Colonial Visions, Postcolonial Revisions
Colonial Visions, Postcolonial Revisions
Images of the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia

By

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In recognition of the Subaltern grounds within Malaysian Indian Communal History.
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I am grateful to a host of people without whom this book would not have been possible. First and foremost my parents who have always believed in me and the various paths that I have chosen to pursue. At the National University of Singapore, I am grateful to Assoc. Prof. Dr Chitra Sankaran who supervised the Phd thesis from which this book emerges and also to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Philip for his helpful comments that guided my revision of the thesis for publication.
This book is in many senses an aide-memoire to the pioneer Indian immigrants who journeyed to Malaya in the nineteenth century to work and consequently settled in the rubber plantations that were set up by the colonial government. These migrant workers were mainly from the Southern region of India and were known largely by the term “coolie”. This word will emerge from time to time in this book. Its history is tied to the sign systems of the colonial past and these were more often than not, derogatory in nature. Many from within the contemporary Malaysian Indian community may take offence at its generous usage in this book. There is a reason for its presence and it is this: to attempt to show that there is nothing demeaning in its usage. What has made it derogatory is the system of signs that were put in place during colonialism. The coolie is only seen as a degraded figure because of the history of representation that is interlaced within this historical folk figure of Malaya. It’s high time that we see more than just the downtrodden docile worker of the plantation when we think of this word and see instead, as in the words of veteran Indo-Caribbean historian, Rajkumari Singh, that ‘COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements. The word must not be left to die out, buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new ease of life’ (353).

This book has been put together to give a new lease of life to both the word and the figure “Coolie” by venturing to reveal the structures of the sign systems of coolie-ism and the ways in which one can dismantle its foundation through a resistant mode of reading as well as writing, of colonial visions and postcolonial revisions.
INTRODUCTION

COLONIAL VISIONS, POSTCOLONIAL REVISIONS: IMAGES OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN MALAYA

There are threads of continuity between the pioneer Indian immigrant community that lived and worked in Malaya and the present Malaysian Indian community. These threads are not fragile, neither are they inconsequential. One could argue that they are in many senses the very fibre of the politics of the identity of the Indian community in Malaysia, as there was an enormity in the role that the early migrants played in carving the niche for an overseas Indian to exist on Malayan soil. Yet they appear to be figures that bear no consequence to Malaysian Indian society at present. Could this be due to the fact that they are perhaps unwanted reminders of the humble beginnings of the majority of the Malaysian Indian community? If this is so, might the reason for this be linked to a history of representation that has reproduced a set of images that hinge on docility, a constant amenability to discipline and demoralized outcasts? I posit that these are the main patterns of perception that prevail of the Indian coolie of Malaya and these have been viewed from behind the lens of colonial visions that have never been duly re-adjusted by the nation at large. My contention here is that such essentialisation of the Indian coolie community of Malaya can be readjusted through re-visioning the colonial encounter through both the process of resistant postcolonial reading as well as writing strategies.

I begin this journey by first tracing the presence of Indian coolie figures within the terrain of colonial narratives of Malaya. In my reading, I show that though there were many ways in which they were subordinated to colonial ideological discourses, instances of their resistance to these power structures can be found resting within the inner recesses of the text. Yet, what has become the dominant image is that of the coolie as a minion of empire, meek and subdued, in perpetual debt to the planter as paternal benefactor. In my readings of the colonial texts that depict the encounter between planter and Indian coolie, I will show that the discourse of subordination was vigilantly upheld because it suited the colonial ideology of dominance and control and that if we read the latent undertones of such discourse, we just might uncover another story, the
suppressed story of coolie resistance that lie under the weight of such masks of conquest. Yet, one cannot brush aside the fact that the “true” voice of the Indian coolie may not be readily accessible as most were illiterate peasants with virtually no way of voicing themselves in printed form. As such, we need to look to those who included these figures within their narrative boundaries and this leads us firstly to colonialist narrative representations of the plantation world of Malaya, that world that the peasants from India migrated to with the hope that they would be building a new life for themselves. As I explore the tones and inflections of the voices concerned however, it will become evident that what may at first seem indomitable expressions of the coolie as an unassertive, incognisant underling of empire are in many ways discursive constructions that reveal lines of tension that mar the smooth imperial countenance of control. For with every accentuation of the labourer’s docility, there is, ultimately, an underlying tension of anticipated dissension.

I thus begin, in Chapter One, at the threshold of the journey of immigration, the embarkation and disembarkation ports. Here I refer substantially to the core texts that were produced by colonial officials in charge of these initial moments of Indian immigration. Among those that will feature prominently are selected reports of the Indian Immigration Committee as well as those by individual agents of the Government of India, sent to enquire into the state of immigration in Malaya. Such an investigation is necessary as the quest for the text of the coolie has to begin at the start of their journey to Malaya. Also, it is within these reports that one is able to find the details of the coolie contract, that script that was to govern their lives for many years. These documents offer an insight into the setting up of the confining structures of imperial discourse that framed the coolies and are thus crucial texts that need to be included. They form the initial passageway into tracing the Indian coolie experience.

