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Indians on the Plantation Frontier of British Malaya

Anonymous

Introduction

British colonial rule played a critical role in creating and sustaining divisions within the multi-ethnic fabric of Malaysian society. British control over the nation through emphasis on the Malay character resulted in racism entrenching itself in the legal fabric of the independent nation-state, its legacy persisting through Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia. Apart from the 'safeguarding' of the 'special' positions of Malays, this clause expounds on the establishment of quotas within the civil service, public education and public scholarships; the discussion of its repeal being illegal.[1] Fundamentally, the roots of these 'affirmative actions' lie in the legal fiction of Malay supremacy fuelled by the British to exclude Indians and Chinese from effective power. Thus, 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' in many ways echoes the appeal by minorities in Malaysia for equality, albeit within divergent contexts.

Against this backdrop, the relevance of this study on the plight of Malaysian Indians lies in its ability to provoke a rethink on the relationship between architecture and power in response to the 'Call to Action' and its endeavour to equalise and diversify the curriculum. As part of a Masters dissertation, this exploration of colonisation and the making of "race" offers an alternative perspective of the relationship between architecture and colonialism; architecture taking on a broader social meaning in place of the outdated outlook predominantly taught. Essentially, it explores racism as the foundation of the built environment

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and the role of colonialism in this process, reinforcing intersectionality and acknowledging the diverse range of lived experiences often unrepresented in mainstream architectural education.

Prologue

In Malaysian society, race is a fundamental organising principle, a signifier of difference and an ascribed identity. At birth, one's race is determined as 'Malay', 'Chinese', 'Indian' or 'Other', inscribed on one's birth certificate and eventually on an identity card – an unchangeable aspect of identity.[2] Critically, its foundations lie in the political economy of British colonial rule in the region and its influence in the postcolonial imagining of the nation continues to reverberate in the repeated articulation of race as a reliable category of difference.

As a Malaysian of Indian descent, I seek to investigate the notion of race in relation to space, and their intertwined aspects from a perspective often overlooked in contemporary discourses on discrimination. Since the built environment is inevitably shaped by bodies of knowledge and philosophy, an appreciation for the complex microhistories that influence the knowledge of such bases is fundamental. In many ways, this essay's nuanced exploration of race rooted in the structuring of the colonial economy urges one to interrogate the often unacknowledged impact that racism has on the creation of place and space – imploring a rethink on our understandings of architecture and the legacy of colonisation.

Indians on the Plantation Frontier of British Malaya

Malaya's pivotal position along the shortest sea-route between India and China has made it, since ancient times, an arena for conflicting foreign interests, each leaving an indelible influence on its history. Diffusion of Indian culture in the region led to the flourishing of Indianised kingdoms, reaching their zenith with the Malacca Sultanate (A.D. 1400-1511).[3] The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in the early sixteenth century marked the emergence of colonial control in the region; a period that would last over four centuries; comprised predominantly of British dominion.[4] The unparalleled transformative process of Malaya from jungle into highly developed agricultural landscape during the British colonial era stands as a reminder of the contributions of Indians to the nation. (The term Malaya will be used throughout instead of Malaysia to denote the pre-independence focus that this narrative emphasises.)

In present-day Malaysia, categories of race and naming – whilst losing their salience on the ground – continue to be mobilised by the state as a lens to view society.[5] Escalating tensions challenge the country's paradigm

1 Article 153 – Special Position of Bumiputras and Legitimate Interests of Other Communities 1957 (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Part .XII), (Malaysia: The Commissioner of Law Revision, 2006), p.142.

2 Sharmani P. Gabriel, 'The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-colonial and Possible New Conjunctures', Ethnicities, 15.6 (London: SAGE, 2015), pp.782-809 (p.783).

3 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.2.

4 Sandhu.

5 Sharmani P. Gabriel, 'The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-colonial and Possible New Conjunctures', Ethnicities, 15.6 (London: SAGE, 2015), pp.782-809 (p.782)

of pluralism, generating space for critical reflection on the meaning of race and its foundations in British colonialism. At the forefront of these conflicts lies the country's large Indian minority – their beginnings characterised by large scale migration to the region in the 1900s as crucial components of the plantation economy.[6] The remnants of a system deeply rooted in colonial policy and the manufacturing of racial perceptions continues to echo in new tragedies – their contributions now largely forgotten.

