th Century

Tamil and Hindu influences are absorbed into local Malay culture

Can you think of some Malay words that are similar to Tamil?

Let's meet one person who travelled from South India to Malaysia to work on the rubber plantation.

Sakunthalai's husband left a small village Tamil Nadu and joined hundreds of thousands of labourers who made the journey to a new life in Malaya in the early 1900s. He was promised a work permit and adequate wages to pay off his debt within 10 years. When 18-year-old Sakunthalai did not hear from him through her relatives who had made the journey before him, she packed what little she had with her three young children and boarded the boat to Malaya to escape the famine in her village.

In Malaya, Sakunthalai worked as a rubber tapper in a plantation in Kedah. Though she was never reunited with her husband, she was determined to work hard and bring up her children all by herself.



She began working between the hours of 2 am and 5 am, navigating the uneven terrain in darkness with a head light and a fellow female rubber tapper for company. She worked tirelessly, cutting precise incisions into the rubber tree with a steady hand to not injure the tree. When the repetition bored her, she sang songs to herself and dreamt up stories to tell her children.

Then, she returned in the afternoon to collect the congealed latex in buckets strapped behind her back. The weight of the latex determined Sakunthalai's weekly wages. Sakunthalai and her friend worked just as hard as any of the male labourers, and yet their wages were lower than their male counterparts. Aside from working in the plantation, they needed to rush home in time to cook and tend to their children, while the men congregated in the toddy shop and drank away their fatigue. Without the protection of a husband, Sakunthalai lived a quiet life to avoid unnecessary attention. She kept her head down and children close when

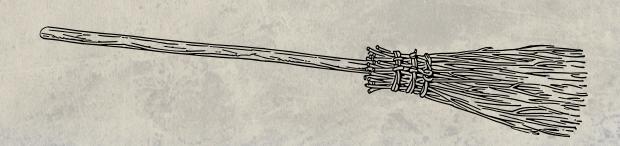
white masters visited the plantation.

At night, under the light of a small kerosene lamp, she made brooms out of branches that she collected with the help of her children; these, her children would sell around the



village for extra income. This was her favourite part of the day, conjuring up stories about big houses and orchards while splitting the branches evenly.

Her children tied knots around the sticks with rope while dreaming their own little dreams about sweet snacks and toys they couldn't afford.



She made sure her children went to the estate school so they could learn to read and write. She refused to let them be illiterates, like her. It thrilled her to hear them learn English words in school. Even after her children grew up and landed government jobs, Sakunthalai tapped rubber till the end of her days to raise her grandchildren and offer them small luxuries. She told the same stories to her grandchildren, even in her old age when her memory was beginning to fade. It was her favourite part of the day, after all; under the light of a small lamp, three generations shared their dreams and joys. What remains of her legacy now are the protective gold hip-chains, arnaakodi, that she had gifted each of her grandchildren,

and the stories they remember her by.

## Imagine you are Sakunthalai.

What would life have looked like when you arrived?

What kind of environment would you have been living in?

What are the things you would have brought with you on your travels?

How do you think she would have felt?

Discuss these questions with your teacher and write a short poem describing your experience together with your class.

## Now let's look at some folk songs that Malaysian Indian scholars like Dr R. Thandayutham and Enbah Nilah Sugurmar have gathered and translated for us to remember.

#### மலேசிய நாட்டுப்புற பாடல்கள்

ஆட்டு மாட்டு மந்தையைப் போல ஆங்கிலேயர்களும் நம்மை கூட்டில் அடைத்து வைத்து கொடுமைகள் செய்கின்றாரே

கரும்பு தோட்டத்திலே -- நம் இந்தியரை கூலியெனும் பெயர் கொடுத்து கொண்டுபோறார் பதிவு செய்ய ரயில்ல ஏத்தி

கஷ்டப் பட்டோமே பத்து வெள்ளி தான் கொடுத்து ரயில்ல ஏத்தினான் சேலை பேனு சொறி சிரங்கு -- நாங்க நொந்து வாழறோம்

#### <u>Yet, we persist</u>

No different from herding goats and cattle, the English cage us, and abuse us.

