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By Prof. Charles Sarvan. *(This piece was written many years ago- but in these troubled times it is still relevant. It is a little long. Suggest that serious Readers take a hard copy and read it carefully. Director)*

The word “fetish” has several connotations, one of them being when something is endowed with value or appreciation forgetful that it was human effort that went into its creation. The work of Karl Marx on commodity fetishism is most apposite here. As I have written elsewhere, “pictures of tea-leaves being plucked almost invariably show women smiling brightly, in bright sunshine, wearing bright clothes, healthy and happy. Poverty and wretchedness can excite contempt rather than compassion and conscience.” It’s hoped that, in the intervening years, life for tea-estate workers in Sri Lanka has improved. End of Introduction.

We have taken

Too little care of this.

(King Lear 111. iv.32-33)

The slave trade in Africans is perhaps the worst blot on recorded human history, given the trade's duration, the numbers involved and, above all, its appallingly cruel nature. The effects of the trade persist in various forms into the present, not least in the presence and experience of Africans now native to the United States and the Caribbean. Ironically, the trade has been enabling in that it has generated numerous studies, autobiographies, memoirs and fictional works, the last not only by Africans (Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips and others) but also by non-Africans, for example, Barry Unsworth (*Sacred Hunger*), Graeme Rigby (*The Black Cook's Historian*) and the Indo-Guyanese-British writer, David Dabydeen (*A Harlot's Progress*). The exodus of Indians, voluntary or otherwise, to labour on British plantations under the indenture system, some heading East to Malaya and further to Fiji, others West through the Suez Canal (opened 1869) to the distant Caribbean, was a newer form of slavery, but it has not drawn the attention of researchers nor inspired writers as much as the “trade” in Africans has done. This article examines some of the available work. I regret I have been unable to trace primary material from Mauritius, but I am sure others will fill

in this, and other, gaps. The title specifies, "Indian" because many Chinese also went, or were taken, as coolies; "plantation" because Indians who slaved other than on estates were also derogatorily known as "coolies" - don't visit Colombo harbour, for it is full of sweaty, smelly coolies (Muller 1993, 19) - and "overseas" because "coolie" exploitation featured within India too (see Mulk Raj Anand). Why the indentured labourers themselves haven't left a substantial body of literature is not difficult to understand: most were illiterate, work was exhausting, housing squalid and they were segregated, trapped within the confines, physical and mental, of the plantation. No doubt, there were songs expressing their suffering and their longings; their yearning for a distant home made attractive by immediate misery, by time and distance, but these songs appear not to have been translated into English. I fear most are lost even in their original languages.

Historically, the African Slave trade and the system of indenture are linked in that it was the emancipation of the slaves in the nineteenth century that made Britain look to its teeming Indian possession for replacement labour. As with Africans, the descendants of Indian "coolies" now form part of the population of certain countries, leading, in some cases to racial attacks: Guyana in the early 1960s, and Sri Lanka ever since independence in 1948 with the departure of the British who had introduced Indian labour into the Island. To cite recent examples, the year 2000 saw increased tension in Mauritius between Indians and "Creoles"; parliament in Fiji was stormed and its Indian Prime Minister taken hostage by Fijian "nationalists"; and in November (so-called) "Indian Tamils" in Sri Lanka were attacked in various towns and four youths held in a rehabilitation centre, murdered by a mob which was allowed entry and incited by the security forces, the latter being drawn almost entirely from the majority (Sinhalese - Buddhist) group. In short, the effects of the British indenture system persist: indenture is not 'history' in the popular sense of being over and done with.

As the Africans before them had done, the Indians under indenture contributed to Britain's wealth. Writing in 1859 about Mauritius, Patrick Beaton describes emaciated, scantily-clad wretches with miserable, melancholic expressions, and then reflects that these wretches are "the secret source of all the wealth, luxury and splendour with which the island abounds.... There is not a carriage ... or a robe of silk worn ... to the purchase of which the Indian has not, by his labour indirectly contributed' (Beaton 11). The novel, *The Last English Plantation*, by the Indo-Guyanese writer Janice Shinebourne, states it directly: it is because of the "coolies" that some became rich and enjoyed a privileged life-style (27). The wretchedness in appearance of the "coolies" Beaton refers to was the product of poverty, of cramped and unhygienic living conditions; the result of the nature and duration of their labour. In contrast, Chandrasekhar cites seventeenth-century descriptions of Tamils brought from India to work in Mauritius as artisans: a gentle, sober, and thrifty people (13).