References to the nation's 2 million Indians (or 7% of the population) as 'immigrants', 'squatters' or even 'trespassers' demonstrate their unchanging and unchangeable historical identities; distancing minorities from their national-cultural identity as Malaysians.[7] Existing precariously at the juncture between old empire and new state, they resemble victims of colonialism and nationalism. The former plantation community grapples with issues of broken families, single mothers, addiction, violence, gangsterism and hopelessness.[8] Systemic oppression and racism that plague the region have resulted in this community finding itself on the margins of society – opportunities for legitimate success and upward mobility being scarce.

Evidently, the categorisation of citizens by their ethnic origins has made them immigrants in their own homeland – a constant reminder of their presence in Malaysia but not of Malaysia. Several generations later, the predicament of this diasporic community recalls that of their immigrant forefathers who found themselves 'unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, [and] rejected by the established order.'[9] The synonymity of Indian identity with rubber plantations is a poignant reminder of an unshakeable past that continues to define perception, policy and urbanism in the Malay peninsula. My initial investigation of rubber plantations as the seat of Indian life and agency establishes a crucial link in understanding the origins of Malaysian-Indian identity and its formation.

An analysis of four pivotal facets of Indian engagement in the plantation economy underpins the approach to understanding the intricacies of this theme, based on historical research and archival materials complemented by oral histories. Drawing upon Ravindra K. Jain, who asserts that the plantation was a 'total institution' – the lives of Indians defined by its boundaries,[10] my masters thesis explored the establishment of rubber estates and labour recruitment (which I have entitled 'Establishment of Space'); the study proceeds to explore the shifting status of labourers ('Transition in Space'), their confinement within the estate domain ('Confinement within Space') and concludes with the decline in the rubber industry and post-independence dissolution of estates ('Dissolution of Space'). This essay will delve into a more focused analysis of the critical relationship between the colonial economy and race through the lens

6 Kernial Singh Sandhu and A. Mani, Indian Communities in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p.162.

7 Sharmani P. Gabriel, 'The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-colonial and Possible New Conjunctures', Ethnicities, 15.6 (London: SAGE, 2015), pp.782-809 (p.800).

8 Dashini Jeyathurai, 'Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories: The Malaysian-Indian Estate Girl', The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 47.3 (London: SAGE, 2012), pp. 303-323 (p.305); Edward Wadie Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.402.

9 Edward Wadie Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.402.

10 Clarence E.Glick, review of South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya, by Ravindra K.Jain, Journal of the American Oriental Society, 93.2 (Ann Arbor: American Oriental Society, 1973), pp.252-253, p.252.

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of rubber plantations, offering a nuanced perspective on race from the complex microhistories of colonialism.

Rubber Estates

Indian overseas migration to Malaya was a phenomenon that predated the period of colonial rule in the region, evidenced by the unmistakable similarity between Malay culture and that of ancient India.[11] Nevertheless, colonisation can be perceived as an inevitable force that caused a shift in patterns of migration and to the demographics of groups of migrants. The Industrial Revolution coupled with the advent of large scale manufacturing in Britain drew attention to the prospect of exploiting colonies as sources of raw materials.[12]

Colonial attraction to the soils of Malaya as a source of revenue catalysed the development of the plantation economy in the region, leading to the establishment of rubber estates across the peninsula. Symbolically, this marks the emergence of settlements comprised predominantly of Indians who laboured on these plantations; their manual labour sowing the seeds of prosperity for the British Empire. The flourishing of these rubber estates will be analysed in conjunction with the plantation economy as its impetus and patterns of labour recruitment that followed while delving into concepts of racial perception throughout.

Stemming from the colonial state's active encouragement to exploit the lands, rubber estates began to proliferate in the Malayan landscape from the late 1800s.[13] Plantations, often located in the depths of the hinterlands as a response to environmental conditions and transportation links, resemble capitalist production nodes; they were industrialised in both form and function. In contrast to the largely dispersed and sprawling settlements of indigenous communities, Indian settlements are and have been significantly nucleated – a direct consequence of a system that divided labour along racial lines.[14] Patterns of settlement were spatialised based on convenience (labourers grouped in dwellings closely situated to staff quarters and offices) and have remained largely unchallenged since its inception; further accentuated by resettlement programmes during the Malayan Emergency on the pretext of security.