The treatment accorded to the Indian immigrants within this corridor was not unlike that of the various commodities of the imperial enterprises that they were recruited for. They were seen mainly as production units to be fitted into the larger machinery of labour that awaited them inside the grounds of the plantations of Malaya. I argue that the numerous ways in which the lives of these Indian labourers (or ‘coolies’ as they were mainly referred to in that era) were dominated by colonial order worked to encase them within various crate-like discursive frameworks. From the confining quarters of the immigrant depots built to hold the labourers as they awaited transportation to the Malay States to the barrack-like living quarters they were allocated and all the minutiae of the colonial plantation experience, one finds that the presiding issue is always the anxiety to preserve the boundaries of control so that the frame is kept intact at all times. The intention of most colonial textualisations was to keep all
configurations of the labour enterprise well within the grasp of imperial power. An important feature of that frame was an almost formulaic docility of the Indian labourer. Imperial control needed such acquiescence, for if it were to discharge outbursts of defiance, the composed visage of control could very well find itself defeated and the flaws in the imperial armour would be exposed.

As such, most imperial textualisations of the encounter between colonial control and its conscripted labour force exhibit an almost fixated bid to emphasise the malleability of the latter to the machinations of the former. Docility was part and parcel of the purchase agreement and imperial order was most composed when the labourer remained so. This is exemplified in the ensuing words of Mr C.W. Duncan, Chairman of the Planters Association of Malaya. Advancing the issue of further recruitment of labourers from the South of India for the Malayan rubber enterprise in the *Federated Malay States Report of the Indian Immigration Committee Meeting*, he states that through a period of trying years he [the Indian coolie] remained amenable to law and order and generally behaved in a most praiseworthy manner. If he had grievances they were borne passively, and perhaps in no other part of the Empire did its subjects cause less anxiety to its rulers than did Ramasamy here. These qualities should be remembered in his favour in estimating his value to us. (1920: 4)

Colonial authority depended on Ramasamy following this model of compliancy. This dependency was however industriously veiled by a discourse that accentuated instead the Indian peasants’ destitution and the benevolence of the imperial project in rescuing them from their fate. When we move closer to unpack these primary frameworks of representation, as I proceed to do in the following chapters, the contents inside its casing become inevitably dislodged and they begin to reveal a certain measure of instability in their overall structure. It will become increasingly evident that passivity in the labourer was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was a trait that had to be manoeuvred and manipulated by the colonial parties. What happens though when such manoeuvrings failed to have its effect? Colonial control is found in a fractured state as I will show in my first chapter.

The next stage in this quest of the narrative of the coolie leads me to texts written by planters themselves. Within their narrative spaces, the details of the drama of dominance and subalternity are played out upon a wider platform that is offered through the license of allegory. The term ‘subaltern’ was first used out of its military context of inferior ranking soldiers by Antonio Gramsci as he adopted it to refer to the subordinate classes that made up the Italian peasantry in his “Notes on Italian History”. The constitution of that subordinate class depended on there being always a party that dominated the space within which
they were situated, a domination that extended also to the configuration of the “identity of the represented and the representative” (55). The power of representation was almost always in the hands of the dominant. The subaltern is always the one who is represented, never a representative of him or herself. To be the latter he or she must have some form of access to voice within narrativity and that has been virtually nonexistent in discursive history. Most information on the subaltern Indian immigrant stems from what has been written by a colonial or state representative. The politics of such representation served in turn to augment the identity of subalternty at every given opportunity. Coolie figures were often included as minor characters that contribute to the unravelling of the narrative plot of colonial narratives and as the intricacies of the plantation encounter unfold in these discursive spaces, we witness again the tensions that abide in the struggle to maintain colonial control. Chapter two demonstrates this as it focuses on a close reading of three key literary texts that articulate the dynamics of the encounter between the planter and his Indian labour force. They are *The Confessions of a Planter in Malaya: A Chronicle of Life and Adventure in the Jungle* by Leopold Ainsworth, *Pahang: the Saga of a Rubber Planter in the Malay Jungle* by Willard C Bush, and *Sacrilege in Malaya* by Pierre Boulle. Though all three narratives are set in Malayan plantations, the perspectives vary for their authors are from three different countries. Ainsworth is from Britain, Bush is from America whereas Boulle is a French planter. I have chosen these texts because they offer comparative angles to the discourse of domination and subordination that informed the plantation experience of the Indian immigrant community. Significantly, when the author is not as closely aligned to the dominant imperial force, the narrative voice becomes more openly critical of the colonial capitalist enterprise. However, all three narratives invariably demonstrate the laborious effort that was needed for the planters to keep their labour force well within the boards of imperial control as the latter devised ways of crossing boundary lines and claiming more space than what was prescribed for them. The walls of the crates of control, I will duly show, were constantly vulnerable to corrosion.

After this initial incursion into the world of the Malayan coolie, I proceed in search of the figure of the coolie woman. Women were often rendered invisible within the imperial design. Yet, they were crucial to the sustenance of not only the labour force itself but more importantly to that of the evolvement of the Indian diaspora that is now a vital part of Malaysia. Chapter three thus proceeds with a discussion of the ways in which Indian coolie women were situated within and subsequently broke out of imposed gendered chambers.