Simple folk who had not ventured outside their village, boarded ships and sailed thousands of miles to foreign lands of which they knew nothing; had not even the haziest notion of where they were geographically situated. The moment they signed, they became captives, degraded "coolies"; and when they crossed the *kala pani*, the dark waters (in the 1870s, the voyage from Calcutta to Jamaica took about twenty-six weeks), they lost their caste and, with it, their sense of place within a cohesive social structure. The etymology of the derogative term "coolie" is uncertain. It may have been derived from the Tamil word for wages or from the Chinese, *k'u*, meaning bitter, and *li*, strength. Demand (in this case for labour) itself does not always create supply, and the chief factor accounting for the thousands of Indians who emigrated as indentured labourers was poverty at once both extreme and hopeless. The peasants at best managed subsistence living, and

floods or drought meant starvation and death. In Kamala Markandaya's novel, *Nectar in a sieve*, Rukmani's sons leave for the tea estates of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka): "There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it" (68). The mother grieves, and the young men speak soothingly to her, as one would to a child, telling her how much they would earn and that, one day, they would return. Even as they speak, mother and sons know it is a "sham, a poor shabby pretence to mask tortured feelings" (68). She never sees them again. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) convey something of the caste-based degradation and exploitation experienced by the poor within India itself, while his *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) describes and indicts plantation life in India, a prison though without bars where the workers must abnegate their selves in order to endure toil and humiliation. But poverty was not the sole factor impelling Indians to go abroad. Many were tricked into making the voyage and, later, some were also tricked into staying on: Sheik Sadeek of Guyana describes a farewell party for coolies returning to India at the end of their period of indenture. There is plenty of alcohol and, in the morning, the coolies find to their dismay that they have placed their thumb-print on a document that indentures them for another five years (9-11) Others were threatened and forced into making the voyage, but there were also those who went abroad because they were enterprising, and were determined to fashion a better life for themselves and their children. A few women accompanied their husbands: the rest were a miscellany: those who, for one reason or another, had incurred the displeasure of their family or the opprobrium of their community, and women who had failed to get married, were barren, who could no longer endure conditions at home, and those who had been coerced.

Malaya. From earliest times, the Bay of Bengal was a highway of communication between India and Malaya but these contacts arose from mutual need and were of mutual benefit. However, with the establishment of rubber plantations in Malaya by Britain, India supplied not goods but labour, that is, human beings. The nineteenth century saw the breakdown of India's traditional economy, and the consequences of this caused many who were innately conservative and immobile to emigrate (Arasaratnam). The Malay himself was unwilling to "abandon his fields, milieu and way of life in order to submit to the sweated toil of the estates" (Tate 151) - something which can also be said of other countries, Sri Lanka for example, to which Indian labour was imported. In the Caribbean, the newly, emancipated African was not going to take on the yoke of another form of slavery. Malayan rubber companies found the Indian worker to be amenable to discipline (a chilling euphemism), docile and unused to collective bargaining. In short, they were ideal material for gross exploitation. D.J.M. Tate records that until almost the end of the nineteenth century, a labourer was not supplied with rice (his staple food) unless he was fit to work. It was a practice which condemned the sick and the disabled to a lingering death (Tate 169).

K.S. Maniam is the writer who testifies best to the experience of the indentured Indian coolie on the rubber plantations of Malaya, particularly in his novels, *The Return* (1993a) and *In a Far Country* (1993b). I will deal with these two together because the latter begins with the experience of the new arrivals on the plantation and moves forward into contemporary Malaya, while the former, in chronological terms, fits into the 1950s (Malaysia gained independence in 1957). Rajan, in *Far Country*, pieces together something of the history of his taciturn father. The latter had been told stories by his father, stories from the Hindu epics of heroes who ventured into foreign lands untrodden by human feet, of those who walked through sandalwood-scented forests. Desperate to escape from the suffocating coils of poverty in India, Rajan's father decides to dare, and makes the voyage. The contrast between epic adventure and the indenture system sharpens the sense of betrayal and defeat:

The ship we came in was crowded and foul. The hulls were rusted. When I drank water from the taps there was only a taste of rust. And the human dung - all over the place. The men not even closing the door. The door too rusted to be closed. The women with the saris over their thighs, to hide the shame. Sometimes no water even to wash, to flush away the human filth. (Manian 1993b)

Realising that they have been deceived and now were trapped, Rajan's nearly deranged mother slashes at the rubber trees. "Brought to 'wound' the rubber trees so that the injured sides bleed their profitable sap (from which rubber was manufactured) they themselves become wounded beings, their bleeding enriching imperial capitalism" (Sarvan 1996a, 68). The father remonstrates: "You want to cut up something ... cut me up. Yes, I brought you to these trees. Made you their slave. Put the wounds on me" (Manian 1993b, 41). Defending himself, the father says, "I tried ... But people can be wrong ... The price has to be paid. I'm paying it with blood... We suffered there in India. Now there's only suffering. No escape like the last time" (Manian 1993b, 7). Attempting to escape, they find that they have fallen into a ravine infested with insects (Manian 1993b, 7). There are other casualties, such as the traditional Hindu woman who withdraws into herself and mutely dies, and Muniandy who worked in the plantation's smoke-house. Once he retires, he is ejected from his hut, sleeps on the cement side-walks outside shops and is kicked by the irate Chinese shopkeepers. Reduced to rubbish, his body finds final rest "beside the huge furnace where the town's rubbish was burned" (Manian 1993b, 22). The experience of the aged, use-less, coolie in Sri Lanka was no different:

*They rot and linger
In a workless waste ...
Their hearts uprooted
Thrown on the dust;
With a tin for beggary
A staff for support
Await the final hour
To cast their weary limbs
Underneath the tea*

To the tom-tom's throb. (Velupillai 1957, 11.)

