

IN the article "Calling them to account" (*Human Writes, The Star*, June 28; online at bit.ly/star_labour), columnist Mangai Balasegaram mentions a book that focuses on the topic of indentured labour, *A New System Of Slavery* (1974) by Hugh Tinker.

Perhaps I could add to her account by bringing to readers' attention more recent published accounts of literature (both fiction and nonfiction) on the subject of indentured labour. These works could serve as a springboard for further intelligent discourse about what is often thought to be a difficult topic to openly discuss.

In the 1980s, a towering figure in Malaysian fiction, KS Maniam, gave voice to the anguish, pain and hardships of indentured labourers in *The Return* (1981), which for many years served as a reading text in many schools in the peninsula.

Further, in 2018, *Journeys: Tamils In Singapore, 1800-Present* by Nirmala Murugian, published in Singapore, gives a detailed account of indentured labour in Malaya. She writes: "According to a report by HJ Stokes, Acting Sub Collector, Tanjore, this was how the system operated by speculators in the 1870s worked: 'A ship-owner advances money to a head *maistry* (recruiting agent) who employs under him several subordinate *maistries*. These latter have to go about to villages and persuade coolies to emigrate. This they do by representing, in bright colours, prospects of enrichment

More info on indentured labour

Human Writes Mangai Balasegaram

Calling them to account

It is high time that the neglected history of slavery and indentured labour be finally given due attention.

FOR as long as I can remember, in every circle, in every country that I've lived in, there was always a preference for — or even deference to — lighter-coloured skin. Put it this way, there weren't any circles where people wanted to have darker skin.

The desire for fairer skin still persists everywhere. Despite health concerns, there is a massive global multibillion-dollar market for skin whitening products — it's especially big in Asia. An Indian woman's eligibility for marriage can depend on the exact hue of brown skin.

and vilification of brown skin, of slavery and colonialism. It's a wound that still festers in today's world, where a white minority dominates and controls so much global wealth, power, institutions and ideas.

Now, the slave trade is under examination in Britain. University College London is tracking companies with links to the trade. Venerated institutions have shown contrition. This week, the Bank of England apologised because former governors had links with slavery. Insurance giant Lloyd's of London pledged to financially support projects for minorities in recompense for past ties with slavery.

Men once elevated are now

Well, let me tell you about Rhodes. He "founded" (actually seized) Southern and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia). He named the colonies after himself and gave them to white farmers. Rhodes believed the English were "the first race in the world" and despised Africans. He made it an offence for an African to have a skilled job and denied Africans the vote — in their own country.

This man stood for Empire, white dominion and exploitation — so no, he doesn't deserve veneration. Physically removing such statues challenges views of race and colonialism. It is symbolic that men who were once symbols are being

its colonial past. Neither has Britain. There has never been a systematic re-examination of colonial history or the teaching of it in schools, unlike the way Germany has confronted its Nazi past. Past surveys show most British people think favourably of the empire.

Unfortunately, the revived focus on the slave trade in Britain has not extended to the empire. There has been no mention of the Indian coolies sent all over the empire, including Malaya, to work in slave-like conditions on plantations. This issue, the focus of my last column ("The deep historical roots of colonialism", *The Star*, June 14; online at bit.ly/star_indian) which seemed

The indentured system locked Indian labourers into a form of wage bondage that was little better than slavery. Death and disease were rampant. Of the survivors, some were left as destitute "bags of bones", others returned to India as "sucked oranges", Tinker wrote.

With a supply of steady labour, there was no need for innovative methods or machines. Everything was done with the human hand, points out Tinker. Hard work was extracted through "penalties and punishments", including the cane or a cattle whip in the West Indies and Natal.

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and advance. The ignorant coolies believe easily, and, while some volunteer to go to try their fortune, many are persuaded.' ... According to documents in the Government of Madras Proceedings in the Public Department 1870, the traffic was so profitable that recruiters kidnapped boys and women as well. ... Until 1910, when the recruitment system was changed, a majority of labourers migrated to Singapore and Malaya via this abuse-riddled system.

"Unlike Chinese labourers, who

could move around freely on the island, Indian workers were isolated from the rest of the local population, housed in barracks and severely punished for acts of disobedience or for not doing sufficient work. Toddy shops and cinemas were opened for them, and many became addicted to toddy, known as the poor man's whisky, and sought escape through Tamil films with themes of romance, betrayal and violence."

In 2018, two further things converged: the University of London

(Balasegaram notes in her column is tracking companies with historical links to the slave trade), in partnership with its School of Advanced Studies, published an anthology called *We Mark Your Memory: Writings From The Descendants Of Indenture* (available at bit.ly/writers_mark). The only entry from Malaysia in this anthology (which remains the School's most popular publication throughout the Commonwealth) is by Aneeta Sundararaj. Her story, "The Legend Of Nagakanna" is an edited version of chapter

nine of her latest novel, *The Age Of Smiling Secrets* (2018).

While "The Legend Of Nagakanna" is a relatively humorous piece, it is another extract from this tragic novel, "Ammavasai", that captures the brutality that many descendants of indentured labour in Malaysia endured regularly. In it, the character

Karuppan gives voice to the sheer contempt for his station in life he feels, which epitomises the utter lack of self-worth that many Tamils will identify with. In his review of this novel, renowned Indian classical dance master Datuk Ramli Ibrahim writes, "Lives unravel in a worst-case scenario when loopholes in the law, exacerbated by corruption and unscrupulous characters, combine to destroy the very fabric of the lives of simple and honest folks".

Personally, I feel works such as these need to be recognised by people in academia as well as by the general public. As such, from the point of view of literature, there are many published works that speak of the challenges that Balasegaram speaks of. They are rich in information, emotion and, in most cases, unspoken trauma and pain.

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