Tracing these striking patterns of nucleated settlements suggests a connection to the traditionally nucleated villages of India from where labourers originally migrated – a re-enactment of spatial occupation transcending space and time. Regardless, this pattern of settlement remains predominantly within the confines of the rubber estates whilst urban centres are laid out with little or no resemblance to the traditional town patterns of India.[15] Essentially, these urban spaces were set out as centres of administration and the gathering of goods for export – the

11 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.297.

12 Richard B. Sheridan, 'The Plantation Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, 1625-1775', Caribbean Studies, 9.3, (Washington: Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1969), pp.5-25, p.7.

13 J. Thomas Lindblad, Foreign Investment in Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 47.

14 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.218.

15 Sandhu, p.219.

state and its peoples reduced to a commodity and patterns of habitation designed to elicit control.

Inevitably, the plantation economy necessitated the acquisition of cheap land. Often such lands were in isolated frontier areas, spatially and socially segregated from urban centres and the mining settlements of Chinese communities – a transformation of virgin jungle into ethnically homogenous clusters.[16] To this end, the plantation became the 'boundary of existence' for the Indian worker – trapped in a cycle of dependency and poverty.[17]

The Plantation Economy

Malaya as a land suited to the development of crops paved the path for its unforeseen economic prosperity, albeit at the expense of the colonised. Kernial Singh Sandhu, author of Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957, affirms the shift of focus to the soils of colonies, stating that 'their thoughts thus turned, quite naturally, to the soil as an outlet of their surplus capital'.[18] Perceptions of Malaya by officials as an 'undeveloped estate' essentially fuelled the process of land acquisition for plantations – exacerbated by the gifting of land to pioneers.[19] Ultimately, the "gifting" of "colonised" land exemplifies colonial conceptions of superiority and authority over their subjects, reaffirming the "civilising" role of colonisation.

Commercial agriculture took precedence over other forms of enterprise, bolstered by fears of depleting tin supplies, the primary source of dependence thus far. It is this active encouragement that created a favourable climate for the capital from within and beyond the country to flow into commercial agriculture. Robert Home aptly attributes the establishment of the British Empire through the 'planting' of colonies' – a notion reinforced by previous references to the Colonial Office as the Board of Plantations.[20]

Under these circumstances, the cultivation of crops such as spices, pepper, sugar and coffee were soon overtaken by rubber – a consequence of the rubber rush of the 1900s.[21] Land in Malaya's countryside was swiftly reclaimed by a plethora of companies and individual planters seeking the fortunes offered by the "white gold". In this regard, Malaya's landscape and its peoples were perceived as nothing more than a resource to be exploited – the profits flowing to the treasury of the Empire.

16 Alec Gordon, 'Towards a Model of Asian Plantation Systems', Journal of Contemporary Asia, 31.3 (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001), pp.306-330 (p.319).

17 Amarjit Kaur, Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s, ed. by Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Boston: BRILL, 2011), p. 164.

18 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.48.

19 Jack Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, Africa and the Victorians (London: Macmillan and Company, 1961), p.396.

20 Robert K. Home, Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities (London: Spon, 1997), p.12.

21 G.D. Babcock, History of the United States Rubber Company (Indiana: Indiana University, 1966), p. 419.

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The Labour Gap

Fundamentally, the lack of labour-saving mechanical equipment necessitated the employment of gangs of labourers to perform the simple and repetitive tasks involved with rubber cultivation.[22] Calling almost exclusively for unskilled workers, the climate of the peninsula allowed for year-round growing requiring a constant high demand for labour throughout the year with nominal change to the workload. Owing to the training period of at least a year before a labourer could be productive, it was envisaged that a labourer should stay on a plantation for at least several years or ideally for the rest of their life.[23] As natives and 'owners of the soil,' the indigenous Malays were seen as a group less inclined to work fixed hours of the labour day – appearing content with their self-subsistent rural lifestyle – thus discouraging their involvement in the plantation economy.[24] Such circumstances inevitably contributed to the necessity to turn to immigrant labour.

Whilst African slave labour had been abolished by the early 1800s, white labour was an unimaginable concept since 'they would insist on decent wage standards'.[25] Ultimately, the prestige of the Europeans had to be upkept, hence their involvement in the agricultural economy as common labourers was inconceivable. Upon assessing various sources of potential labour, the Indian became indispensable – particularly the South Indian peasant who, according to some of the accounts that Sandhu uncovers, was 'malleable, worked well under supervision and was easily manageable'.[26] Colonial attitudes towards this specific demographic coupled with their low standard of living in the motherland secured a source of labour deprived of self-respect, designating their place in society. Beyond the realm of economics, Indian immigration into Malaya can also be viewed as a desirable political move to counterbalance the growing Chinese influence in the region – ensuring British interests throughout.