The Return, like Far Country, is a first-person narrative (with a strong autobiographical element). Though not set on a plantation, its presence is felt, and its effects persist - indeed, at one point, the family is forced by circumstances to resume work on the plantation. Ravi's father makes a living by washing clothes, beating them against stones, and ironing with a coal-fired iron. His was an effort to break free from the plantation and set up his own business, but the "imported" plantation economy misshapes and stultifies the growth of a balanced economy, and the ex-coolies have little or no scope. For example, the carver with his wonderful, "story-creating chisel" (Manian 1993a, 4) is unable to make a living and must fall back on physical labour. Poverty brings with it the curse of debt, for the coolies on arrival are already in debt to the kangani (recruiter, foreman, often the man who had brought them over from India) or to the planter. Writing about coolies on Sri Lankan estates, Hugh Tinker states that around 1917, the average debt of a coolie was Rs 70, while the debt owed by some was as high as Rs 200. The highest salary then was Rs 10 a month (179-80). The debt position in Malaya was worse: the coolie owed money to the planter and to the 'ganger' (tindal or mondal) who blackmailed him, made false claims, and took from "coolie" families the little they had. Ravi's father, Kanna, is regularly visited by a moneylender who teases, demands, threatens and takes. Plantation-inculcated behaviour persists, and the men who harshly exact respect and obedience from their families, are servile towards those of a higher standing - "humble, waist-bending, eye-averted" (Manian 1993a, 76). Families lived in close proximity, and adults were often dragged into the quarrels of children, first the mothers and then the fathers. Frustrated, unhappy and despairing, the men turned to alcohol, to the toddy tapped from the ubiquitous coconut tree, creating the image of the "coolie" as "an inveterate drunkard" (Arasaratnam 70). Debt, deep frustration, arduous work, unwholesome living conditions, hopelessness - these led to alcohol; and drink, in turn, to violence. "I was suddenly lifted from the floor and flung against the cups, plates and jars on the kitchen table" (Manian 1993a, 32); "my father caught [my stepmother] and ... choked the curses in her throat. All around, the children wailed. My sister... went into an uncontrollable spasm" (Manian 1993a, 86). Defeated by imperial capitalism, the father mutters "Useless! Useless!" and dies a crazed man, talking a mixture of languages which makes no sense. The linguistic confusion is metonymic and points to his total bewilderment. Kannan's futile goal, like that of his mother, was to own a piece of land, as if by that ownership he could claim a "place" in the country to which he had emigrated - even as Old Thom in an Indo-Guyanese novel dreams of going back to "his" paddy fields (Lauchmonen 1965). Ravi detaches himself from this tragedy, from this doomed destruction, and forces himself to be somewhat selfish. If not, he too will go down - and make no difference to the life of his family. His sacrifice would have been a gesture, and no more. The title of the novel can be read as Ravi's "return", his restitution, an attempt to make the pain of his people known to posterity.

A Far country, as already stated, takes the reader forward into contemporary Malaysia, a country of over nineteen million with Malays comprising approximately sixty-one percent, the Chinese about twenty-eight percent and the Indians eight percent. Nationalism in some countries

loses its meaning of different peoples fusing over time to form a nation Instead, what rears its ugly head is "ethnic nationalism" (less euphemistically, "racism"), and its hatreds and rejections. Those of one racial group assert that they are the natives, the original inhabitants;

that they, and only they, constitute the real or authentic nation. The notion of many truths, of a plural authenticity is not countenanced, and so ... to be a nationalist is to be a “racist,” and vice versa. (Sarvan 1996a, 69).

As Arasaratnam observes, in Malaya the ideal of non-racial politics cannot be pursued because “racism” is entrenched as the very basis of political organisation (120); it is politically and socially accepted, and the different ethnic groups are encouraged to think of themselves as separate entities (198). Yet, India is a far and foreign country to Rajan, as it was and is to other (Indian) descendants elsewhere: Indo-Guyanese writer, Mahadai Das, asks doubtfully, if I go to India, will I find my self? (47). And Naipaul describes the feeling of being out of place, particularly felt by those grown old: “They were living in Trinidad and were going to die there; but for them it was the wrong place” (20). Thus having freed himself from the servitude of indentured labour, Rajan finds himself discriminated against and rejected by the majority group of the only country he knows, the country he fondly (both in the earlier and present meaning) had thought was his “home”. Foreign commercial interests have left him becalmed on a shore which is unwelcoming, amid a people who would subordinate and reject him. Similar feelings of alienation and pain have been experienced by the so-called “Indians” of Sri Lanka.

