

Stereotypes of labour ingrained in visual art

A section captures migrant Tamil labourers

**EXHIBITION
ON LABOUR**

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PUDUCHERRY: What do illustrated school charts and company paintings commissioned in colonial times have in common?

Going by the visual-cum-text exhibition by the Indology Department at the French Institute of Puducherry, they do share a common thread. While one belongs to the 21st century and the other harks back to the 18th century, but both are testaments of stereotyping labour in art.

With examples of school charts listing occupations and photographs and 'company paintings' - called so as they were works commissioned by the English East India Company and other foreign companies - the exhibit exposes flaws in representation of labour down the ages.

The images focus on the dress and generally depict the labourer as a man accompanied by his wife. The company paintings have



Viewers at the exhibition at Indology Department, French Institute of Puducherry on Friday. — PHOTO: G. KRISHNASWAMY

catalogued various occupations including an oil seller, washerman, astrologer, butcher, basket weaver and snake charmer. The emphasis rarely focuses on the process of labour.

"Even when technology took a leap and photographs were commissioned instead of paintings, the scope of actually capturing the worker in action was missed out," says Senthil, a researcher. The second section of the display focuses on migration of Tamil labourers to

Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia, South Africa and Fiji, amply explained through photographs of labourers working in tea plantations, sugar cane farms, coffee gardens and rubber plantations. This section interestingly juxtaposes two perspectives on migration to an alien land - as a lament when a labourer leaves home (through Bharathiar's poems) and as a pathway to liberation from fetters like caste and forced marriage.