Intrinsically, the impoverishment of the poorer classes of the Madras Presidency by British imperialism left peasants and artisans desperate to earn a livelihood and inclined to accept risks associated with temporary migration to foreign lands.[27] Essentially, 'the labourers were recruited from areas where the destruction of local industry, famines or political unrest had led to widespread hardship', providing an easily manipulated resource for the colonial state to exploit.[28]

Poverty and desperation in rural colonial India becomes an apparatus to stimulate a mass migration – a legacy of lives bound in servitude to the Empire. A community, largely from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, characterised by their lowest rank in the discriminatory caste system of the subcontinent was perceived to be appropriately suited to labour with little resistance to migrating under the pretext of a better future. Sandhu succinctly describes this as the imperative to ensure a copious flow of

22 Committee on Work on Plantations, Basic Problems of Plantation Labour (Geneva, International Labour Organisation, 1950), p.25.

23 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.52.

24 Sandhu.

25 Sandhu, p.53.

26 Kernial Singh Sandhu and A. Mani, Indian Communities in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Times Academic Press and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p.152.

27 Michael Roger Stenson, Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p.17.

28 Michael Roger Stenson, Industrial Conflict in Malaya (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.1-2.

Figure 1: A group of labourers sowing rubber seeds circa 1905. Extensive manual labour was a crucial component in the 'success' of the plantation economy in extracting profits through exploitative processes. Photo: Public Domain, Leiden University. https://picryl.com/media/kitlv-101110-kleingrothe-cj-medan-seed-beds-of-a-rubber-plantation-in-sumatra-3fa3f8 [accessed 23 September 2021]

labour – of cheap labour that can sustain the development of British Malaya, 'a death trap yawning to engulf the surplus population of India.'[29]

However, existing patterns of communal living within isolated villages scattered across South India would serve as a challenge in this process – generating a reluctance to surrender familiarity in exchange for uncertainty. Colonial policy on both Indian and Malayan governments aimed at encouraging migration would nonetheless soon materialise the expected mass movement of labour – setting the scene for the inevitable proliferation of rubber estates across the peninsula.[30] Accordingly, propaganda to project a favourable image of Malaya in the minds of potential South Indian labour was intensified; Malaya being referred to as 'the land of opportunity and plenty' in various South Indian languages.[31] Such pressures of recruitment and inducement applied at appropriate psychological moments in the context of dire poverty in rural South India successfully overcame the non-existence of migratory mobility in the Indian peasantry – fuelling the Imperial economy across every stage.[32] Ultimately, this unlimited labour supply would be its own downfall; the Indian labourer having 'neither value nor price'.[33]

29 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.60.

30 Sandhu.

31 Sandhu, p.62.

32 Lanka Sundaram, International Aspects of Indian Emigration (London: East and West, 1930), p.4.

33 K.A. Neelakandha Aiyer, Indian Problems in Malaya: A Brief Survey in Relation to Emigration (Kuala Lumpur: Indian Office, 1938), p.61.

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34 Ravindra K. Jain, 'Tamilian Labour and Malayan Plantations, 1840-1938', Economic and Political Weekly, 28.43 (India: Sameeksha Trust, 1993), pp.2363-2370 (p.2364).

35 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.85.

36 Alec Gordon, 'Towards a Model of Asian Plantation Systems', Journal of Contemporary Asia, 31.3 (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001), pp.306-330 (p.315).

37 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.86.

38 Ravindra K. Jain, 'Tamilian Labour and Malayan Plantations, 1840-1938', Economic and Political Weekly, 28.43 (India: Sameeksha Trust, 1993), pp.2363-2370 (p.2365).