Ceylon. The descendants of Indians brought to Ceylon (since 1972, Sri Lanka) are particularly unfortunate because the attainment of independence has worsened their plight, bringing disenfranchisement, “race” riots (and the accompanying humiliation and terror; assault, rape and murder) and expatriation. Though these “wretched of the earth” have left little literary testimony (for reasons already explained), C.V. Velupillai has tried to ensure that their lives and experiences are not entirely forgotten. Velupillai, a “coolie” who joined the trade union movement and then entered parliament, participated in satyagraha (non-violent protest, on the model of that practised by Mahatma Gandhi) against the racially discriminatory policies of the government, was arrested and briefly imprisoned. Born in Ceylon, he never visited India. I have been able to trace only two of his works: *In Ceylon’s Tea Garden* (1957) and *Born to Labour* (1970). The stories and songs by and of a people exploited and discarded are simply told but are all the more effective for it:

*They lie dust under dust
Beneath the tea
No wild weed flowers
Or memories token
Tributes rise
Over their humble mound
(Velupillai 1957, 2).*

The first group of “coolies” was brought to Ceylon as early as 1817 to build the road from Colombo to Kandy (Daniel 31). Later, many more came to work on the coffee plantations (1830-1880) and, when that crop crashed, to labour on tea estates. When reading statements that the government of India came to an agreement with the government of Ceylon (or with that of any other imperial territory) over the export of labour, it must be borne in mind that India was then under British rule. The agreement was between British officials, and the natives played

no part in the decision, though they were affected by the consequences. In the early years, except for the short sea crossing from India to Ceylon, coolies, both men and women, literally walked from the north of Ceylon where they were landed, through the jungles of the North-Central province to the central hill country. The coolies were a miserable lot, ill-fed, ill-clothed, travelling through jungle, sometimes without a drop of water, sometimes knee-deep in swamps (Tinker 93). Food being scarce, survival depended on a speedy completion of the journey, and anyone unable to keep up was abandoned, left in the deep recesses of the forest amid wild beasts, serpents and insects, with a handful of rice and a shell of water to meet death all alone (Tinker 173.) Britain gave land free of charge to would-be British planters – a foreign power gifting that was not its own to its own. Later, land was sold at the nominal rate of a few shillings per acre. All land for which there was no proof of ownership - in the form and manner recognised by British law - was regarded as waste or Crown land, and expropriated (Thondaman 1987, 7). The people of the hill country deeply resented this intrusion but, unfortunately, their resentment and hatred were directed not at the rulers and the plantation companies, but at the hapless plantation workers, the miserable victims of a rapacious commercial enterprise (Fries and Bibin 13).

The coolie found himself a bonded serf, burdened with a debt he could never redeem, however long and hard he worked (Thondaman 1987, 78) As on plantation in other countries, a breach of a labour agreement was “tantamount to a penal breach of the law ... a criminal offence” (Thondaman 1987, 79). The employer was judge supreme against whom there was no appeal, no redress. The workers were, and are, segregated in their “lines”, shrouded in their daily work, a grey existence in the vast panorama of lush, green, rolling hills (Velupillai 1970, 1). “A family unit of father, mother, two children and a grown up daughter” occupy a line room, a living space of ten feet by twelve (Velupillai 1970, 1). A survey found that over seventy percent of plantation-children were severely malnourished (Gillard 14): hospitals can offer no cure for arduous and long hours of work, poverty, debt, malnutrition, and unhygienic living conditions. The experience on plantations in other territories was no different: in Old Dam (Guyana), the worker lived on a mudflat without drains, walked barefoot in the sticky mud when it rained, and the logies were choked with large families (Shinebourne 32). On the plantations, the superintendent (the dorai) was a king, a planter Raj, and in his presence, the coolie cringed, and stepped off the estate path into the drains:

When the P.D. [Periya Dorai; the big master, the boss] came on his “rounds” no special courier ran ahead of him to announce his arrival. Nature itself spoke forth A pack of sleek brown and white dogs, with flaming tongues lolling out, ran along the bridle-path. Fast behind them came the thud of the horse and then the animal itself shot into view with P.D. poised in its saddle. (Velupillai 1970, 74).

It is an impressive scene but the description, with its mocking undertone, is not without its subversive element. Power not only corrupts but is also habituating, and the planter came to believe that he was more than mortal, that he deserved such obedience and obeisance. At the receiving end, the coolie's sadness was such that it couldn't sigh; the pain so great it couldn't cry, and God was far away (Velupillai 1970, 84).

The songs Velupillai records tell of hardship and loss. The “work” of the kangany is to see that his coolies work:

*I dug up the pits
Numbered out to me:
As I stood up
With a broken spine
The jobless kangany
He goaded me:
“Ai, dig on, dig on”
(Velupillai 1970.37)*

*By the river's fringe my contract -
It bristles with cootch grass.
By scraping the roots out all my days
My life has been cut short.
(Velupillai 1970,41)*

Statistics cannot convey the actual experience undergone by individual, sentient beings, such as the young woman whose right hand is accidentally burnt while cooking: “I can't use my hand and the dorai has refused me work.” Her husband has run away with her sister: “Not his fault. We all lived in one room. Fire and cotton can't be safe together. I pray that they may be well. I want work only to help my mother' (Velupillai 1970 111). The woman, hardly more than a girl, shows remarkable dignity and courage, understanding and love. “Kandi” in the song immediately following refers not only to Kandy, the capital of the hill country, but to the whole Island. Hardship is accompanied and accentuated by a sense of loss:

*I lost my dear country
With it my palm grove
In this far famed Kandi
I lost my mother and home.
(Velupillai 1970, 42)*

*In yonder field
Strung with pegs
Where coffee plants sprout
I lost my beloved brother
(Op. cit., 35)*

