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3rd MBRAS Lecture 2017

Making of “Coolie” Identities:
Indian Plantation Communities in Malaysian History

By Arunima Datta

Meeting Room (Level 4), Asia Research Institute (ARI), AS8
10 Kent Ridge Crescent,
Singapore
Saturday, 30 September 2017, 5.30–7 pm

The Lecture

The Indian “coolies” have for years been an inseparable but anomalous part of the Malaysian society — local yet outsiders, normal but different. For long, Indian male coolies have been regarded by the colonial planters, administrators and fellow Indians as prone to violence, immorality and toddy addiction, while the Indian coolie women have been perceived as the docile, passive victims of their fellow male (coolie) perpetrators. Such insidious stereotyping have continued to inform our understanding (past and present) of the Indian coolie community in Malaysia. Based on archival research, the talk will examine the history of how such insidious stereotypes were constructed in British Malaya. It unpacks the influence of gender, race, class, caste and market economics on the making of Indian coolie identity in British Malaya. In doing so, the talk will also show how Indian coolies engaged with and responded to such insidious stereotyping in their everyday life, particularly in British Malaya.

About the Speaker

Arunima Datta is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS) and simultaneously lectures at the South Asian Program, NUS. Datta received her PhD in Southeast Asian Studies from NUS and maintains an active interest in the related fields of Asian history/studies, women’s and gender history, race, gender and sexuality studies, colonial and postcolonial studies. She has authored a number of articles on colonial law, Indian coolie women in Malaya under both British rule and Japanese Occupation and on European planters’ wives in British Malaya. She is currently working on two new book projects, concerning: Indian Coolie Women in Malaya; Indian Travelling Ayahs. Datta serves as Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Malaysian Branch of Royal Asiatic Society* and is also a member of the editorial board of *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies*.