Figure 2: The rubber plantations of British Malaya became the place where the Indian working class grew up, received education, laboured, reproduced and died - completing the cycle of life within the plantation confines. Public Domain, from the British Library's collections, 2013. https://picryl.com/media/image-taken-from-page-101-of-camping-and-tramping-in-malaya-fifteen-years-pioneering-242c7f [accessed 18 October 2021

Employment

Labour recruitment in the early phase was primarily through indenture, a system akin to slavery wherein labourers serve their employers for a fixed period paying off the debt of immigration costs.[34] Indenture can be viewed as the bargaining away of a labourer's personal freedom for an extended period – the agreement renewed only if the worker is still productive or terminated if they were not. Whilst slavery had infamy written upon its terminology, indenture was a system that disguised itself whilst emulating the worst abuses of its predecessor, slavery. Such systems not only served the economic motives of the Empire but more importantly they restrained labourers from acquiring social mobility. A labourer needed their employer's permission to change employer and any attempt at absconding was a 'crime' which would need to be paid off in the form of unpaid work.[35] Other infractions including the 'lack of proper respect' for an employer or 'failure to work diligently' were punishable by means such as flogging, clearly indicating the inhumane treatment of labourers, seen as unworthy of dignity.[36]

Employers' abilities to extend the labourer's period of indenture and exceedingly low wages would soon result in resentment towards their employment in the land of fortunes, tales of their suffering in Malaya filtering back to India. Britain's Anti-Slavery Society's efforts bore fruit in 1910 when indentured labour was officially abolished; its replacement being the kangani system.[37] In this system, a kangani, or headman, on behalf of his employer, recruited labour from his village in the Indian subcontinent – the labourer having confidence in his master due to their shared lived experiences, crucial in expediting labour recruitment.[38] Nonetheless, this system was only a variant of the indenture system since the debt (and thus the labourer) would be sold to a planter, illustrating the unmistakable forced nature of labour recruitment in rubber plantations. Such forms of employment thus bound labourers in a cycle of debt and servitude to the Empire; their freedom assured only upon the clearance of their debt. Critically, these aspects of bondage and servitude that exemplify the plantation economy were indispensable in sustaining the Empire.

Labour force

Until the 1920s, the labour force was predominantly comprised of males – married men discouraged from emigrating due to low wages and unsuitable conditions on the plantation frontier for families.[39] Changes in policy, however, caused a marked shift in immigration patterns with women entering the labour force. Significantly, this marks the point at which the rubber estate morphs from a workplace to a microcosm of Indian existence in Malaya. The transitioning form of estates through the lens of the status of labourers was defined by colonial policy and the

Figure 3: A gateway into a rubber estate with a welcome notice to India's first Prime Minister. These gateways and fences symbolically demarcated the extent of the labourer's existence in Malaya. Photo: Author's family archives, circa 1950.

navigation of emergent hierarchies. Ultimately, changing policies on the pretence of ensuring a more settled population of Indians exemplifies the essence of the existence, reproduction and replenishment of bonded labour within the plantation economy, under capitalist conditions.

Post-independence pressures from the plantation capital to rationalise production through mechanisation and the sales of estates by departing European companies essentially made Indian labour redundant in the rubber industry.[40] Alienated, fractured and marginalised, these powerless workers were expelled into urban slums with little compensation and scarce government support.[41] The repressive weapons of imperialism, capitalism and racism forced this ex-estate labouring community to eke out a living on the periphery of the informal economy – hardship, depression and despair synonymous with their existence. Their unequal partnership in the new nation was reflected in policies that alienated minorities from a share in the nation's economic prosperity – their constitutional legitimacy effectively curbed.

Escalating racial tensions and the riots that ensued in 1969 marked the point at which policies to promote greater equity and participation in the country's development were drafted.[42] Ultimately, this took the form of the controversial New Economic Policy of 1971, a socio-economic restructuring of society by invoking the inalienable rights of Malays as 'sons of soil'.[43] Evidently, the institutionalised segregation of the colonial state was replicated by the postcolonial government – a reproduction of the same harmful systems that the independence movement allegedly resisted. Ultimately, inequality was the price that minorities had to pay for a stake in the country that they contributed phenomenally to – its legacy echoing across generations.