The latter draws to a close the colonial articulation of the coolie experience and leads into the postcolonial envisioning (and consequent revisioning) of the same by K.S. Maniam, a Malaysian Indian writer. His is a voice that must be
included as he emerges from the very community that is the subject of this manuscript, the subaltern Indian coolie community of Malaya. Maniam’s works offer a tremendous insight into the development of the Malaysian Indian psyche from colonial days to the present. Chapter Four presents the intricacies of the experience of the Indian coolies as a pioneering diasporic community and their many attempts to transplant their Indian cultural legacy, a feat that is shown to be rather impossible unless the hands that sow the seeds are mindful of the soil of the land that they knead. Chapter Five demonstrates the ways in which the latter produces a creative synthesis of identity which releases them from the confines of the historically constraining crate of subalternity. This will be presented through the discussion of certain key motifs from the altar of Indian cultural phenomena in a selection of Maniam’s works that I see as offering important insights into the ways in which he reconstructs the Indian immigrants of Malaya as choreographers of the diasporic identity that they have left as the most significant legacy for contemporary Malaysian Indians.

Maniam has notably been hailed as one of the leading creative writers to emerge out of Malaysia and many situate him as a rather important articulator of the polemics of nationhood. As such, there may be a tendency to see my reading of his works as situating him within a cultural ghetto. However, as I duly show in my close reading of a selection of his works, the very notion of Indian-ness that we see in them is one that reflects openness. The coolie figures who play lead roles within his narrative space were already open to the concept of Malaya as their new homeland and as such I believe that they ought to be given their due place on the mural of nationhood. Also, I would argue too that my discussion of Maniam’s texts against the backdrop of the cultural motifs resituates the oft repeated refrain of exile that normally accompanies the works of many critics. It is what I would call an altar-native reading of Maniam as I draw on the altar of Indian cultural phenomena and situate myself as a native of the Malaysian Indian community he often writes about.

Ultimately, this book takes seed from the belief that any engagement with the Indian diasporic experience in Malaysia must take into account the role of the pioneer Indian immigrants who carved the niche of existence for the overseas Indian on Malayan soil. The main objective of this book is to unpack the various dimensions of the Indian immigrant experience in Malaysia and bring it to the fore of the wider scholarship of the diasporic community as a key text that reflects the polemics of Malaysian Indian identity and its definitions and re-definitions.
CHAPTER ONE
THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN IMPERIAL CONTROL
AND ITS LABOUR FORCE

The decision to recruit Indians as labourers for the Straits Settlements was made at a time when the British colonial government was anxious for a supply of labour for the various sugar, coffee and rubber plantations of colonial Malaya. The resource for obtaining this was seen to lie in the southern region of India which was one of the most impoverished. A number of plans were devised to strategically promote the chance of a better life to the mostly famine stricken or debt-ridden Indian villagers in that region. In 1884 an Indian Immigration Ordinance was enacted to aid the migration of these villagers to Malaya and was evidently rather successful in drawing an increasing number of Indian immigrants (Parmer: 19). However, an alarmingly high mortality rate amongst these immigrants drew the concern of the Indian government and consequently, a Labour Commission was set up to conduct regular enquiries into and report on the condition of Indian migration to Malaya. The personnel involved in said Commission were mainly European planters and Straits Settlements Colonial Officials. Meetings were held regularly to monitor the physical condition of labour recruitment and to address any irregularities in the recruitment system. However the focus of these meetings was, more often than not, the grievances of the planters rather than the actual plight of the immigrants that they recruited for the various plantations in the Straits Settlement. Proceedings of the meetings were noted verbatim and stored in the archives of colonial documentation. Each account contains a minefield of information on the subject of Indian immigration into Malaya not only for its socio-historical and statistical content but also for its reflections of the ideology of the time. In many senses, the reports of the Colonial Labour Commission are narratives that tell their own stories of the plantation experience in the Straits Settlements.

Interrogations of the tones and inflections of the imperial voices that articulated this experience within the various reports reveal various facets of the colonial plantation encounter and most significant are the colonialist sign systems of the Indian plantation worker (or coolie as they were referred to in
those days) and the politics that were put in play. There is a significant emphasis on the term 'play' here because, in many senses, the proceedings of the Labour Commission Meetings that documented the subject of Indian immigration to Malaya did so in a form that closely resembled that of a staged play. They are in many senses the scripts of empire that staged the drama of the encounter between imperial control and its subordinate labour force and within their pages one finds a cast of characters that have very clearly defined roles. The lead actors are notably the colonials (mainly members of the colonial governing body and the plantocracy) and the Indian coolie plays a rather minor part, able only to come to the forefront through the dominating dialogue of empire. This casting was put together with one focal intention, the elevation of the imperialist project, its theatre the plantation world. As Norman Parmer puts it, “the intent of the planters was less to improve indentured labor conditions than to obtain the government’s participation in importing labor”(20). Framed within the sub-plot of empire, the labourers were constantly edged in by prescriptions of subordination, domains that chalked out their characters in images that accentuated their meekness and malleability to colonial manipulation. These are the domains that I envision as the crates of docility, frameworks assembled by the imperialists to keep the Indian labourer of colonial Malaya conscripted well within their tightly lidded casings.