Exploited, despised, enduring the unendurable, the “coolie” managed to preserve something of his original culture; to create some joy, to experience love: in other words, the human capacity to create patches of happiness in the midst of an otherwise unrelieved gloom was not lost. During marriage ceremonies, certain leaves and plants are placed near the couple, symbolising procreation and prosperity. The life force is represented by seven pots in pyramid form:

*The first pot at the base contains water - the life-giver;
the second contains rice - the sustainer; the third one
contains salt - the leavener; the fourth contains nine
different pulses dedicated to the nine planets
The next three are left empty for the Trinity, namely
Shiva, Brahma and Rudra.*
(Velupillai 1970. 19)

Velupillai has a special sympathy for the “coolie” woman who, like the man, labours the whole day but, in addition, is also wife, mother, housekeeper. In traditional Tamil literature, she is the one who sleeps last at night, and is the first to get up next morning.

*Weary grow her limbs
On midnight' mat:
Her star-centred eyes
Between wake and sleep
Dream of dawn's white grin
And the tom-tom's throb.
Thus her nights enfold
A round of broken days
And empty years.*
(Velupillai 1957, 6)

Velupillai records (1970, 71) the old plantation saying, “What wife (‘wife’ with its connotation of regard, protection and exclusive possession) for a coolie?” Those within the hierarchy of authority, first the British and then their Sri Lankan successors, casually made sexual use of “coolie” women. It was not only le droit de seigneur but of any and all men who had some power on the plantation. At the highest levels, the attitude was either one of “They don't mind it” (that is, they don't have “our” niceties of feeling; our moral standards, being a foreign and subordinate species) or, more frankly, “We don't care even if they do.” Those with twinges of conscience deceived themselves with, “They come willingly,” not realising that their alacrity itself was both indication and indictment of the system, revealing the power of a few (starting

with the Peria Dorai at the top) over hundreds of unfortunates beholden for employment, wages and accommodation in a hostile country. As a Colonial Secretary wrote in 1921, the man with power took his pick of the indentured women, and never realised (or if he did, didn't care) that their readiness to come was the most damning indictment of the whole system (Lal 43). I was told with pride by a retired Sri Lankan P.D. now living in Germany that of the many women he had made sexual use of in his long career, not one had accepted payment, or even gifts, from him. He did not realise that this refusal was the only way open to them of preserving a modicum of self-respect; of not allowing themselves to be turned into prostitutes by accepting money for services rendered. Besides, they would save up what little sense (if any) of obligation the P.D. felt for the crises and calamities which would inevitably befall them, sooner or later. (For a wider perspective, readers may wish to turn, for example, to Doris Lessing's story, "'Leopard' George": Who will want to marry her now? These girls, what happens to them? No decent man will have her (161-62).

*And O, how often
While in harness
Factory or field,
Authority forgot
The original shame
Unknown to Eve
And crucified the flesh!
Mother earth then
Her bosom laid waste
Raped and ravaged
Sighed and sobbed
For lost womanhood
Their dignity defiled
[They] lie broken and profaned...
And the tom-tom throbs.
(Velupillai 1957, 6)*

Ceylon became independent in 1948 and its first act was to decitizenise and then defranchise the Hill-country Tamil population (Thondaman 1994, 49). The British who had imported the Indians into Ceylon, sold them down the river in order to secure the political and commercial goodwill of the Sinhalese, the majority group, in whom power was now vested, and with whom they would have to do business in the future (Thondaman 1994, 50). Attempts by Upcountry Tamils to register as citizens were deliberately frustrated by bureaucrats - they were dealing with "foreigners" whom they disliked intensely; with those who were illiterate; those who had no proper documentation. In the successive waves of violence unleashed against the Tamils in general, Plantation Tamils were included, thus further encouraging them to emigrate. "But it was the [Upcountry, Tamil] plantation workers who suffered the most. Their line-rooms were burnt, their possessions looted, the men

beaten, the women gang-raped” (Sivanandan 1984, 28). During the 1970s, the tea plantations were taken over by the state, resulting in the forced eviction of the “coolies;” resulting in destitution and death on the roads of Nawalapitiya and Gampola and Hatton (Sivanandan 1984, 23). “At least 1,000 people were dying every month around the plantations in 1975” (Kurian 85).

