

Estate Chronicle: Doubled-tapping for rainy days

By [Ravindran Raman Kutty](#) - February 5, 2023 @ 8:00am



If the Standard Malaysian Rubber price was high, the estate management would ask workers to do ‘rendu vettu’, which means tapping two plots of rubber trees in one day. It was an opportunity to fill the workers’ pockets, at times gratefully heavier than usual.

FILE PIC



Those days, my parents and their fellow rubber tappers received wages on a daily basis. The more you tapped, the more you were paid.

When the clouds were kind, the rubber tappers had work, meaning they had money. When the monsoon arrived, the tapping knives had to stop carving into trees, and tappers began despairing.

The rainy weather was a bother. You could not tap rubber when the trees were wet. The latex would be heavily diluted by the rainwater and lose its sap; thus the rubber would become worthless.

The estate workers would always pray for sunshine, especially in the early mornings. If it was school holidays, that was a bonus because the children could be roped in to work, and perhaps earn more for the day.

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On the other hand, we, the children, would pray for the opposite. If it rained in the early morning during our school breaks, we would be able to enjoy an hour or two more of sweet slumber, as the morning shower would halt tapping for the day.

I, for one, would pray extra hard for rain in the morning — I was too young to understand income and expenditure, but old enough to know that sweet dreams should not be interrupted!



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Occasionally, the estate management would study the price of rubber; if the Standard Malaysian Rubber (SMR) price was high, then they would request the workers to do *rendu vettu*, or double-tapping. This simply meant that every tapper would tap two plots of rubber trees in one day.

One *rendu vettu* could substitute one rainy day's leave. Each lot had 500 trees, so two lots would mean 1,000 trees to tap in a day.

The roll call for *rendu vettu* was around 3am. Roll call was a time when the workers' attendance was noted by estate field conductors.

On the day of a *rendu vettu*, my parents would be up before 3am. My elder sister would also be up preparing breakfast.

Those of us who were attending morning school would wake up at 5am, get ready and leave for school, then go to the field immediately after school at 2pm to help with the tapping.

Those in afternoon school would also be up to tag along with our parents to the field as early as 3am, and tap rubber till it was time to take our leave for school.

However, if it was during the school holidays, then all of us would be up with our parents when the skies were still dark before filling our tummies with a good breakfast and making our way to the fields. It was really dark in the wee hours.

Sometimes the bright moonlight lit our way, but we would still need a kerosene headlamp or carbide lamp tied to our forehead to start the tapping as early as 3.30am or 4am.

In the midst of making our way to the fields and while tapping rubber trees, we had to be cautious to avoid encounters with the estate wildlife.

Rubber estates were well known for their snakes, centipedes, wild boars, civets and several types of birds.

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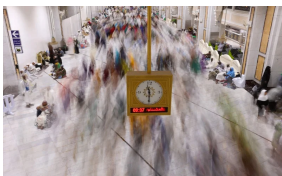
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Although I had never heard of any early morning snakebites in our estate, I was a victim of a bite once, as was my cousin Sam. Fortunately, we both survived.

Well, that was in another place at another time for another story.

From afar, in the dark and cold morning, among the tall rubber trees, you would see lights moving in the air; hardworking tappers rushing to catch up with their 1,000-tree deadline for the day.

The tapping of the first 500 trees, or rather the first lot, would be completed by 9am. Once the plot had been tapped, my parents would move to the next plot, leaving me and my brothers and sisters to collect the latex from 500 cups.

We would fill up the latex containers within two hours. The latex in containers would then be sent to the estate store to be weighed and checked for viscosity — their thickness and fluid consistency.

Once the process was completed, either my brother or I would wash the containers and rush back to the second plot on my father's bicycle. The second plot of 500 trees would have its tapping completed by noon.

Once done, we would all sit down and share some bread or dhosai to reduce our hunger pangs, and quench our thirst with bottles of cold rice water.

This salted rice water was refrigerated by the rubber tree breeze; it tasted better than any juice in the world. I really do miss it till today.

After a quick bite and short rest, we would all resume the task of collecting the latex from the second lot of rubber trees. Once completed, the collection would again be transported to the store.

This time, my siblings and I would head home, while my parents would take the latex to the store for the same process of weighing and checking its viscosity. They would be home by 5pm at the latest.

Exhausted was too simple a word to describe how we felt after a long day. We would get home, have a good cool bath, and then sit down together to a fantastically delicious dinner prepared by my sister.

We would just enjoy the meal and eat to glory, without the slightest care of dieting or putting on weight; the only thing on our minds was to tuck into the maximum!

Monsoons were really tough for every tapper household.

Salaries would be halved or even lesser than that. Our home was no exception. My parents would worry each day the heavens sent down showers of rain instead of sunshine.

Hence, *rendu vettu* or double tapping, although disliked by me and my siblings, was never a time to complain about.

This was an opportunity to fill my parents' pockets, at times gratefully heavier than usual, and simultaneously ensure that our tummies are filled with food, and our home with happiness and contentment.

Till today, *rendu vettu's* long hours of toil and sweat may be a frightening thought, yet it was a unique and rare experience in any vocation.

Once again, a toast to my days at the estate — it was only there that such experiences were found, and such unforgettable memories were formed.



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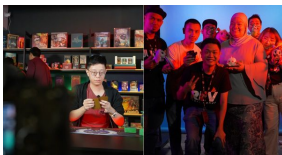
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