The metaphor of the crate can clearly be seen in the initial stages of the migration process. The transportation of the Indian peasants from the port of Madras bore much resemblance to the packing and transporting of cargo goods rather than human beings. They were ferried across the Bay of Bengal to Malaya aboard the decks of steam ships that were really nothing more than large crates of transportation. In the Annual Report of the Government of India in British Malaya, 1926, it is disclosed that

the provision of deck space allowance per adult of 8 superficial feet during fair weather season and 10 superficial feet during foul weather season, enable the shipping of more emigrants frequently resulting in congestion of the deck accommodation...feeding and other arrangements ... are supervised by the travelling immigration inspectors of the labour department of Malaya. (7)

Within its domain, the etchings of subordination are worked well into the discursive framework. Not only are they packed into the hulls of the steam ships like merchandise of empire in exact measured out spaces. The terms of identification in the passage are similarly those used for commodities of trade. The deployment of the term ‘feeding’ for example is more applicable to livestock, rather than human passengers and furthermore, effectively places them in a dependent mode. They do not eat, they are fed. The description dispossesses them of agency within that structured frame of imperial control that
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is already set in motion on board the steamers. It establishes the symbol of subjugation and of the power of the hand that feeds the helpless subjects of empire. These are also the hands that purposefully shape the figure of the Indian immigrant into production tools rather than allowing them to determine their part on that stage of empire, as individuals offering their service for the transactions of the imperial capitalist ventures in Malaya. The experience on board these ships became the determining threshold into what was to be a long journey into the recesses of other subaltern encasements, as other patterns of domination and subordination followed in its wake. The presiding designs of these encasements are the various discursive formulations that made up the narratives of the Indian labour experience. As the textual domains are formed, they simultaneously board them up within the boundary lines of the all pervading discourse of imperial control and its mechanisms of power. These were the parapets of the rules and regulations that governed the life of the Indian labourer within the fortress of imperial control that was otherwise known as the colonial plantation.

The illustration over the page [Figure 1] befittingly pictures the framing of the discourse of the Indian coolie and the imperial compulsion for control.

Being an advertisement placed by the company Imperial Chemical Industries in Tolong Lagi a magazine of the Planter’s Association, it sketches out the ideal set up of what a plantation was thought to be. The depiction of the coolies strategically placed around the conveyor belt emphasises the factory setting, and the mechanism of control. The belt is the girdle of control that commands the machinery of labour. Each labouring body, assigned to his or her own station around the encircled rubber tree reflects the ordering and dispersing of the signs of imperial control of the labour experience. The frame speaks of the metaphoric structuring of the domain of the imperial discourse of order, the desire for the picture perfect plantation setting.
The two colonial officials within the picture frame act as the icons of colonial control, always already within any frame that encloses the Indian coolies, sentries of the gateposts of imperial control. Their role is to ward off possible invasions to the guarded terrain, to master the flow of production so that it remains well within their control and to ensure that its form is kept intact at all costs. The figure elevated on the wooden structure above the tree apparently cataloguing the condition of its leaves emphasises the controlling scientific eye, ordering the agronomics of the rubber enterprise. The board with the caption ‘leaf disease department’ draws attention to the fact that scientific research was a vital part of the exercise of control, for the condition of the trees had to be monitored for the commercial enterprise to succeed. The other (rather
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irate) colonial figure, ordering the fourth coolie (who is literally tearing out of the frame with the sign of the advertising company in his hands) to get back into the frame, is the controlling commercial eye, whose task it is to see that labour was well ordered and duly placed in their designated positions. Witness too that it is the tree that gains prominence in the picture and the coolies are manoeuvred around its trunk. The coolie manning the conveyer belt dotted with the cups of latex is indicative of the plantation management’s desire for the orderly daily tapping exercise. Significantly, the coolies responsible for conveying the produce to the factory are displaced by the conveyor belt. This is a telling demonstration of the objectification of labour. The coolie armed with the can of fertiliser reflects in turn the vital task of providing nourishment for the tree, and the term ‘feeding trough’ emphasises its personification within that drama of control. The coolies themselves, being mere tools of imperial production, are thus totally divested of their personalities. The female coolie seated on lower ground, tending to the roots of the tree, is reflective of the status of the female population of the work force who were doubly subordinate within the bind of gender. Her presence within the frame is a rare occasion for she is almost always rendered invisible in most colonial documents. The choice of this picture is thus doubly important for she is visibly presented. However, the intricacies of the gendered aspect of the coolie experience will be dealt with in detail in a separate chapter as this concentrates on the unpacking of the general frame that was constructed around it.

The positioning of the three figures of the labouring population within the frame exhibits the desired effect of the mechanism of the capitalist venture, assignable stations framed within a well oiled machinery of production. However this is not the whole picture, for revealed too is the wayward coolie tearing out of its margins. The planter standing at the edge of the frame, still ensconced within his desired terrain, shouting for the recalcitrant coolie to get back into the frame with the sign, bespeaks of the urge to regain control of the disrupted sequence of the orderliness within the mainframe. The burst of movement draws attention to the permeable conditions of boundaries and frames. Likewise the literal ripping of the border that is sketched out is indicative of the shredding of the barriers of discourse and interrupting the flow of the circuit of power. It demonstrates that the colonial hold on the labourers was not an invincible one as their signposts of power and order could be, as pictured above, spirited off by the subjects controlled. Just as the absconding coolie is placed at the margins of the frame, so too are inscriptions of insurrection against colonial control inserted at the margins of official reports.