Sivanandan's novel, *When Memory Dies* (1997), is an epic work that takes in its sweep almost the whole of Sri Lanka's twentieth-century history. He traces the failure of the trade union movement, the horizontal division of class being replaced by the vertical division of race; the growth of a virulent and ugly “racism”; the legitimisation of racism so that, far from being ashamed, racists were proud, flaunting hate and racism as a measure of their patriotism and therefore, ultimately, of their virtue. Sivanandan is very conscious of, and compassionate towards, the “coolies,” the estate (or so-called “Indian”) Tamil. In the first decades of the 1900s, the British used “Indian” labour to break trade-union strikes organised by the Sinhalese, and this practice of divide and rule left an unfortunate legacy. The chief source of Ceylon's income was tea, and yet the workers who produced it, toiling from morning to evening, received but a pittance (Sivanandan 1997, 96). The excuse given, first by British and then by successive Sri Lankan authorities was one of, “They don't starve, and they've got a roof over their heads” and, secondly, “They are used to it” - even the children (Sivanandan 1997, 100). A common humanity is denied, and the convenient belief was that the coolies are different; they don't have “our” needs; they don't experience pain and hardship as we would; they are incapable of feeling as “we” do. “Filthy, unclean. They live like pigs, these people. Have you seen the drains? Shit everywhere... But they are used to it ... It's we who feel bad for them, but they were born to it” (Sivanandan 1997, 102). The degradation caused by poverty is used as an excuse for continuing exploitation and poverty; that they have suffered long, is the justification for prolonging suffering. Christopher Rezel (Sri Lankan journalist and writer now settled in Australia) in a communication to me describes a Sri Lankan planter whose guest he was briefly excusing himself, going out and assaulting a worker. Returning, cleaning his hands with distaste, the “P. D.” explained that the man had been accused of incest. Living in one room with female members of the family, his sense of self-worth damaged, inclined to alcohol, incest was not uncommon, but rather than dealing with the root causes, the planter feels contempt and, having beaten up the man, moral superiority. The same planter regularly beat up “troublesome” workers in the evening, and if a worker complained to the police they, having been generously entertained at the “bungalow”, gave him another beating and sent him back to the “lines”.

As described in Maniam's (Malaysian) novel, some families tried to climb out, but the chances of getting away were (and are even now) slight, particularly in the Sri Lankan context where the very right of the “coolies” to remain on the Island is questioned. Sanji's father, Raman, sets up a mud-built shop and struggles not to be “sucked back into the plantation and overtaken by tea bushes. Already four of his five sons ... had succumbed to coolie life... Raman's five surviving daughters were tea-pluckers” (Sivanandan 1997, 116). Sanji is the last, and the entire family strives and strains to keep him in school. “They dressed him up as one dresses up hope” (Sivanandan 1997, 117): he is the personification of hope but his clothes are shabby and one day when he comes to school without shoes, he is expelled.

The “coolie” victims of racial violence are driven to shame and silence and, contradictorily, to articulation in the interests of justice:

A daughter who had witnessed her father's murdered body being dragged away by the army jeep to which it was tied said at one point ... "take this story and tell the world" And at another point in the same interview, she pleaded: "Please don't tell anyone My father is such a dignified man. He never comes to dinner without bathing I don't want anyone to remember him the way I see him". (Daniel 105)

When Memory Dies records something of the cruelty and violence unleashed on the defenceless: "lorry loads of masked men had suddenly appeared in the middle of the night and attacked the line-rooms, terrorizing the sleeping families and destroying their pitiful belongs" (185); a starving "coolie" child steals a piece of bread, is detected and beaten: "Yesterday they stole our land, today they steal our food," despite the fact that it was the British who took the land (247). It also describes the forceful "repatriation" of the so-called Indians. The term "repatriation" is a misnomer since many of those expelled had lived for generations on the Island: it was to them a painful expatriation, for they had given their lives to and on the estates. "Look at those tea-bushes.... That's not leaves and buds they're plucking you know, our women and children, but bits of their lives" (259). Velupillai's treatment of forced expatriation is poignant in its indirection: Muttiah is forced to return (sic) to India, leaving behind Sooty, the dog which he and his now-deceased mother had loved: "The moaning of Sooty came from the distance and faded away like the cry of a child in the night. Muttiah felt as if it came from the grave of his mother ... a handful of dust calling out to him from under the tea bushes" (Velupillai 1970, 89). Yvonne Fries and Thomas Bibin relate something of the human tragedy involved in the expatriation of Indian labour. As with slavery, families are split, some members being permitted to stay, others forcibly expelled, arriving in an India that was totally foreign to them and where they knew no one. The "fate of the Indian expatriates is a human tragedy to an extent yet to be realised. Nine out of ten expatriates end up as migrant seasonal labour, beggars or are untimely dead" (3). It is another story that waits, and deserves, to be told. Truly, the "coolies" in Sri Lanka have suffered to an extreme.

*What man dare speak
[Of] His fettered, unbroken
Days of drudgery
That sole legacy
From sire to son!
Poverty and shame
Bound to the cart wheel –
A beast of burden
Cowed and bent
To a lesser beast;
An outcast*

*From the mainland
And here a helot
Stripped of his name,
A reproach and danger
To his kin
(Velupillai 1957, 8)*

To stress similarities in the “coolie” experience, it should be noted that those who returned voluntarily to India from other British territories fared little better, as Marianne Ramesar records (1996).

The suffering of those of Indian descent in Sri Lanka is not a thing of the past. Carl Muller reports that estate workers are seen as human discards. Those who attempt to leave the estate and estate-existence are forced by failure to return. Fifty-two percent of the children of plantation-workers are underweight; forty percent of income is spent on alcohol and betel leaf (a mild narcotic); there is no electricity; little space, and the roof leaks. There is no proper sanitation, garbage disposal and maintenance (Muller 2000).