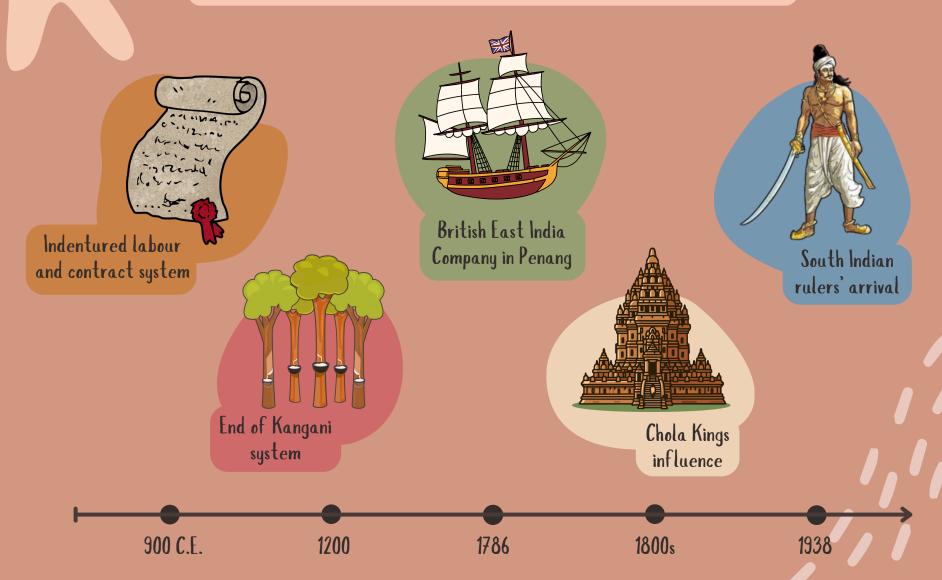
In the sugarcane plantations, we, the Indians, are renamed coolies, flocked into trains, then, taken to be branded.

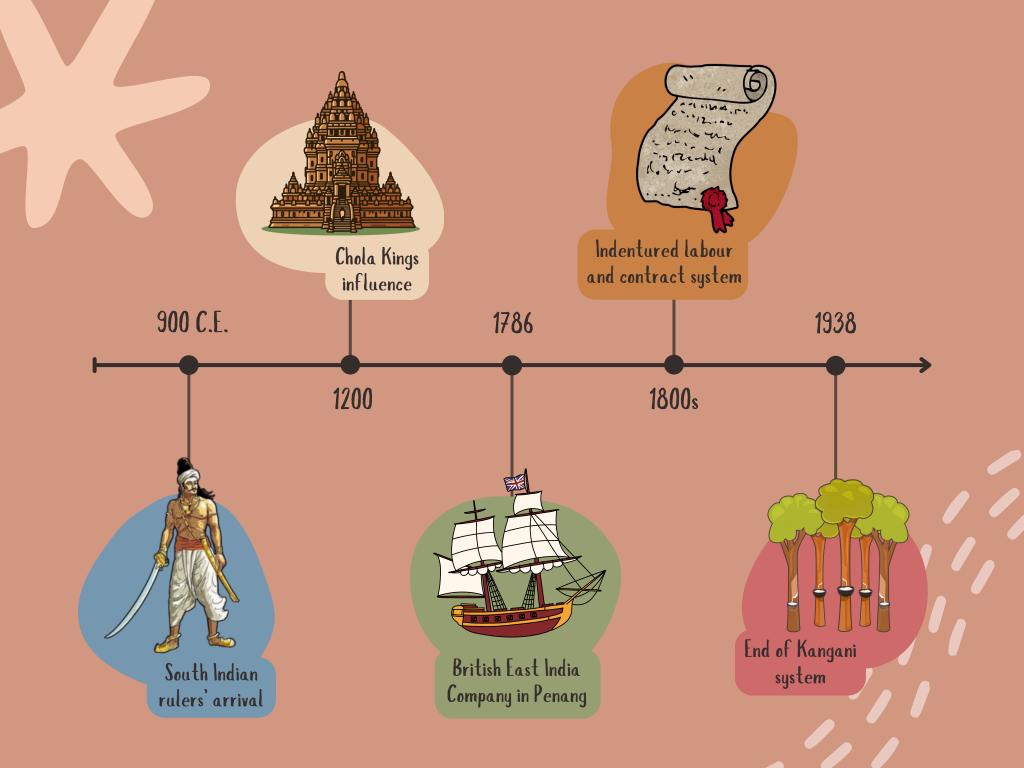
They paid only ten coins, the price of our agony, then rounded us up on trains. Lice in our clothes, itching scabies-yet we persist painfully.

## Is your class poem similar to these? What are some things that your class wrote about that are different?

You've learned about how South Indian people arrived in Malaya, and the role they have played in shaping culture today.

Rearrange the following images to build a timeline.





Think of your life today.

Are there any similarities to life during British colonisation?

Now listen to these three stories of Malaysian Indian women today by clicking on the speech bubbles.



Can you find three things that are similar to Sakunthalai's life?

You have come to the end of your lesson today understanding how legacies of colonialism are still present in our lives today. What wishes do you have for yourself and your classmates as you grow up?



For your homework, draw a picture based on these wishes and share what you have learnt with your loved ones. If they have a mobile phone or computer, ask them to explore the website above with you.

Dear teachers,

Thank you for downloading this resource! We hope this was a fun teaching experience for you and your class.

Here are some additional resources to support your exploration of the topic.

- 1. Lost melodies from the plantations
- 2. Skeletons of Empire
- 3. Tamils of Singapore & Tamil Nadu

Please do get in touch with us to share your classroom experiences. We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes, Dr Geetha Reddy, Dr Nithiya Guna Saigaran, Enbah Nilah Sugurmar, Leia Ariin Gomez