Colonial documentation of the commencement of Indian immigration to Malaya illustrates the ways in which the inscription of the figure of the coolie is juggled by various governing officials in their bid to ensure that it fits into their
desired scheme of things. My reading of excerpts from a selection of Labour Commission Reports below will reveal the instability of the myth of the Indian coolie’s perpetual deference to an all-powerful colonial authority. I do this in two segments. In the first, I look at the ways in which imperial officials assembled the structures of control over the body of the coolie. My overall frame of reference is the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States of the year 1890, which collates a vast number of minutes of meetings that took place between colonial plantation officials. Yet I move on to show in the second segment that this very document (along with a select number of others), reveals in the process the instability of the myth of the Indian coolie’s perpetual deference to what was supposedly an all-powerful colonial authority.

**Scripts of Indenture: Initial Encounters of the Coolie**

In the initial pages of the *RCL 1890*, there is an extract of a correspondence of the Secretary to Government of India to the Secretary of Madras. It states, rather clearly, that the immigration of Indian peasants to the Straits Settlement “was a purely voluntary movement on the part of the people, stimulated by their own interests and wishes; it was not assisted by any law, neither was it impeded by any law till the year 1857”(36). It is interesting that the introduction to the coolies in the document points to issues of mobility and agency in the coolie. It speaks of an active involvement in the act of migration. Early migration appeared to have offered the coolie some amount of freedom of choice. Yet, their docility within Indian society becomes a tool of manipulation for it is subsequently recorded that certain unscrupulous parties were kidnapping a number of Indian peasants and shipping them to the Malay Peninsula (36). What little freedom that the immigrant had is lost at that point, for measures are taken by the colonial authorities to regulate the procedure of immigration. The experience of immigration to and settlement in Malaya from that point on for the Indian labourer is overtaken by defined and exacting measures that etch out the subaltern part that the labourer will play within the various scenes that unfold on the stages of the plantation world.

The following passage consequently puts into motion the formal advent of the coolie into the scripts of empire, being a record of the Indian government in Malaya commanding all recruiting agents to bring coolies intending to proceed to the Straits before Magistrate, at Nagapattam, and state all particulars as to repayments of cost of passage, money-advances, diet during voyage, wages in Straits Settlements, nature of work, duration of engagement, return passage. Magistrate will enter these particulars in a register, copy of which will be sent to the Colonial Secretary to be reduced in
individual case into a contract on arrival. Magistrate will ascertain that coolies go willingly and with full knowledge of condition. Magistrate will protect natives from crimping, and prevent desertion of families. (RCL 1890: 37)

These recruiting agents were normally employed by the planters in Malaya. They were known as tyndals (later kanganies) hired by colonial planters, mainly Indians who had been labourers themselves and were given the opportunity to promote their status to head-labourer provided they could furnish the planters with enough labour force. They were thought to be apt for the job as they could speak the language and hence would possess the ability to persuade the peasants in the villages of South India to migrate. They offered visions of a more yielding future in the new land, Malaya. Take for instance the following excerpt of a recruiting poster issued in Nagapatnam in 1890 by Ganapathy Pillay and Co., Agents for Planters, Penang: “Houses, fuel, and land for gardens will be given free ... There are shops and a good supply of water. There are doctors who speak Tamil. Rice is sold at market price ... The country is quite similar to our own places, and comfortable. Many of our own countrymen are working on each estate” (RCL 1890: 44). These were in effect fraudulent embellishments of the actual situations in the plantations, with its more often than not unsanitary living conditions and hotbeds of fatal epidemics. This said however, it must be noted that the majority of these Indian recruiters operated within the encirclement of colonialist racial hierarchy and were duty, if not forcibly, bound to serve their colonial paymasters. They were very much caught within the role of the infamous native informants for the dominions of colonial rule, obliged to deliver information to secure power and knowledge of the Indian peasantry. Their task did not end with mere recruiting. They had also to aid in persuading the prospective coolies to sign the labour agreement or contract which was to formally bind the coolie to the labour enterprise. They were the ones equipped with the language to facilitate this last and with this, the colonial planter ensured that he had fulfilled his responsibility of obtaining the coolie’s “full awareness of the terms” he was binding himself to, as stipulated by the Indian Immigration Ordinance. Figure 2 provides a sample of the contract the coolies signed. The controlling force in the contract above is that of the colonial planter and the immigration officials. They are the administrators of its terms and conditions. Precisely how they ascertain the coolie’s awareness of the full terms and conditions of employment is rather ominous.
Could the coolie ever have had full awareness of the terms and conditions of his employment? Firstly, there is the matter of the language of the contract which is in that of the colonial administration, English. The majority of the coolies hailed from the illiterate sections of South India’s rural districts. The passage below sheds more light on the nature of the possibilities of ascertaining the coolies’ understanding of the contract and the role it would play in their lives:

This contract is practically the only means open to the immigrant of authentically ascertaining the terms of his engagement. He can ask questions of the depot superintendent or the Indian Immigration agent, but few men will do this, and if they do the answers cannot well embody the contents of the twenty-four printed pages of the Ordinance. His only other means of informing himself is to enquire of the recruiter, or read the placards of the recruiting agent. Although a Tamil translation of the Ordinance was made some years ago it has not been published,
and the conditions of service do not therefore exist in any document to which a scholar among immigrants can refer. (RCL 1890: 54)

The hesitation on the part of the coolies alluded to above stem most apparently from the stature of the colonial administrators and the play of power and dominance. The contract itself is twenty-four pages long and, the wheels of the colonial capitalist enterprise could not afford, in all probability, to halt for lengthy though much needed explanations. Added to this is also the fact that the Tamil translation of the Ordinance was never published. Thus even if there were coolies who could read, there was no avenue to ascertain full awareness of the details of the contract they were signing. Knowledge on the part of the labourer was quite obviously not a priority. The very people who spoke their language and were in fact informed of the conditions that lay waiting kept this information from them.