Fiji. In Fiji, the racial divide between Indians and Fijians, the suspicion, fear and hostility, led to the military coup of 1987 which prompted many Indians to emigrate. They, like their parents and grandparents, had been born in Fiji; had believed and felt it to be home, but suddenly home was no longer home. This imperial legacy is similar to that experienced by descendants of indentured labour in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. In Satendra Nandan's *The Wounded Sea* (1991), Fijian Indians are like Rama in the Indian epic *The Ramayana* who, on the eve of his coronation, in an abrupt reversal, is sent into exile. But to Rama and his wife there was a triumphant return; to the Indians, a dispersal, insecurity and unease. By law, most of the land is reserved for Fijians, and though the first batch of indentured workers reached Fiji in 1879, their children cannot own land; cannot have the claims and the feelings which flow from such rights. “Coolies” do not make history: they merely suffer it. As Nandan shows, suffering without hope, many degenerate into alcoholism, crudity and violence (77). Satendra Nandan is a contemporary writer (born 1939), and for an account of the earlier experience of indenture in Fiji, one must turn to Totaram Sanadhya's *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line*, both now in one volume. Sanadhya arrived in Fiji in 1893, at the age of seventeen, returned to India in 1914, and published these works which were subsequently translated into several Indian languages. Even as an adult, the remembrance of the poverty his parents endured in India brought “clouds of sorrow” (32) to him. He ran away from his widowed mother (because he was unable to be of help, and didn't want to be an additional burden on her) and met up with an arkati or recruiter. The arkati trained their victims to answer “Yes” to all questions, and the latter found they had “voluntarily” bound themselves to go to Fiji, a land whose very name they had not heard before. Those recruited were known as grimitiyas because they had signed a grimit, an Indianisation of “agreement.” The trapped grimitiyas, prior to embarkation (Sanadhya's voyage took three months and twelve days) were forbidden to speak to each other, in case information was exchanged and the true nature of things discovered. The food given was so hard it first had to be soaked in water. On arrival, they were immediately surrounded by police, indicating their captive status. They woke at four in the morning, and were working by five. An impossible amount of work was set, and failure to fulfil the quota meant a fine. This last reduced

the grimitya's pay and set him down the road into inextricable debt. The government inspectors who came round were "White"; they stayed with the planters, were their guests and wrote positive reports. Women suffered the most, getting up at three-thirty in the morning to prepare food for the day; working ten hours, and returning home to cook for the night and to clean. There was "a corpse-like shading to their faces" (61). A woman desired by a man with power was assigned work in a lonely place so that she could be raped. One woman, forced back to work only three days after giving birth and being unable to cope, was so badly beaten that she ended up mentally deranged. Brij Lal records cases such as an English overseer pouring acid on the penis of a grimitya; of a woman who just after giving birth was put to work breaking stones, and when unable to complete the task, being beaten senseless (41). Since the ratio of women was about thirty to every hundred men, prostitution, infidelity, suspicion and violence were rife. In *The Story of the Haunted Line*, women lament their fate, comfort each other and resume work (119): work was both destroyer and distraction. The author himself was tempted to commit suicide but was stopped by thoughts of his mother's love for him, and of his love for, and duty towards, her.

Caribbean. If the ancestors are texts waiting to be written (Dabydeen 1988, 12) then it is the children of those who went West, to the Caribbean and to Guyana - who have done the most to commemorate, to indict, to celebrate: I have already referred to several works from this region. The "coolie" mother in Dabydeen's work, *Coolie Odyssey*, has incredible courage; is iron-like in her determination that her son will have a better life, and so, though her feet and hands are cracked, though she's coughing blood, she continues to labour.

The “discovery” (sic) of the Caribbean was an unmitigated disaster for the Amerindians, the autochthonous inhabitants, for it marked their extinction. This was followed by the importation of Africans as slaves and, with abolition, there began the new form of slavery, indenture. Between 1838 and 1917, about over half a million Indians were shipped out to the Caribbean and to the northern coasts of the South American continent (Dabydeen 1996, 1). Yet this region is generally thought of as being African, the Indians and their contribution being overlooked (Mangru, vii). Similar to Maniam's description of the voyage to Malaya, Mangru cites evidence that, on board ship, the “coolies” received but one meal a day. The absence of toilets for the exclusive use of women resulted in extreme embarrassment to them, not to mention vulnerability to sexual assault (26). The spirit of slavery but newly abolished, governed employer-employee relations, and it was convenient for the former - as with ruling classes all over - to believe that the workers were contented, even happy, with their degraded status and miserable lives. The “coolies” were restricted to the plantation, their movement curtailed by law. Generally, the aim was to create a sense of helplessness, despair and dependence. Laws, rights and entitlements were not explained to the “coolies”: the planter, the overseer and others with power were the law, and what they said was the law. Civil contracts were enforced by criminal proceedings. Mangru concludes that indenture (particularly in the early years) was slavery in a disguised form. He cites the rate of suicide for 1902-1912 as averaging 400 per every million in Trinidad and 926 in Fiji, while for the whole of British India, it was a mere 51 (Mangru, 114) The wealth created by the “coolie” went into British coffers; into the pockets of plantation owners and their managers: very little was given back to the actual producers of wealth. Those who opted out of indenture and remained in the colony, found life difficult because it was not in the interests of the colonial government, of plantation owners and managers: a thriving peasantry would make cheap, exploitable labour hard to come by. Further, as in Fiji and Sri Lanka, the numbers imported, the expropriation of land in the latter, the separation between groups (encouraged, if not enforced) led to racial tension (see, for example, Shewcharan).