> ' The idea of race is a situational imperative; if it is not there to begin with, it tends to develop in a plantation society because it is a useful, maybe even necessary, principle of control.' [44]

Colonial rule inevitably brought with it European racial theory, especially within the context of a racialised labour force. Charles Hirschman, author of the article 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology', argues that distinction in skin pigmentation, initial cultural differences and belief systems played a lesser role than institutional systems of exploitation requiring ideological justification in the construct of race.[45] Prior to British colonisation, racial constructs may have centred on ethnocentrism, the belief of superiority of one's own peoples and culture, instead of a racial ideology of inherent differences. Crucially, the former permits absorption whilst the latter demarcates caste lines – evidenced by intermarriage that demonstrates the relative openness of ethnic relations prior to British rule.[46] European images of Asian peoples and their consequent effect on inter-ethnic relationships can

39 Kernial Singh Sandhu, Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.82.

40 Viswanathan Selvaratnam, 'From Servitude to Underclass: The Empire's South Indian 'Coolies' in Postcolonial Malaysia', Economic & Political Weekly, 59.18 (Mumbai: Athena Information Solutions Pvt. Ltd., 2021), pp.43-50 (p.48).

41 Selvaratnam.

42 Sharmani P. Gabriel, 'The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-colonial and Possible New Conjunctures', Ethnicities, 15.6 (London: SAGE, 2015), pp.782-809 (p.792).

43 Daniel P. S. Goh, 'Arrested Multiculturalisms: Race, Capitalism, and State Formation in Malaysia and Singapore'. In Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth: Comparative Perspectives on Theory and Practice, ed. by Richard T. Ashcroft and Mark Bevir, 1st ed. (California: University of California Press, 2019), pp.191–211 (p.202).

44 Edgar Tristram Thompson, 'The Plantation as a Race Making Situation'. In Plantation Societies, Race Relations, and the South: The Regimentation of

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thus be seen as a justification to spread and maintain colonial rule in the region.

Conclusion

"Race" is not inherently natural but rather a construct; a social and political mechanism by which imperial capital established and maintained its authority in the colonial state. Despite Malaya having gained independence from the British in 1957, persisting concepts of race and division continue to impact the lives of minority communities in the region. Ultimately narratives of a "plural" society were devised for the systematic extraction of profit from the exploitation of migrant labour whilst the built environment of the colonial era was reorganised to accentuate racial divergences.

Segregation of the region's population into distinct spatial environments based on ethnicity ultimately shaped Malaya's social and economic geography – one defined by partition and separation. Crucially, the colonial plantation system had the power to confine the region's Indian community within specific territorial units – its identity erasure exemplified through the dissolution of estates. A century of manual labour that changed the fortunes of the country may now be forgotten but for every Indian labourer who succeeded in rising to the ranks of petty capitalist or professional, this legacy lives on. Essentially, the meaning of race takes different forms in varying cultural and social contexts, thus appreciating these complex histories provokes a rethink on the power structures and colonial constructs that continue to define postcolonial societies.

As a third-generation descendant of immigrants who had to 'fill roles invented for them' on the rubber plantations of British Malaya, my fixed identity as 'Indian' or 'Malaysian-Indian', at best, conveys the enduring legacy of colonial taxonomies of naming.[47] My connection to the ancestral homeland need not be shunned but the political and social implications of accepting my "recognition" as "Indian", the rhetorical "Other", demonstrates the strong association of concepts of race in hegemonic discourses to narratives of "roots" and "original" homeland. Such concerns are exacerbated by legislation and discriminatory policies that afford benefits to those recognised as Bumiputera – the 'sons of the soil'. Generations may have passed since the period of immigration to the region yet the cultural loyalty and affiliations of Indians to the nation are often perceived to be uncertain – a symbol of their irrevocable historical identities that serve to dissociate the "Others" from a fully-vested identity as Malaysian.

Populations: Selected Papers of Edgar T. Thompson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), pp.115-117 (p.117).

45 Charles Hirschman, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology', Sociology Forum, 1.2 (New Jersey: Wiley, 1986), pp.330-361 (p.332; p.332).

46 Charles Hirschman, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology', Sociology Forum, 1.2 (New Jersey: Wiley, 1986), pp.330-361 (p.332; p.338).

47 Preeta Samarasan, Evening is the Whole Day (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), p.21

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Biography

Growing up in postcolonial Malaysia, my experiences of being sidelined for my ethnicity and the social implications of “being Indian” have made me acutely aware of the consequences of disclosing my identity. Despite being born and raised in Malaysia, discriminatory practices towards Indians are synonymous with the community’s existence. Whilst I am expected to be grateful for being able to call Malaysia my home, I am constantly reminded of my family’s migratory past and my corresponding identity as an “immigrant” through the crippling racism that affects the lives of the ones who can never be ‘sons of the soil; the ‘Non-Bumiputeras’.

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