Even the manner with which they await to sign the contract at the ports of the Straits Settlement accentuates the manipulative schemata of the colonial plantation enterprise:

On arrival in Penang, the ship is boarded by the Indian immigrant agent or his Assistant who inspects the coolies and sees that all the deck passengers... are at once landed and sent to the depot... The contract coolies are detained in the government depot until they sign the contracts and are handed over to the agents of the employers for transit to the estates where they are to work. A separate contract is signed for every man and transmitted to the employer for custody. A duplicate in the Tamil language is given to the cooly and the office Register serves as the Immigration Agent’s record of the transaction. (RCL 1890: 41)

The excerpt lays bare substantial indications of penal codification. The coolies are restrained like criminals within the depot until the contracts are signed and when that is accomplished, it (the original copy) is kept in the control of the planter. The gaze of the imperialist could liberally glide over every exacting measure within these contracts. The labourer’s unlettered gaze however could never truly engage with it. The choice of the word “detained” speaks clearly of the status of the coolies within the plantation world.

There is also evidence that the details of the contract are interpreted at the will of the employer and often transposed into terms pertaining to prisoners rather than industrial workers. There is for instance the record of a "'joint and several' contract' where ‘coolies of a gang signed a common document rendering themselves jointly liable for the default of any one of their number’ (RCL 1890: 52). Such means accentuate the image of the coolies linked together by the conveyor belt of control as aptly illustrated in Figure 1. In this context the joining is truly literal. It also alerts one to the more sinister state of affairs that
lie behind the scene of the frame. The breaching of the hold of power does not merely result with the admonition to come back but more importantly to return the signpost of power to its original circle. The ripped margins must be sewn back; the ownership of the sign must be restored for to possess it is to possess the reins of the discourse of power. The coolie must be sent back into the crate that he has fled from.

Life on the plantations was designed to confine the labourer within set boundaries. The muster re-enacted every day, is another ritual that served to consolidate the plantocracy’s command over the labourers. It duly marked their presence down in registers, filed them up according to their categories (the tapping gang, the weeding gang etc) and recorded the results of their labour at the end of the day. The following words of a planter exhibit the commandeering of its mechanism of power:

A roll call is called daily at 6 a.m., in my presence, by the Tyndals, and there are other calls at 10, 1 and 4 o’clock.
At the morning call everyone on the estate is present: the later roll calls in the field are supervised by the Overseers.
I determine myself the amount of task work to be done ....
(RCL 1890: Evid. 74)

The roll call is the grid of control that assembles them within the framework of their task and consequently marshals them out into the field. The muster and the register both act as critical examinations and preservations of the circle of order that takes on almost mythic propensities within the framework that is assembled.

On the trail of such circumscribed manoeuvres is the issue of the coolie lodgings set up by their employers. Known as coolie ‘lines’ because they were long rows of houses partitioned into numerous cubicles, they were often overcrowded for sometimes as many as ten or more coolies were packed into their frames. They were in most cases practically like crates that had little space and virtually no ventilation at all:

on one estate the building is divided into a number of rooms about 10 feet square, in which six people are usually put. Other rooms in the same building are 20 feet by 14 feet, and in one of these eighteen people were living, men and women indiscriminately. Sometimes three married couples in one small room; in other cases one or two couples, as well as several single men. (RCL 1890: 48)

The demarcation of exact space and the numbers that are lodged within their frames evoke once again the image of goods packed within the frames of commercial crates.
The conditions highlighted above are only a fraction of those that boarded up the Indian immigrant experience within encasements of docility that were assembled by the various figures of authority that made up the plantocracy that was intent more often than not on extracting as much profit from the labourers. The plantation system was thus run very much along the lines of a factory, with the labourers commandeered to labour meticulously and productively. The desired scene was much like that reflected by the brush of the colonial artist responsible for the colonial advertisement of Figure 1. The discourse that was produced showed the desire for the creation of the ideal picture of orderliness on the stage of their drama of the imperial capitalist enterprise, framed within a setting commandeered by the colonial plantocracy.

A cursory reading of the events outlined above may lead to the assumption that these coolies were submissive victims of imperial schemata. It has led to a number of sociohistorical arguments that these labourers were passively dependent on the benevolent colonial master for their every need4. My argument however is that if we delve deeper into the configurations of the scripts that are presented to us, notions of agency become evident deep within their framework. These are the points when we witness coolies resisting and ripping the frames of colonial control, just like that unmanageable coolie in Figure 1. These incidents occur on the cusp of the discursive formations of the Indian labour experience. Here, synonymous with the scene in Figure 1, we glimpse coolies running away with the signs of imperial control.