Clem Seecharan confirms much of the above in his study. For example, he writes that where the “coolies” lived, the “logies” (in Sri Lanka, the “coolie lines”) were known as “the nigger yard” (67): cramped, unhygienic places breeding ill health and strife. These were the “homes” to which the exhausted “coolie” returned. They were cowed into silence by the fear of being dismissed, evicted or being assigned more arduous and unpleasant work. The “coolie lines” or “logies” are the most enduring symbol of plantation life (74). However, Seecharan also points out that oppression, degradation and despair, though axiomatic, are not the complete picture: “The elaborate rituals, the lavish preparation, and the informal, joyful participation in festivals, like Holi and Diwali, fed a sense of community.... The Indians were irrepressible, their wit was spontaneous, they were alive. To paint a picture of darkness, of a pervasive melancholy, is a distortion” (73). This is true of the “coolie” experience in general as, for example, some of the songs Velupillai has recorded attest. Rooplall Monar's *Backdarn People* (1985), rather like Velupillai's work, describes the daily life of the “coolie” but is different in that the focus is on escapades, mischief and infidelities. Despite the strong picaresque element, there is the unmistakable presence of the plantation, and of the reality of plantation (or estate) life: “backdam” itself refers to the distant part of the estate. Those assigned to work there had to walk four or five miles in the darkness, getting up extra early to begin work on time. The village teacher must accept that, however intelligent, his pupils will end up working as “coolies”.

Two significant fictional works from this region are Harold Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and David Dabydeen's *The Counting*

House (1996). The former is set in Trinidad and told through the perspective of a child. It is August, the rainy season, and the family live in a hut with a leaking roof and muddy floors. With the rain, the ants and scorpions come out of hiding, and outside, in the rice fields and forests, there are snakes. The father has given up altogether and turned alcoholic. His despair finds vent in gross crudity and appalling brutality meted out to his wife and children. The emaciated woman endures and struggles, determined that her children will, one day, “come man and woman” (1972, 41). But a desperate poverty and unhygienic conditions; ill health, constant beatings and the lack of care; sorrow and grief, drive her to insanity and death. The father may rant and rampage; be foul, lie, brutalise, but it is the mother and grandmother, their courage born of love, that one remembers. There is nothing shy and timid in them (Espinete, 81). When on the verge of despair, the grandmother beats her drum: it is a call to God; a warding off of evil; defiance and celebration. Repeatedly, the two women ask, “Where you is God?” (Ladoo 49); “Which part in dat sky you is God?” (Ladoo 71) but God calmly continues to watch the sorry soap-opera of human lives. It is a searing novel, one that makes the reader flinch and, once read, is difficult to forget. (In 1973, while on a visit to Trinidad, Harold Ladoo was attacked and killed. He was twenty-eight.)

Dabydeen's novel covers two phases of the indenture experience - recruitment and servitude - and briefly mentions the third - the return. Rohini, aged seventeen, and Vidya, twenty, marry and, a year later (1857) sail to Guiana. Clem Secharan writes (xxiii) that the infamous recruiter still excites the imagination of local Indians, and in Dabydeen's novel, the recruiter slinks at the edges of the village; he entices, traps and transports. Of the two, it is Rohini, the wife, who persuades her husband to emigrate. She is the one with enterprise and determination. On arrival, they find that they have sold themselves into virtual slavery. As I suggested in a brief review of the novel (1997), Vidya's inability to father a child points to a wider impotency, given the context of indenture and “cooliehood”. Disappointed, Rohini begins to admire imperial power, purpose and achievement. She is made pregnant by Gladstone (Glad-stone) and steals the money Vidya had collected (tiny sum by tiny sum, through arduous toil) to pay for the abortion. Rohini ends deranged and Vidya drowns on the return voyage to India: ironically, his intention was to become a recruiter. Often, the victims of cruelty turn cruel.

Both these novels end in defeat; both confirm what Lucille, in Janice Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* tells her daughter of “coolie” life and marriage: “they drink rum ... and beat their wives, and fight.... Their wives cook from three o'clock in the morning to late at night! You want to be a coolie woman? Coolie women have to carry all the burdens for the men, the burden of the sick, the old, the children ... and get no thanks for it, only [beatings]” (128). But with the passage of time, things have changed and improved. The descendants of those “coolies” who went to Mauritius have fared the best, while the situation of the so-called “Indian” Tamils in Sri Lanka remains the most unfortunate. The authors mentioned in this article are themselves evidence that at least some escaped “cooliehood”. Through intelligence and resolve, they got into various lifeboats and escaped the long-lingering effects of “coolieness” - helped by those for whom escape was too late in life, and too early in history.

Coolie is “the name of our hard-working, economy-building forefathers... All this they gave to us and more. In return... what greater tribute can we pay to them than to keep alive the name by which they were called? COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears defeats, achievements.” (Singh 353)

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