One of the most significant ways in which the coolie dodged the frame of docility that was placed around him was through acts of desertion. This underscores two issues. Firstly, we learn more and more that the coolie never sat in total deference to his colonial master. Secondly, it demonstrates that the coolies actually had sufficient agency to cause anxiety in the planter. By this latter, I mean that planters, as I will show shortly, were often made to reinforce their position by adopting measures that they were often not happy with. Raising wages was one of this. It also caused much friction between neighbouring European planters as coolies would abscond to whichever plantation offered higher wages. Every Immigration report documents a fair number of coolies absconding from the ports of disembarkation in the Straits as well as the plantations. For instance, there is evidence that a number of newly arrived coolies at the government depot at Negapatnam who find themselves engaged on less favourable terms become aware that better can be had, and ultimately refuse to sign contracts unless on better terms, so that those offering lower terms cannot get as many as they want” (RCL 1890: Evid. 73). Note how the coolies here have the capacity to actually disrupt the imperialist plan.

Because of this, planters saw fit to draw up rather stringent terms in their contracts to forcefully bind the coolie to the plantation:
However, many coolies ran away in spite of being aware of the heavy penalties. It ironically becomes the very point of conflict for the labourer who runs away when he is discontented with its terms and conditions. In many senses this illustrates that the preservation of that very order is dependent on the coolie’s collaboration with it. Power was never totally in the grasp of the planter for he had to constantly resort to coercive methods to keep the labourer within the boundaries of his plantation. Absconding was already a choice that the labourer knew he had and many took it upon themselves to exercise that right of choice, indicating agency in the body that was assumed to be wholly under the mechanism of colonial control. Malleability in the labourer was thus not an invariable trait but rather one that had to be manoeuvred, and when labourers were not in agreement, colonial control finds itself fractured.

Barely five lines from the earlier stipulation for a legal contract cited above, it is subsequently recorded that ‘many employers argue that some system of contract is indispensable, for unless they can be absolutely certain of having a labour force bound to them and at command at certain seasons, there is risk of losing an entire crop’ (RCL 1890: 55). The term ‘risk’ highlights the correlative consequences that the coolies have on the running of the plantation enterprise, underscoring the notion that they were not permanent fixtures on the apparatus of control engineered by the plantocracy. Rather, they could become dislodged and consequently rattle the mechanism of the plantation machinery which they were engaged for. Needless to say, colonial order finds itself rattled by the visitations of such disruption. The following words of planter JMB Vermont as recorded in the report indicate the extent to which planters were rattled: “When Mr Turner offered his coolies better treatment I was forced to do the same, to a smaller extent; but it was against my inclination. I cannot say whether I got as many coolies as Mr Turner at that time” (RCL 1890: Evid.77). Coolies had sufficient agency not only to ensure that wages were raised but also to cause rifts between their imperial masters. It follows thus that they were not docile pawns of imperial order.

Then there is also the fact that planters built temples of worship within the vicinity of the plantations to induce the labourers to stay and not stray. Within the pages of another report, *Indian Immigration to the FMS: Resolutions and Recommendations of a Commission appointed by the Acting Resident General FMS 1900*, it is documented that ‘any increase in the facilities offered for the observation of religious functions must benefit the cause of immigration, because natives will naturally prefer to proceed to a country where they have
reason to believe that opportunities for observances exist in a form similar to what they are accustomed to in their native land” (5). The colonial planter’s anxiety of coolie desertion is clearly evident here if they felt the need to coerce the labourer to remain in the plantation by using the temple, the seat of his cultural and religious link, as a strategic tool. However, the coolies were not averse to overturning this formula of colonial control. The Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya 1930 sets down numerous incidents of insubordination of labourers when the boundaries of their cultures are seen to be intruded upon, in similar terms of the following excerpt:

Ten labourers of Parit Perak estate were charged for rioting and assault on the Assistant Manager, who annoyed at the beat of drums, had interfered unnecessarily with a marriage celebration conducted on the estate …. (24)

In this sense, the coolie evidently acquires more agency within the boundary markers of his own cultural compound. Colonial control obviously had not much of a stake within this Other frame. These instances of disruptions to the hierarchy of order within the plantation world work to dislodge the image of the meek and docile South Indian coolie. The docile body was not so meek when seen as an agent of its own cultural identity, one that resided within and was an affirmation in many senses of the possession of something that could not be manipulated by colonial control.

These select incidents have been significant in compiling the early experiences of the coolie experience. However, the scenes of disruption are not displayed in full form within the pages of such official documentation. As the reports are angled towards building and sequestering the structures of the colonial enterprise, agitations against the prized conduit of power are registered in muted tones, concealing the magnitude of its ramifications to the imperial project. For if the composure of superior governance is to be maintained, the expression of control must not reveal its dissident features. The silenced syllables of thoughts are rendered more conspicuous by its very muteness for it draws attention to what is not or cannot, be said. To articulate it would be to swim against the tide of the imperial discourse. The damming up of what is seen to risk damming the treatise of power ironically acts as a foil to the very exercise of silencing for they speak louder than what is articulated in plain terms on the page.

This chapter has been mainly an attempt to unpack and consequently shift the position of the force of imperialist articulations of the Malayan Indian coolies, their bodies mired for so long in grounds of docility. The body of the Indian immigrant has thus far been traced by a language that has accentuated an identification of docility. Almost all other aspects were dissolved under the weight of such markings. These are the images that have been stored away in
the warehouse of history. Genealogical expositions of the imprints on the historical body of the Indian labourer of Colonial Malaya are highly necessary, for such a process will not only dislodge these firmly packed contents. More importantly, in the momentary spaces that are created through such displacements, other imprints that have been edged out of the historical vision can finally find their way into the mainframe.

However, the examples that I have discussed above, while significant, offer only glimpses of the coolie figures as they are more often than not submerged under statistical evidence and production profit margins. It is the realm of colonial literary narratives written by planters themselves that enact more explicitly the dynamics of the plantation world. The following excerpt from a doggerel entitled ‘The Weeding Gang’6 demonstrates how literary form was used by them to articulate scenes from their daily lives while revealing too the similar nuances of the precarious discourse of dominance and subordination encountered in the colonial reports examined above:

I love to stand upon a hill
And watch my weeding gang until
I feel that it is hardly fair
To stand and watch them working there.-
For, when alone, they suck their thumbs
And sit about till ‘dorai’ comes;
They need the rest so they can work,
Whilst he is watching, with a jerk.-
Unless he stops too long, he’ll see
They’re simply full of energy.
…
At daybreak, out to work they stroll
Their speed kept well within control;
Throughout the day perhaps they’re slack,
But you should see them gallop back!
…
(cited in Money 1989: 42)

Adherence to order is indicated as present only when the ‘gang’ is observed by the colonial eye. In its absence, they are notably seen to be prone to indolence. While this seems on the one hand to highlight the foibles of the coolies, it exposes too the idea that colonial control was never totally within the hands of the planters. It was something that needed to be monitored and maintained, echoed again in the last four lines.

Similar compositions were published frequently and though in form doggerels, they nevertheless portray the mind of the planters constructing the figure of the coolie in a variety of scenes. This fact emphasises that official
reports were not the only form that they used to construct the figure of the coolie in a variety of scenes of plantation life. It is a fitting introduction to the altering arena of dominance and docility that awaits us in the next chapter as the discussion moves on to explore the colonial narratives written by planters of Malaya. These, largely autobiographical, depict the daily scenes of the colonial plantation and a fair number of them contain dramatisations of the coolie community. Within these various scenes, one witnesses a broader display of the politics of the performance of the encounter between imperial order and its seemingly subordinate labour force and the extent to which the coolies transformed the sign-system of docility configured by their imperial masters.

Notes

1 A term that I use to refer to the almost aristocratic role the colonial planters played in the plantation realm.
2 Hereafter RCL 1890
3 The view commonly held of these recruiters is that they were fraudulent manipulators interested only in financial gain at the cost of the impoverished and ill-informed labourer. However, the role they played within the plantation system was rather ambivalent. Though they admittedly brought the labourers under false grounds, they became rather paternalistic in their attitudes towards their charges and were soon seen as the asian king within the realm of the coolie world. The planters were aware of this and tried as far as possible to curb the power that they held. A detailed explanation of the polemics of this can be found in Frank Heiddemann’s Kangories in Sri Lanka and Malaysia: Tamil Recruiter-xam-Foreman as a Sociological Category in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century (Munchen:Anacon-Verlap, 1992).
4 Two key scholars are Kernial Singh Sandhu and S. Arasaratnam. The first produced what has been lauded as a seminal work on the nature of Indian immigration into Malaya and their socio-historical development. However he states rather explicitly that the labourers’ every need was taken care of from the time of immigration: “the labour movement was predominantly an ‘arranged’ one in that almost every step of its movement from its home in India to its place of employment in Malaya was arranged and taken care of by someone else. Thus there was little or no spontaneity about it and much less a ‘call of adventure’ or service.” (Sandhu 65). Arasaratnam’s text operates in the same manner too as he emphasises the passivity of the Indian labourer amidst the capitalist enterprise of the imperial plantations: The Indian labourer, from the time he made the decision to emigrate to Malaya, had someone to attend to his cares, and had things done for him. The whole process of shifting from his village to the depot, across the seas to Penang and thence to the estate, went on under the watchful eye of someone who was responsible for him... during this entire period he grew up in a situation where he had no necessity to take sustained action of his own behalf. (Arasaratnam 1970: 135-136)
5 According to P. Ramasamy between 1912 and 1920, a number of labourers of various estates in Malaya staged “walk-outs” as they were unhappy with low rates or delayed
payment of wages, high mortality rates, management’s unkept promises and the generally unsanitary living conditions. The planters however, incensed at such insubordination, arranged to have those very labourers charged and jailed by the police for contravening the terms of their contract. When they were released later, they were reported to have made it clear that “they preferred to stay in jail or ‘even walk into the sea and be drowned’” than to return to the oppressive estates (1992: 101-102). Where is the figure of the docile malleable tool of empire in all this?

This doggerel was originally published in the planting community’s official bulletin The Planter, and subsequently reproduced in John Kyrle Money’s Planting Tales of Joy and Sorrow (1989), an anthology of various plantation stories and anecdotes. It was composed and submitted to the above mentioned magazine by a planter in the year 1934. The author is identified only, as the editor of the anthology states, by the initials F.H.F.